

Wisconsin Council of Churches

Pastoral Letter from the Council's Religious Leaders Regarding the Death Penalty Referendum

September, 2006

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The ballot for the general election on November 7 will include the advisory referendum question: "Should the death penalty be enacted in the State of Wisconsin for cases involving a person who is convicted of first-degree intentional homicide, if the conviction is supported by DNA evidence?"

The possibility that the death penalty might be restored in Wisconsin -- after 153 years without it -- is a matter of deep concern for us. While we recognize and respect the strong feelings and moral and religious arguments on both sides of the debate, we must reaffirm our strong opposition to the death penalty.

For many years, our respective denominations have opposed the death penalty. As an expression of our united witness, a statement opposing the death penalty was adopted in 1995 by the Board of the Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC). That statement, "Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Living as Images of God," grounds our opposition to the death penalty in fundamental affirmations of our Christian faith. It reads in part:

We believe and teach that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and that even the most perverse behavior cannot obliterate that image or destroy the worth of the person who bears it.

We believe that God is love and that, through the prophets, Jesus and other messengers, even to our own time, God teaches us to love and respect every human person as an image of God.

We understand ourselves as people called to follow Jesus, who rejected the law of retribution ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth") and, by teaching us to love our enemies, broke the cycle of violence and death once and for all. Our opposition to the death penalty is an expression of our desire, as Jesus' disciples, to do what we can to bring this cycle to an end.

We believe that vengeance belongs to God alone, and that the God we adore is not vengeful but gracious and merciful."

The WCC's statement also points out "serious and unavoidable" problems involved in implementing the death penalty, including the fact that it has not been proven to deter crime; that it is imposed disproportionately on persons of color; and that innocent persons have been, and will inevitably be, executed by mistake.

We do not believe that the requirement of DNA evidence is sufficient to overcome the danger of executing innocent persons. All human techniques and methods are fallible. Requiring DNA evidence for the death penalty will also increase the arbitrariness of capital punishment, since DNA evidence is not available in every case.

We urge all of our congregations to take time for informed, respectful discussion of this issue before the general election. We encourage you to make use of the resource packet prepared by the Wisconsin Council of Churches. And let us all pray for God's guidance as we seek to discern how best to frame policies to promote fairness, compassion, healing, and security for all God's beloved children in the state of Wisconsin.

In Christ,

Bishop Robert Berg
Northwest Synod of WI
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop George Carlson
South Central Synod of WI
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rev. James Hicks
Western District President
Moravian Church

Bishop Russell Jacobus
Diocese of Fond Du Lac
Episcopal Church

Bishop James A. Justman
East Central Synod of WI
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop April Ullring Larson
La Crosse Area Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Linda Lee
Wisconsin Annual Conference
United Methodist Church

Bishop Steven A. Miller
Diocese of Milwaukee
Episcopal Church

Rev. Hal Murry
Executive Presbyter
John Knox Presbytery, Presbyterian Church
(USA)

Rev Gregg Neel
Executive Presbyter
Milwaukee Presbytery, Presbyterian Church
(USA)

Rev. Arlo Reichter
Executive Minister
American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin

Rev. Lucille Rupe
Executive Presbyter, Winnebago Presbytery,
Presbyterian Church (USA)

Bishop Thomas A. Skrenes
Northern Great Lakes Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Paul Stumme-Diers
Greater Milwaukee Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Bishop Keith Whitmore
Diocese of Eau Claire
The Episcopal Church

Rev. Cary Winn
Wisconsin Classis
Reformed Church in America

[signatories as of 8-21-2006]