

Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Living As Images of God

Wisconsin Council of Churches Statement
Adopted February 6, 1995

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A note about this statement: *Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical, theological, and ethical grounds for the Council's work and witness regarding matters of concern to God's people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the Council's education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.*

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Although the violence so prevalent all around us today frightens, angers, and outrages us, we oppose the reintroduction of the death penalty in Wisconsin. We believe there are more humane and effective options for addressing the problem of violence, and that these options enjoy significant public support. *

Our opposition to the death penalty is based, first of all, on our faith.

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.

We also oppose the death penalty because of serious and unavoidable problems in its implementation.

The record shows that innocent people have sometimes been executed. Because of human imperfection, such mistakes are unavoidable. Unlike other forms of punishment, a mistaken execution can never be corrected. **

Numerous studies have failed to prove that capital punishment deters homicide more effectively than imprisonment. ***

Demographic studies have shown that the death penalty is imposed disproportionately on poor people and people of color. ****

We know that there are many thoughtful differences of opinion about the death penalty among the members of our churches. In the coming months, we urge the people in our congregations to share these opinions with one another and to study and reflect together on this issue from the perspective of their Christian faith, opening their hearts and minds to one another and to the guidance and illumination of God's Spirit. We also urge those who come to a decision on this issue to communicate their position to the governor and legislators of our state.

Footnotes

* A national poll conducted in 1993 by the polling firms of Greenberg/Lake and the Tarrance Group revealed that more Americans favor life without parole, coupled with restitution, than favor the death penalty. (Sentencing for Life, Americans Embrace Alternative to the Death Penalty, 1993).

** A 1987 Stanford Law Review article found 349 people wrongfully convicted of crimes punishable by death from 1900 to 1985. Of these, 139 received the death penalty and 23 were executed.

*** For example, a study by Amnesty International revealed that between 1976 and 1986 the average murder rate in states without the death penalty was 5.3 per million and in states that had executed someone, it was 10.6 per million. (The Milwaukee Journal, October 29, 1994).

**** For example, nearly 90% of those executed for the crime of rape since 1930 have been African Americans. (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Capital Punishment, 1981).