

Hunger Network in Ohio



Good morning, Chairman LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking member Leland and members of the criminal justice committee.

My name is Nick Bates, I am an ordained Deacon and the director of the Hunger Network in Ohio which is an ecumenical ministry and serves as the State Public Policy Office for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In Ohio, the ELCA has over 500 congregations throughout the state.

Today I stand here in support of HB 183 to repeal the death penalty in Ohio.

The ELCA passed our social statement regarding the death penalty in 1989, and the language remains insightful and pertinent today. In part it states,

“Violent crime has a powerful, corrosive effect on society. Bonds of trust, the very assumptions that allow us to live our lives in security and peace, break down. Instead of loving, we fear our neighbor. We especially fear the stranger. The human community is saddened by violence, and angered by the injustice involved. We want to hold accountable those who violate life, who violate society. Our sadness and anger, however, make us vulnerable to feelings of revenge. Our frustration with the complex problems contributing to violence may make us long for simple solutions.”

The Lutheran tradition is straight forward - because of God’s love and grace that is freely given, we are sent into the world to restore and heal broken relationships. This second part is the standard we use when bringing our values and faith into the public setting – does it build up the community and heal broken relationships or not.

The death penalty does not build up the community and likely is a barrier toward restoration of community.

The death penalty is bias. Race and economic status of both the victim and defendant play a role in death penalty deliberations.

The death penalty is costly. Procedures and appeals are necessary, but cost society a lot of time, money, and emotional effort.

The death penalty doesn’t deter crime. The death penalty has been present in many major societies and violent crime has been present.

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In addition to these standard arguments against the death penalty, the Church has found that the **death penalty doesn't aide in the grief process of victim's families.**

Our social statement continues to state:

It is because of this church's ministry with and to people affected by violent crime that we oppose the death penalty. Executions focus on the convicted murderer, providing very little for the victim's family or anyone else whose life has been touched by the 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.

Grief is a complicated. Clergy in multiple faith traditions spend a lot of time and energy with people to help them process grief. Funeral traditions, for example, are designed to help us process our grief. The death penalty, however, ties up our grief in complicated court bureaucracy and stoic legalistic procedures.

We recommend that we re-orient our judicial proceedings away from centering on the perpetrator and instead center on the victim.

God's law is not only guardrails but a guidebook for human relationship. In the Lutheran tradition, our scripture says that God provided the law as a gift to help us live into community with one another; not as a matter of personal morality, but instead as a matter of building up community. The ministry of Jesus and the many prophets throughout human history orient the law toward one fundamental truth – we are to love and serve our neighbor. In fact, Jesus commands His followers to view all of the law through this lens of love of God and neighbor, (Matt. 22:37-40).

As a person of faith, I am called to love my neighbor.
Love requires accountability, but not vengeance.
Love requires accountability of those who harm their neighbor.
Love requires accountability of our judicial systems and laws.
Love requires restraint of those with the power of the sword to kill.

Please end the death penalty in Ohio.
Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions.