



January 25, 2005

San Francisco Theological Seminary Statement on June 2004 Student/Faculty Educational Trip to the Middle East

San Francisco Theological Seminary is a dynamic academic community characterized by vital Christian faith, worship, and practice. Holding ourselves to a high standard of academic excellence, SFTS provides theological, spiritual, and practical leadership preparation for ministry in both the Church and the world. Through affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and as a founding member of the Graduate Theological Union, a distinguished ecumenical and interfaith consortium of seminaries and theological schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, SFTS students receive a theological education that includes classroom study, spiritual formation, and contextual learning experiences.

Recent news articles have attempted to connect a June 2004 student/faculty educational trip to the Middle East with ongoing political conflicts in the region. The trip, part of the course "Christianity in Context: Palestine/Israel," focused on helping students gain a deeper understanding of the Middle East, its cultures, issues, people, and religions. Following an itinerary planned by the Middle East Council of Churches, the two week trip included meeting with religious leaders and visits to seminaries, church-related institutions, mission sites, and well-known shrines in the Holy Land.

Understanding the volatility of the region, safety of the SFTS traveling group of thirteen was of the utmost concern. The group found itself in a potentially difficult situation during a tour of a historic detention center in early June. While hearing a presentation on the background of the prison, it became clear to the group that they were unexpectedly in the presence of a Hizbullah representative and the media. The SFTS group sought to be courteous to all present in order to ensure their safety. These efforts were misrepresented in subsequent Middle Eastern news reports.

Current attempts to link the Seminary, its students, faculty, or members of the SFTS traveling party, to specific political causes are unfounded and inconsistent with the mission of the institution. San Francisco Theological Seminary is a theological and educational institution that repudiates all use of terrorism for any reason.

Statement of Facts

On June 1, 2004, following an agenda set by the Middle East Council of Churches, the San Francisco Theological Seminary group knew only that it would be taking a bus trip to Southern Lebanon. While underway, they were told that they would stop for lunch and a tour at the former Israeli detention center in Khiam. Upon arriving, they were surprised to find news reporters and photographers, as well as a group of about 100 Muslim clerics

having lunch. They were disconcerted to be addressed by, and photographed with, a person a subsequent news article identified as a Hizbullah "commander."

The SFTS group had no prior knowledge of this person, nor of the address. Comments quoted in a subsequent news article misrepresented the efforts by an SFTS student and a faculty member to be hospitable and gracious. Two other people quoted in the news article were not in any way affiliated with SFTS.

This misrepresentation, and indeed the entire incident, appears to have been an attempt to exploit the SFTS group for propaganda purposes. The trip was entirely educational in nature, structured to give SFTS students broad and balanced exposure, primarily to Christian, but also to Muslim and Jewish perspectives, on the complicated situation in the Middle East.

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