

Church of the Brethren Resolution Against Torture

1. Introduction

The Church of the Brethren, as a Historic Peace Church, has experienced persecution for its faith and its members have suffered violence at times in the church's 300-year history. Torture has been one form of that violence, illustrated by the story told about elder Johannes Naas and how he was tortured for refusing military conscription.

Only recently have efforts begun to work toward reconciliation of the persecution the first Brethren experienced in Europe, before they migrated to America—an indication of the long-lasting effects of such painful experiences, even across many generations.

Personal experience of the violence of war has been one guiding factor in the Church of the Brethren's consistent statement that "all war is sin" and its emphasis on peacemaking.

2. Biblical Basis

The sanctity of life was and is a fundamental value of our faith. According to the biblical witness we recognize the following as foundational for our conviction regarding the sanctity of life: God created human beings in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), and God proclaimed this creation "very good." In Exodus God commands the Israelites to "not wrong or oppress a resident alien" (Ex. 22:21).

In the gospels, Jesus commands his followers not only to love their neighbors, but to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). This same command is given through the apostolic witness as Paul exhorts the Roman believers to live at peace with others, genuinely love others, and "not be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:9-21; 13:8-10).

It is our belief and conviction that the redemptive work and purpose of God is to bring wholeness and life to all creation (John 3:16; 4:1-15; 2 Cor. 5:16-20; Col. 3:12-15). The final promise of God accentuates the hope of all believers and illustrates the end to which God and God's community are working (Isaiah 2:2-4; 11:1-9; Rev. 21:3-4).

3. Torture is a Violation of Word and Life

We, the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren, are aware of the growing occurrences of torture throughout our world. We also recognize there have been attempts to legitimize torture. Torture is a blatant violation of the tenets of our faith. It injects into our character the sense that we are better than others and dehumanizes people. It seeks to break the human spirit. In reality it devastates both the one who is tortured and the one who tortures.

4. Call to Confession, Call to Action

We, the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren, find both the occurrences of torture and the attempt to legitimize the acts of torture unconscionable.

We confess allowing the rhetoric and images of torture to pass us by.

We confess ignoring the cry for justice.
We confess becoming desensitized and complacent.
We confess feeling insignificant to make a difference.
We confess not speaking in a timely manner.
We confess our inaction.
We confess our silence.

We deeply mourn the harm that has been done to all who have been tortured and have tortured.
Lord have mercy.

We will be silent no more.

Adopted by the Church of the Brethren Mission and Ministry Board at its October 2009 meeting in Elgin, Ill., and recommended for adoption by the 2010 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren.

Action of the 2010 Annual Conference: The 2010 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren approved by a near-unanimous majority the recommendation of Standing Committee that the Church of the Brethren Resolution Against Torture be adopted.

References and Resources

The story about elder Johannes Naas is told, among other places, in the illustrated children's book, *The Tall Man*, by Dorothy Brandt Davis and Carl Brandt Davis, and in a DVD of that series of children's books, *Little Middle Tall*, narrated by Ed Asner. Published by Brethren Press.

International conventions on torture include three documents counted among the United Nations' agreements on human rights: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 5), the Convention Against Torture, and the Geneva Conventions. Links to these documents are at www.hrweb.org/legal/undocs.html.

A number of statements of the Church of the Brethren relate to issues surrounding torture, including:

1988 statement "Covert Operations and Covert War"
(www.cobannualconference.org/ac_statements/88CovertOperations.htm)

1991 statement "Peacemaking: The Calling of God's People in History"
(www.cobannualconference.org/ac_statements/91Peacemaking.htm)

1996 statement on "Nonviolence and Humanitarian Intervention"
(www.cobannualconference.org/ac_statements/96Nonviolence.htm)

Also relevant are the church's statements on war. The 1970 "Statement of the Church of the

Brethren on War” (www.cobannualconference.org/ac_statements/70War.htm) is the most recent. Previous statements against war by the Brethren annual meeting include the 1785 statement that we should not "submit to the higher powers so as to make ourselves their instruments to shed human blood"; the 1918 statement when the church said that "we believe that war or any participation in war is wrong and incompatible with the spirit, example and teachings of Jesus Christ"; the 1934 statement when Annual Conference resolved that all war is sin and that “we, therefore, cannot encourage, engage in, or willingly profit from armed conflict at home or abroad. We cannot, in the event of war, accept military service or support the military machine in any capacity”; and when this conviction was reaffirmed in 1948.

Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out, a book edited by George Hunsinger (William B. Eerdmans, 2008) is a collection of essays offering a religious and moral perspective on torture. As well as essays about the issue of torture from writers of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim points of view, the book includes personal stories from survivors and from those who have used torture against other human beings, and essays on how to move toward a solution of the problem.

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is an interreligious nonprofit organization working against torture and advocating for human rights, declaring that “torture is a moral issue.” Its website www.nrcat.org offers an “Action Center” with a number of ideas for action and advocacy steps that can be taken by individuals or congregations, and an online store offering helpful resources. The Church of the Brethren works with NRCAT through its Global Mission Partnerships program.