

The United Methodist Church's View on the Death Penalty

Close-Up: The Death Penalty

By Tom McAnally



Opponents of the death penalty rally outside the New Jersey Statehouse in Trenton in this 2001 file photograph. Capital punishment has always been a difficult issue for religious and non-religious people alike. Debate over it has intensified in recent years, particularly in the United States. A UMNS photo by John C. Goodwin.

Capital punishment, legalized killing by the state, has always been a deeply troublesome issue for religious and non-religious people alike.

Debate on the issue has intensified in recent years, particularly in the United States, where an unprecedented number of people have been executed. Most church groups officially oppose capital punishment, but individual support has increased amid such horrendous events as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, high-profile child abduction cases, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and last fall's chain of sniper killings in the Washington, Maryland and Virginia area.

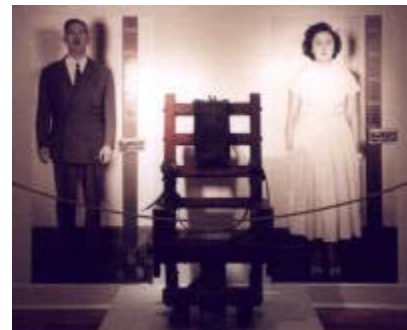
People of faith weigh in on both sides of the debate. Some argue the death penalty deters crime and protects society.

Others contend that it has not proven to be a deterrence, is biased against the poor and African Americans, and isn't something Jesus would do.

The United Methodist Church, in its Social Principles, officially opposes capital punishment and urges its elimination from all criminal codes. The church's General Conference, a delegated body representing members around the world, meets every four years and is the only entity that can take official positions for the denomination. Those statements are included in the church's Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions. On many issues addressed by the church, individual members hold a wide range of viewpoints, including outright opposition to denomination policy.

The late Harry Blackmun, associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and an active United Methodist, held strong convictions about the death penalty. In a dissenting opinion related to a pending execution in Texas, Blackmun declared, "From this day forward, I no longer shall tinker with the machinery of death."

Nearly a decade later, another United Methodist, Illinois Gov. George Ryan, referred to that statement from Blackmun as he announced Jan. 11 his decision to commute all Illinois death sentences to prison terms of life or less, the largest such emptying of death row in history. The announcement came as he was leaving office.



Figures representing Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and a Cold War-era electric chair dominate an exhibit at the New-York Historical Society Museum in this 2002 file photograph. The Rosenbergs were executed in 1953 for conspiracy to aid the Soviet Union. Capital punishment has always been a difficult issue for religious and non-religious people alike. Debate over it has intensified in recent years, particularly in the United States. A UMNS photo by John C. Goodwin.



Former Governor of Illinois, and United Methodist, George Ryan, commuted all Illinois death sentences to prison terms of life or less in January.

Since 1977, 13 men have been exonerated and released from Illinois' death row, a 4.9 percent rate that stands as the highest percentage of exonerations in the nation. Referring to the state's capital punishment system, Ryan said, "The legislature couldn't reform it, lawmakers won't repeal it, but I will not stand for it. ... I must act."

J. Taylor Phillips, a United Methodist and state court judge from Macon, Ga., called Ryan's decision "ridiculous." It is possible that some of the inmates should have been exonerated because of questions regarding their cases, he said, "but there was no question about the guilt of others." He expressed concern that convicted murderers would eventually be free to murder again.

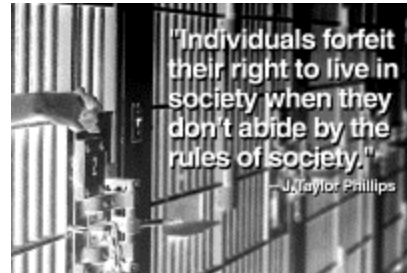
When delegates to the United Methodist General Conference met in 1980, they approved a resolution against the death penalty. Phillips was the only delegate who spoke against it when it reached the floor of the international assembly. He bases his support of capital punishment on the Old Testament. "It is clear that people in those days could lose their right to life by their actions," he said. "It seems to me that the death penalty is a legal matter rather than a religious matter."

Anne Marshall disagrees with the blanket nature of the Social Principles and says each case must be considered individually. Her husband, Raymond Johnson, was among 168 killed in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Convicted bomber Timothy McVeigh's death in 2001 was the first federal execution in 38 years.

In cases where guilt is clear and individuals have no remorse, Marshall, a staff executive with the United Methodist Church, believes "the punishment must fit the crime."

A resolution adopted by the 2000 General Conference encourages bishops to oppose capital punishment and to request that all clergy and lay officials preach, teach and exemplify the church's position.

Jesus took a position, said Bishop Kenneth Carder of the church's Mississippi Area. "When confronted with a woman who was guilty of a capital offense by the laws of the day, Jesus shifted the whole question from who deserves to be executed to who deserves to execute. Jesus stopped an execution of a guilty person by insisting that those without guilt are qualified to throw the stones, or pull the switch, or inject the needle."



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