

Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Testimony on Ending Pennsylvania's Death Penalty

PA House Judiciary Committee

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My name is Sandy Strauss, and I am the Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches. As an organization made up of 42 member bodies representing 20 Protestant denominations, we represent thousands of persons of faith throughout the Commonwealth.

The Council welcomes and supports Governor Tom Wolf's call for a moratorium on executions in Pennsylvania. As Christians and people of faith, we deeply value the sanctity of all human life and believe that pausing executions in order to evaluate the death penalty's human and financial toll on our state is warranted and necessary. However, we believe this is not enough, and call for a repeal of the death penalty in Pennsylvania.

The Council has long advocated ending use of the death penalty. We believe the message of a Messiah that was unjustly executed gives the Council a perspective that places a moral imperative on ending state sponsored executions. Our position statement on this issue states the following:

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.

While the data included in our position statement is somewhat dated (the statement was written in 2007), we believe that it demonstrates a situation that still exists essentially unchanged:

- A disproportionate number (over 50%) of death row inmates are African-American, while African-Americans make up only 10% of Pennsylvania's population.¹
- 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.
- 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.

There is also evidence that the death penalty prolongs the suffering of many victims' family members as these cases involve years of legal uncertainty, scores of meaningless death warrants, additional court hearings, and frequent media headlines that can retraumatize victims and reopen wounds again and again.

We join Roman Catholic Bishop Ronald Gainer in the sentiment he expressed earlier this year when he said that he believed the Governor's announcement "breaks the cycle of violence that so plagues our society. We hope that this spirit of respect for human life is shown throughout all laws and policies of the Commonwealth." However, we go even farther to say that 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

¹ 2000 U.S. Census, Pennsylvania data

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.

We urge the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to end this barbaric practice and to adopt a policy that rehabilitation and restoration of the offender to her/his community should be the first priority of the corrections system.

Thank you for your consideration.