

## A Letter to ELCA Members in Maryland

March 27, 2007

Dear Friends in Christ,

Most religious communities represented in Maryland are opposed to the death penalty. During the 2007 session of the Maryland General Assembly we, and others, made a strong case for repeal of that sanction. Many people inside and outside the General Assembly recognize that the death penalty is not in the interests of the State, its justice, its citizens, nor their safety.

We Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Lutherans have been opposed to the death penalty since 1991. The Lutheran Church in America predecessor body went on record in opposition to capital punishment in 1965. Most of our global communion in the Lutheran World Federation shares this commitment, and in the majority of nations where our witness is present the death penalty has been abolished.

On calendar day March 15, five votes in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee kept repeal from being debated on the floor of the Maryland Senate. We join with other death penalty opponents in expressing our disappointment that there is to be no vote taken on this issue of great moral significance. It would be good for everyone if there were an established record of voting on this issue, as there is for other matters of public concern, for instance.

Religious communities are united in opposition to capital sentences for a variety of reasons, all of which are represented in our social statement, "The Death Penalty." But Maryland has grown into an exemplar of our particular concern for the justice issue of capital justice. We are joined together as ELCA Lutherans in a considered commitment that five votes will not change. Here are more things those five votes do not change:

- **Maryland justice is not a perfect product.** Many capital sentences in Maryland are set aside because of problems with their prosecution, trial, and/or evidence.
- **Maryland sometimes convicts the wrong person.** Kurt Bloodsworth was convicted twice for a crime he didn't commit. Anthony Gray was threatened into a false confession for a crime

he didn't commit. Bernard Webster and Robert Griffin spent time in prison for death-eligible crimes they did not commit.

- **Maryland capital justice is essentially unjust.** Nothing changes the fact that the death penalty in Maryland already surenders any claim to be "justice" because it is applied with racial bias. Nothing with a racial bias is just.
- **In addition Maryland doesn't need a death penalty.** The death penalty doesn't make any of us safer and violent criminals can be locked up for life.

Those five votes don't even keep administration of the death penalty active and available. Presently executions in Maryland are suspended because the protocols for its administration are in violation of the State's Administrative Procedures Act.

We understand there may be a commission established to study the death penalty in Maryland. Even that kind of a modest tender has not made it through the General Assembly in prior sessions, and we are encouraged that an official pause for reflection is contemplated. We are confident that any fair study will learn what is already public record.

Perhaps it will be another day before the Maryland General Assembly acts upon what so many in Maryland already know: the death penalty is broken and can't be fixed. Five votes in the Judicial Proceedings Committee didn't change that. That is a message people of faith are especially able to bring.

We encourage all our ELCA congregations in Maryland to make this matter of public policy a subject for their prayer, study and mutual conversation. We know that many of our congregants have embraced the church's position on the death penalty and taken it to heart. We know that because you have told us so.

During this Passiontide when capital punishment is a featured character in the story of our faith, we urge you to keep faith with the public commitment of our church, to not be discouraged, and to continue working for an end to this inhuman, defective, and unjust sanction.

The peace of the Lord be with you always,

The Rev. H. Gerard Knoche, bishop, DE-MD Synod ELCA

The Rev. Lee Hudson, Lutheran Office on Public Policy