

Presentation by

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Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment

Good afternoon. I am John Deckenback, Conference Minister of the United Church of Christ's Central Atlantic Conference.

Our Conference includes some 70 congregations in Maryland. In many communities our churches are anchors, mainstays, of their communities. Evangelical Reformed United Church of Christ in downtown Frederick a few blocks from my home traces its origins to the early 18th century. Throughout their history - through good time and bad - our congregations and pastors have sought to enhance the fabric of Maryland society.

I am here today speaking on behalf of our congregations and pastors because we believe you have an opportunity to present recommendations that once again will enhance the fabric of Maryland by eliminating Capital Punishment in our state.

Here in Maryland and nationally our delegate assemblies have consistently called for an end of capital punishment. Five times since 1969 our church's national General Synods have voiced their opposition. I have attached several of our statements to these remarks including one from 1979

addressed particularly to the Governor of Florida a member of the United Church of Christ.

We base our decades of opposition to capital punishment on our understanding of the Christian Faith and the New Testament calls for redemptive love, mercy and the sanctity of life. We believe the death penalty undermines the fundamental respect for human life by sanctioning the deliberate act of killing an individual by the State.

My own personal engagement with the criminal justice system goes back to a college internship in a juvenile justice facility more than 40 years ago. Over the years I have been a member of criminal justice advisory commissions, led seminars, advocated for alternatives to incarceration and testified frequently before legislative bodies regarding criminal justice issues.

Early in my ministry I met the Rev. Byron Eschelman. Rev. Eschelman, the long-time chaplain to California's death row, was also a minister of the United Church of Christ. For many years he ministered to prisoners on death row including poignant spiritual moments in those last few hours before their execution by the state.

Chaplain Eschelman had a conversion experience on death row. He became an outspoken opponent of capital punishment. In his book, Death Row Chaplain, Eschelman tells the stories of the people he met on death row. These are the stories of real people. People who have grown and changed on death row and individuals whom Eschelman believes were wrongly executed. Commenting on one execution, he writes:

“From the viewpoint of Christianity, (an execution) was a total negation of all that Jesus Christ tried to teach us.” (p. 187f)

“Whenever killing occurs it must be understood as an appropriate symptom for the psychological immaturity of the killer, whether individual or state.” (p. 227)

“After all these years of knowing the men on Death Row, it is apparent to me that killing has to do with hostility feelings, and that these feelings are related to the amount of hostility one has received from others...”

“Criminals are dynamic scapegoats. Each time one is executed by society the effect is to intensify the problems of crime. Crime, like cancer, thrives on the surface attack which is preoccupied with symptoms and the illusory disappearance of malignancy.” (p. 228)

Last weekend at a book fair I found a copy of Eshelman’s book which I will leave with you today.

Here today and at your previous sessions you have heard from members of Maryland’s Faith Group Leaders (FGL). FGL members – bishops and chief executives from across a spectrum of theological and ecclesiastical traditions are united in urging the eliminate of capital punishment in Maryland. I join their chorus.

Can there ever be a fairly administered execution? I doubt it. Maryland’s own study and record are replete with illustrations of the racial, economic and geographic disparities in the application of the death penalty.

We believe the State of Maryland should not be a partner in death nor should the State in any way sanction killing. We should be about the business of bringing about true justice, healing and reconciliation.

It is conceivable to abolish the death penalty in Maryland and do it now!

Thank you.