

Abolishing capital punishment requires education, conversion and action.

In 1976 a US Supreme Court decision allowed states to resume capital punishment. Since that time, 38 states have reenacted their death penalties while 12 states have not. The US now stands in a shrinking minority of the world's nation-states who continue to legally kill their own citizens. It is in the company of only seven other nation-states who continue to execute juvenile offenders. The US kills more of its citizens than any other nation-state save China and the Congo. Unlike the trend among the world's nation-states to restrict and abolish state killing, many US states and the federal government have actually expanded this practice in the last decade.

From 1976 to 2003, nearly 5000 human beings have been sentenced to death in the US and over 850 have been executed. In some states executions have gone forward in the face of reasonable doubt about the guilt of the condemned. In several states up to three of every four death sentences are overturned upon appeal, a number of them based upon the innocence of the convicted. With the advent of DNA testing, many prisoners facing execution have been freed. But for some, that evidence came too late.

About half of Americans continue to support the death penalty. Among church members, those numbers tend to be higher than among non-members. Many people continue to hold to notions that capital punishment:

- > is a deterrent to violent crime
- > assures that "justice" is done
- > shows no partiality regarding race and class

None of these beliefs are borne out by fact!

FACT: The death penalty is not a deterrent.

Governments that have enacted the death penalty continue to have higher civilian murder rates than those that do not. The five countries with the highest homicide rates that do not impose the death penalty average 21.6 murders per every 100,000 people, whereas the five countries with the highest homicide rate that do impose the death penalty average 41.6 murders every 100,000 people.

The average murder rate per 100,000 people in U.S. states with capital punishment is about 8, while it is only 4.4 in abolitionist states.

FACT: The U.S. executes people regardless of their innocence.

Twenty three (23) innocent people have been mistakenly executed this century.

Each year, approximately 4.5 people are convicted of capital crimes who are actually innocent.

Over 100 people have been released since 1972 as a result of being wrongly convicted.

FACT: The imposition of the death penalty is racially biased:

Over 80% of persons executed were convicted of killing whites, although people of color make up over half of all homicide victims in the United States.

In Illinois, Oklahoma, and North Carolina killers of white victims are four times more likely to receive the death penalty than the killers of black victims. In Mississippi, they are five times more likely; in Maryland, they are seven times more likely.

EPF Commitment

In loyalty to the person, teaching and Lordship of Jesus Christ, my conscience commits me to God's way of redemptive love: to pray, study and work for peace and justice, and to renounce, so far as possible*, participation in war, militarism, and all other forms of violence.

In fellowship with others, I will work to discover and create alternatives to violence and to build a culture of Peace. As a member of the Holy Catholic Church, I urge the Episcopal Church in accordance with our baptismal vows, "to renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God," and to wage peace across all boundaries, calling upon people everywhere to repent to forgive and to love. *(EPF welcomes pacifist and non-pacifist who are committed to nonviolence).

WHAT DOES THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH SAY ABOUT THE DEATH PENALTY

The Episcopal Church is among the vast majority of US religious bodies which have gone on record in opposition to state killing. The General Convention has four times stated its opposition to the death penalty: in 1958, 1969, 1979 and 1991. In the last two resolutions, the Convention called upon Episcopalians to become informed on the issues surrounding state killing and to work actively to bring such practices to an end.

Facing the hard facts about the racism inherent in capital punishment and the strong role that region, class and politics play in capital case decision making is the first step towards abolishing this cruel practice. Recent concerns about the enormous costs of every execution (which far outweigh the costs of life-without-parole sentences) and the increasing revelations of improprieties in judicial proceedings, continue to indicate that there is more than a reasonable doubt about the rectitude of these practices. It is these realities to which the General Convention has called the Church in its roles as both educator and engager of abolition efforts.

In addition to being open to the often disheartening facts of the operation of the criminal justice system in the US, all Christians are called to examine their beliefs and faith commitments regarding punishment, retribution and forgiveness. It is not an easy task but the Way of the Cross has always been marked by such hardships.

CONVERSION TO ABOLISHMENT OF THE DEATH PENALTY

The faith community is called to conversion in Paul's admonition to "render no one evil for evil." (ROM 12:17) As Episcopalians, our Baptism calls all members to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" and to "respect the dignity of every human being..." something we pledge to do "with God's help." (BCP p. 305) So are we called to overcome the desire for vengeance and to recognize the image of God in those who have committed terrible crimes; to overcome our tendencies to see them only in terms of the worst thing they ever did.

Through prayer, study and reflection, church members can grow, taking on new, nonviolent attitudes toward state killing. Through the grace of God, the most hardened heart can set aside the stones of retribution, perhaps even embrace a whole new way of addressing violence.

Slavery was once seen as divinely ordained and legally instituted. Abolition of slavery was accomplished with the help of converted Christians. With God's help, the long practice of capital punishment can come to an end as well.

ACTION: WHAT YOU CAN DO

The Epistle of James reminds us that "Faith without works is dead." (JM 2:14) After teaching and healing Jesus often urged his followers to "Go and do likewise!" For the church to "go and do likewise," capital punishment must remain on the agenda at all levels and its leaders must make it the subject of preaching, teaching and social outreach ministries.

- > Connect with the organizations in your state that are working to abolish the death penalty;
- > Include persons on death row in the Prayers of the People at your parish;
- > Host a death penalty expert to speak in your parish or diocese;
- > Host a workshop in your diocese (diocesan convention) concerning the death penalty;
- > Participate in petition drives and legislative education in your state;
- > Educate yourself on the successful efforts to abolish the death penalty in our country.