

Charter of the Benenson Society

Mission Statement:

The aim of the Benenson Society is to provide students with the opportunity to be involved in the promotion of human rights through the raising of awareness of violations of these rights and by lobbying governments on behalf of prisoners of conscience, for the end of torture and the death penalty, and asserting the rights of all to basic freedoms. The Society is open to all those of whatever religious faith or belief, or none, who accept the fundamental rights of all human beings.

- All work of the Society will be based upon the foundation principle of the inherent and inviolable dignity of the human person. The Society believes that every human being has certain rights that cannot be, and must not be, compromised or separated from the individual.
- The Society will seek to promote human rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in accord with other international human rights' standards.
- Members will be encouraged to deepen their awareness of the struggle for human rights and to promote a wider awareness of human rights in their own communities.
- The Society will encourage its members to take a stand and make a difference, not only through gaining a greater awareness, but through action such as writing letters, petitions, participating in campaigns with other organisations and other forms of appropriate peaceful protest.
- The emphasis will be on inclusion and on helping individuals who experience the violation of their human rights. The Society does not seek to be identified by labels of 'left' or 'right', and would seek to promote human rights wherever, and without fear or prejudice.
- The Society will oppose any policies of women being forced to have abortions (as sometimes practised in China) and oppose the use of rape as a weapon of war (as perpetrated in Darfur). The Society will maintain a policy of neutrality on the appropriate public policy in addressing abortion, leaving it to the conscience and judgment of its members as how best to reduce abortion rates.

The Society will be called the Benenson Society, after Peter Benenson, the Catholic lawyer who founded Amnesty, and will hopefully embody something of the spirituality, as well as idealism, that led to the formation of Amnesty.



The Benenson Society will have as its symbol, a stylised white rose. This symbol draws inspiration from the White Rose Society, a group of Catholic and Protestant students and teachers at Munich University, who opposed Nazism with letters and pamphlets, with six paying the ultimate price of being guillotined for their stand for human rights. A membership lapel pin will soon be made available. It will use the white rose symbol (presently being designed).

Membership and Structure:

Membership will be open to students through the formation and registration of **chapters** in schools, colleges and universities that sign on to the Charter of the Benenson Society. **Associate membership** may be held by teachers and others interested in supporting the work, as well as by members who finish their studies and wish to remain associated with the Society.

It is envisaged at this time that the Society has a rather loose structure and organization so that it is best suited to the needs and opportunities in each school, college or university, in which there is a chapter. A chapter may use the name Benenson Society, and the symbol of the white rose, simply by signing on to the Charter and registering the chapter.

It is hoped that chapters would assist each other through group email lists and other forms of communication. Joint action on various cases could be thus promoted and resources shared. The Society would seek to cooperate on specific issues with Amnesty International (while not having any formal membership or link with the organisation). It would also seek to work with other organizations, such as Consistent Life, a network of over 200 organizations that oppose war, abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia and poverty, Christians Against Torture, founded by Peter Benenson, Aid to the Church in Need and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, both of which advocate for those imprisoned or persecuted because of their religious beliefs, Human Rights First, and other human rights organisations. We are also exploring a relationship with Caritas Australia, part of the world's second largest humanitarian organisation.

Initially the chapters at St Aloysius' College, Milsons Point, and Loreto, Kirribilli, will coordinate registration and contact group lists.

The Patron of the Society is Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia. Bishop Michael has been a member of Amnesty International since 1976. In the 1980s, he was a member of the then British Section Council for two years, coordinated a local Amnesty campaign for the release of a Soviet prisoner of conscience, and chaired the Section's Religious Bodies Liaison Panel for many years. He also wrote the latest Amnesty prayer for their 'Protect the Human' campaign.



Peter Benenson:

(The following draws on the obituary for Peter Benenson written by journalist, Hugh O'Shaughnessy. Hugh was a friend of Peter and was involved in the founding of Amnesty and is an opponent of the recent decision by Amnesty to abandon its policy of neutrality on abortion.)

Peter Benenson was born in London in 1921. Despite a rather unhappy childhood, including the death of his father when Peter was nine, his innate idealism soon emerged. At Eton, the 15-year-old organised support for the Spanish republican government as it fought the military uprising and he himself "adopted" a Spanish baby, undertaking to pay for its upkeep. He and his school friends also raised money to bring two young German Jewish teenagers to school in Britain in 1939. While at school, Benenson became a Catholic.

During World War Two, he met and married Margaret Anderson, a mathematician. He served in the Army in the Ultra code-breaking unit at Bletchley Park. He and Margaret had two daughters. After the war Benenson studied law, preparing himself for a career as a barrister. He joined the British Labour Party. Without success, he tried three times to win a seat in Parliament.

In the early 1950s he went to Spain for the Trades Union Congress as its observer at trials of trade unionists and was shocked by Franco's courts and prisons. He went to Cyprus and aided Greek Cypriot lawyers whose clients had opposed British rule. He led an all-party mission to Hungary during the 1956 uprising against Soviet rule and the ensuing trials, and to South Africa to assist opponents of apartheid. These involvements led to his establishing and initially helping to finance Justice, the British section of the International Commission of Jurists.



Peter Benenson

Photo: AP

The genesis of the movement which was to be Benenson's principal legacy to the world came when, reading a newspaper on the London Underground, he learnt of two students in Antonio Salazar's Portugal who committed the imprudence of toasting liberty in a cafe in Lisbon. Arrested and tried, they were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. His first impulse was to protest at the Portuguese embassy. He thought better of it and went to sit in St Martin-in-the-Fields church, where the seed of an idea for worldwide human-rights movement germinated.

Within a few weeks, on 28 May 1961, *The Observer* newspaper carried a long article, "The Forgotten Prisoners", which suggested a worldwide "Appeal for Amnesty 1961" to governments to let their political prisoners go, or at least, give them a fair trial.

The first Amnesty campaign in 1961 highlighted the fate of six prisoners of conscience: Angolan anti-colonialist poet and resistance leader, Agostinho Neto; the Greek Communist Toni Ambatielos; Archbishop Josef Beran of Prague and Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty of Budapest, both imprisoned by Communist dictatorships; Reverend Ashton Jones, a campaigner for the rights for blacks in the US; and the Romanian philosopher, Constantin Noica.

The article, reproduced worldwide, had an immediate effect. A number of people, including a lawyer friend Louis Blom-Cooper, and Eric Baker, a leading Quaker, Peter Archer and Peggy Crane were conscripted on to a committee to guide what was to be no more than a 12-month campaign. Groups of volunteers, working out of Benenson's chambers organised supporters in many countries in "threes", groups who would adopt a political prisoner, or "prisoner of conscience" in the West, the East and the developing worlds who was imprisoned on a political charge but who did not espouse violence.

Benenson's project in starting Amnesty was influenced by his religious experience. In his history of Amnesty, *Keepers of the Flame*, Stephen Hopgood writes that "*The Amnesty movement was to be a spiritual awakening that would stimulate moral change in members' own societies as well*" (p.57). It is striking how many of the key early figures of Amnesty had strong religious connections – Quaker, Jewish, Protestant and Catholic. Far from being a secular project, one could argue that Amnesty itself has its origins in the religious commitment to justice.

Disputes within the organisation would lead to Benenson's resignation from Amnesty in 1966. After a period of mental exhaustion, he retired to land he had bought near Aylesbury. Benenson was divorced from Margaret in 1972 and the following year he married Susan Booth, who worked at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and with whom he had a son and daughter. Some years later they separated, though did not divorce; they became reconciled when he was in his sixties.

In the 1980s his relations with the organisation he had started were restored under the encouragement of the Swedish secretary-general Thomas Hammarberg and Richard Reoch. He also founded the organisation, Christians Against Torture. In his later years Peter Benenson lived out of the public gaze. He rejected successive governments' offers of a knighthood, as he did offers of honorary degrees. Injured in a

serious motor accident and suffering from coeliac disease, he was constantly visited by Margaret, Susan, his children and grandchildren and numerous friends.

Peter Benenson died Oxford 25 February 2005.

White Rose Society:

White Rose was a group of students and teachers from the University of Munich. Its core was made up of five students — Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans Scholl, Alex Schmorell, Willi Graf, and Christoph Probst, and a professor of philosophy, Kurt Huber. The group became known for an anonymous leaflet campaign, lasting from June 1942 until February 1943, which called for active opposition to Hitler.

In January 1943, using a hand-operated duplicating machine, the group produced between 6,000 and 9,000 copies of their fifth leaflet, "Appeal to all Germans!", which was distributed via courier runs to many cities, where they were then mailed. Written by Hans Scholl and Kurt Huber, the leaflet warned that Hitler was leading Germany into the abyss. The reader was urged to *"Support the resistance movement!"* in the struggle for *"Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and protection of the individual citizen from the arbitrary action of criminal dictator-states"*. *These were the principles that would form "the foundations of the new Europe"*.

The leaflets caused a sensation, and led to an intensive search for the authors by the Gestapo. In February 1943, the slogans "Freedom" and "Down with Hitler" appeared on the walls of the University and other buildings in Munich. Alexander Schmorell, Hans Scholl and Willi Graf had painted them with tar. The Scholls then dropped stacks of copies of their leaflets in the empty University corridors for students to find when they flooded out of lecture rooms. Finally they were seen and were arrested by the Gestapo. The other active members were soon arrested, and the group and everyone associated with them were interrogated.

The Scholls and Probst were tried before the so-called People's Court that tried political offences against the Nazi State. They were found guilty of treason and were sentenced to death. Sophie, Hans and Christoph were executed by guillotine the same day. All three were noted for the courage with which they faced their deaths, particularly Sophie, who remained firm despite intense interrogation. Alexander Schmorell and Kurt Huber were beheaded in July and Willi Graf in October. Friends and colleagues of the White Rose, who helped in the preparation and distribution of leaflets and in collecting money for the widow and young children of Probst, were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six months to ten years.



Members of the White Rose, Munich 1942

From left: Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, and Christoph Probst

Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

- The last words of Sophie Scholl: "...*your heads will fall as well*". There is, however, some dispute over whether Sophie or Hans actually said this; other sources claim that Sophie's final words were "*God, you are my refuge into eternity.*"
- The last words of Hans Scholl: "*Es lebe die Freiheit!*" (Long live freedom!)
- The motto of the White Rose Society was: "*We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!*"

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