



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Death Penalty

Policy Positions

The Council endorses a vision of criminal justice that is based on equal justice for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or economic resources. The message of a Messiah that was unjustly executed gives the Council a perspective that places a moral imperative on ending state sponsored executions.

The finality of the death penalty raises fairness as a standard to a level that currently does not exist in our criminal justice system. Because of this, the Council opposes the death penalty in any form. We believe that it is not a deterrent to crime, is economically costly, and is often racist and classist in its application. Until the death penalty can be abolished, the Council supports a moratorium on further executions. A moratorium would provide time for an examination of the injustices associated with the death penalty in Pennsylvania.

Background

Violent crime has been present for as long as human beings have walked on earth. We are reminded as Christians that even the first family knew the pain of violence when Cain slew Abel. The crime cried out to God from the blood soaked ground (Gen 4:10). God's response to the first murder was not to put Cain to death. Just as God was pained, "The human community is saddened by violence, and angered by the injustice involved. We want to hold accountable those who violate life, who violate society. Our sadness and anger, however, make us vulnerable to feelings of revenge. Our frustration with the complex problems contributing to violence may make us long for simple solutions."¹

The United States is at a crossroads in its criminal justice system. Debate rages over drug policy and mandatory minimum sentencing, but no issue is more pressing than the questions surrounding the use of the death penalty. The death penalty is held up as a deterrent by some, while others feel it is the only fitting punishment for the most violent and disturbing offenses. Politicians use the death penalty to send a message that they are "tough" on crime. This toughness only continues the cycle of violence, ending the hope of redemption and positive contribution to society.

Some information and statistics on the death penalty in Pennsylvania:

- A disproportionate number (over 50%) of death row inmates are African-American, while African-Americans make up only 10% of Pennsylvania's population.²
- 70% of death row inmates are people of color.
- Over 90% of people sentenced to death had state assigned defenses because they could not afford a lawyer.

**And the LORD said,
"What have you done?
Listen; your brother's
blood is crying out to
me from the ground!"**

Genesis 4:10 (NRSV)

¹ ELCA Social Practice Social Statement, adopted 1991.

² 2000 U.S. Census, Pennsylvania data

- The cost of the death sentence (between 2 and 3 million dollars) is three times the cost of a life sentence.
- Death sentences are being overturned because of advances in forensic science.
- There is no evidence that the death penalty is an effective deterrent to violent crime.

Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Biblical imperatives and moral/religious voices on the death penalty:

The ministry of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the prophets form the basis of the Council's opposition to the death penalty. Jesus spoke **against** hatred and **for** love at every turn; putting someone to death, whether as an individual or government, is not an act of love. The death penalty is an act of retribution, not justice. Jesus spoke against the retribution—"an eye for an eye"—and encouraged the eternally revolutionary mandate to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

Jeremiah 22:3 (NRSV)

Reverend Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., says:

Having lost my father and grandmother to gun violence, I will understand the deep hurt and anger felt by the loved ones of those who have been murdered. Yet I can't accept the judgment that their killers deserve to be executed. This merely perpetuates the tragic, unending cycle of violence that destroys our hope for a decent society.

Sister Helen Prejean ("Dead Man Walking") speaks to the responsibility of the religious community:

The movement to abolish the death penalty needs the religious community because the heart of religion is about compassion, human rights, and the indivisible dignity of each human person made in the image of God.

The Council's ***Principles for Public Advocacy*** (draft, 3/05) says:

We envision a Commonwealth whose criminal justice system provides...opportunities for rehabilitation and redemption of those violating the Commonwealth's laws.

Consequently, we believe there is no room for vengeance and retribution in the Commonwealth's criminal justice system. Because we believe every soul is redeemable, we oppose capital punishment in any form because it denies opportunity for rehabilitation and restoration and is often racist and classist in its application. We urge greater discretion for judges in sentencing and fewer mandatory-sentencing laws, so judges can look at the total picture of each case and person before the court.

Rehabilitation and restoration of the offender to her/his community should be the first priority of the corrections system.