



Testimony of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania to the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee

Respectfully submitted by The Rev. Amy E. Reumann, Director

June 11, 2015

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry in Pennsylvania (LAMPa) offers this testimony in support of a moratorium on the death penalty in Pennsylvania. LAMPa is the state public policy office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with 1300 congregations in the Commonwealth. The ELCA has studied capital punishment as an ethical issue and affirms as a national church body that the act of taking a life does not honor God, heal victims of violent crime or make for greater justice in society.

The ELCA Social Statement on the Death Penalty notes that our church's objection to capital punishment is rooted in our theology as well as in the work our congregations are already doing with offenders, victims and their families. The teachings of Scripture call Christians to respond to violent crime through restorative justice for victims and perpetrators, rather than by exacting revenge. Jesus taught and modeled this to his followers and established a tradition of nonviolence as normative for members of his church. Our social teaching and pastoral experience confirm executions do not address the deep hurt of families who have lost loved ones, nor do they provide healing for communities. The ELCA affirms the state's responsibility under God for the protection of citizens and maintenance of justice and public order, but this does not mean that governments have an unlimited right to take life or that crimes must be punished by death.

Our three primary objections to the death penalty are:

- 1) executions represent an unacceptable, non-restorative approach to violent crime. Capital punishment focuses on retribution, sometimes reflecting a spirit of vengeance. Executions do not restore broken society and can actually work counter to restoration.
- 2) executions mirror and reinforce social injustice by focusing attention on the criminal's individual failure and distract us from our work toward a just society; and
- 3) the death penalty cannot possibly be administered justly. It is not fair and fails to make society better or safer. The race of the victim plays a role in who is sentenced to death and who is sentenced to life imprisonment, as do the gender, race, mental capacity, age, and affluence of the accused. The system cannot be made perfect, for biases, prejudices, and chance affect whom we

charge with a capital crime, what verdict we reach, and whether appeals will be successful. Since human beings are fallible, the innocent have been executed in the past and will inevitably be executed in the future. Death is a different punishment from any other; the execution of an innocent person is a mistake we cannot correct.

The message conveyed by an execution, reflected in the attention it receives from the public, is one of brutality and violence. The use of the death penalty undermines any possible moral message that it is supposed to send. Therefore, we support a moratorium on the death penalty in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Thank you for considering this testimony in your important work.