

Testimony in Support of HB 259
Repeal of the Death Penalty
Sponsors: Representatives Jean Schmidt and Adam Miller

Testimony before the House Finance Committee, October 11, 2023
By Rich Nathan, founding pastor of Vineyard Columbus

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LeRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 259 which would end the death penalty in Ohio. I am Rich Nathan, and I am the founding pastor of Vineyard Columbus. Vineyard Columbus has a 45-year track record of attempting great things for God and receiving great things from God, and becoming a model for many churches around the world. For many years, Vineyard Columbus has been the largest Vineyard church in the world and the largest church of any denomination in Central Ohio.

I support ending Ohio's death penalty because I am pro-life throughout all stages of life, from conception to natural death. Many of my fellow Christians are pro-life when it pertains to abortion, but either support capital punishment for convicted murderers or have never really thought about it. I'd like to offer several reasons why we pro-lifers ought to apply our pro-life convictions to capital punishment as well.

We pro-lifers have always argued that a person's right to life should not depend upon anyone else's judgment (whether a mother or her doctor). We have been unwilling to surrender the right to life to society's valuation of a person's "wantedness" or potential capabilities. We have always argued that the right to life is not earned so that it could be forfeited, but is instead a gift of God, founded upon God's image in each of us from conception to natural death. Our pro-life arguments about the inherent worth of each human being apply to everyone — whether in the womb, severely disabled, institutionalized due to Alzheimer's, or convicted of murder.

But doesn't the Old Testament support capital punishment? Like the practice of slavery or polygamy, capital punishment was a divine accommodation to the cultural conditions of the ancient Israelites. It's important to remember that the Old Testament commanded capital punishment for a variety of crimes including striking or cursing a parent, adultery, rape, oppressing the weak, witchcraft, incorrigible delinquency, and other transgressions. Few today would support executions for these crimes. There simply was no other way in ancient Israel for society to protect itself from criminals. But today, when we can protect ourselves without ending a human life through other means, such as life in prison without parole, we pro-lifers should always choose a non-lethal alternative.

What about "an eye for an eye?" The famous "lex taliones" of Exodus 21:24 was originally written to limit relentless revenge so that a person wouldn't be killed for stealing a goat. It was not written to require the actual taking of an eye for an eye or a life for a life.

The Old Testament required two witnesses before capital punishment could be carried out to ensure against the execution of innocent people. But the execution of innocent people is exactly the situation we currently have in America today. Since 1973, 190 death row inmates have been fully exonerated of

all charges and released. In Ohio, 11 death row exonerees spent a collective 216 years incarcerated for crimes they did not commit. With such an obviously flawed criminal justice system, we pro-lifers cannot continue to allow the very real possibility that an innocent person might be executed.

Our hearts break for the families of murder victims. As a pastor, I have presided over the funerals of murder victims, including one involving a young mother killed with her two elementary school-aged children. For years, our church did free funerals for murder victims, helped with all funeral expenses, and offered follow up care to family members left behind.

Compassion demands that we come alongside of families impacted by murder in their quest for justice. But capital punishment is not compassionate. It does not bring closure to a victim's family. Rather, it prolongs a family's agony through the twists and turns of decades-long appeals processes which often result in a different sentence in the end.

For all of these reasons, it is time to fully value life by ending the death penalty in Ohio. I urge you to vote for House Bill 259.