

IN OPPOSITION TO CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

A STATEMENT OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS REAFFIRMS ITS HISTORICAL POSITION ON OCTOBER 23, 1997

Among the bonds that unite us as Christians is the common affirmation that the God we know in Christ creates and seeks to redeem all human beings as outpourings of perfect love. We are called to imitate God's love as fully as possible in all of the dilemmas and ambiguities of human relationships. We hold all human life in reverence, and believe it is the responsibility of churches and governments to cherish and defend this sacred gift. On these assumptions, we regard the death penalty as a contradiction of both the values of our Christian traditions and the principles of humane government.

It is certainly the God-given duty of government to protect its citizens and prevent crimes against them. We live in a flawed world where malice and violence demand restraint. Capital punishment, however, is unnecessary, unjust, and intolerable in any society which has any lesser alternatives.

Punishment by death in the United States, which has alternatives, neither adds essential protections for our citizens, nor does it permit the restoration of offenders--two fundamental purposes of a criminal justice system.

Capital punishment is the needless slaying of a human being who is in custody and no longer poses a threat to public safety. It is always subject to gruesome errors by fallible judges and juries. It is not a demonstrated deterrent to violent crimes. It may, in fact, be a counter-productive incitement to violence; the society which sanctions and practices official vengeance may be setting an example of the brutal devaluation of life which it wants to deter.

Moreover, it is an historical, well-documented fact that those who suffer the death penalty are chosen not only by the nature of their crimes, but also by the color of their skins, the size of their bank accounts to purchase legal services, and the skills of their legal counsels. This discrimination against ethnic minorities and the poor is another reason for eliminating this extreme penalty.

Opposition to the death penalty must be accompanied by compassionate support for the families

and other loved ones of murdered victims. We mourn the loss of human lives, and we feel the agony and anger of the survivors. Though nothing can compensate for the loss of a loved one, it is the role of our religious communities to offer the balm of God's healing, and it is the responsibility of everyone, including state government, to provide the financial and other means to alleviate a family's distress.

We share the public concern about violent crime. We all are potential victims, and we all want effective policies of crime prevention. Yet, political attempts to reinstate the death penalty serve only to mislead the public about the real causes of crime and meaningful deterrents to criminal activity. Revenge is not the solution. It does not overcome grief; it expands human anguish.

There are no easy remedies, but we believe that workable policies of crime prevention include the following: 1) humane alternatives to the prison conditions which do more to "criminalize" than to reform many offenders; 2) rigid controls on the sale, purchase, and ownership of handguns; and 3) transformation of the social conditions--especially poverty and racism--which breed crime. Social injustice is a major contributor to crime, and social reform, not retribution, will be a major deterrent to violent crimes.

We therefore, earnestly implore our Governor, our legislators, and our fellow citizens to prevent the restoration of the death penalty in any form in this Commonwealth. We plead for other ways of social protection which do not add death to death, which do not return evil for evil, but ways which humanize us all by bringing love to fuller fruition.