

1999 General Synod 22 CALL FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE DEATH PENALTY

WHEREAS, the Ten Commandments teach "Thou shall not kill," placing a profound respect for human life at the center of Jewish and Christian teaching;

WHEREAS, the Scriptures reveal that God desires not vengeance but repentance and Jesus explicitly rejects retribution, calling us instead to transformative forgiveness;

WHEREAS, Jesus challenged the death penalty of his culture, calling on those without sin to cast the first stone;

WHEREAS, Scripture repeatedly calls us to overcome evil with good and to transform hatred with love;

WHEREAS, the good news of Easter celebrates the triumph of life over evil and reminds us of the promise of redemption held out to all of creation;

WHEREAS, the death penalty undermines the fundamental respect for human life by sanctioning the deliberate act of killing an individual;

WHEREAS, the death penalty disregards the power of God's grace and sovereignty in human life which offers the possibility of transforming individuals and circumstances deemed "irredeemable" by human judgment;

WHEREAS, in imposing execution even on those who have been transformed in prison, the death penalty is revealed solely as an instrument of vengeance;

WHEREAS, such an instrument of vengeance negates the stated goal of change and rehabilitation as part of the criminal justice system;

WHEREAS, study after study demonstrates a clear racial and economic bias in applying the death penalty and this arbitrary administration of the death penalty contradicts its use as an instrument of justice (David Baldus "Racial Discrimination in the Administration of the Death Penalty in Georgia" 1986; Gross/Mauro "Discrimination in the Death Penalty" 1982; U.S. General Accounting Office Mauro "Discrimination in the Death Penalty" 1994);

WHEREAS, the financial cost to society of implementing the death penalty is significantly higher than the cost of lifetime incarceration; (Miami Herald "Cost of Execution" early 1980's; Jonathan Gradess, "Costs of Execution in New York" circa 1990)

WHEREAS, studies show that despite efforts to eliminate racial and socioeconomic bias in death penalty sentencing, people of color are still disproportionately represented among the death row population, with African Americans and Latinos and Latinas constituting almost half of the death row population but only 18% of the U.S. population;

WHEREAS, the race of the defendant and the race of the victim continue to be prominent factors in the application of the death penalty, with the death penalty imposed significantly more frequently when the victim is white, a pattern acknowledged by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1987 (McClesky v. Kemp, U.S. Supreme Court, April 12, 1987);

WHEREAS, documented evidence of racial and socioeconomic disparity in the application of the death penalty, as well as inadequate legal representation of death row

prisoners, has led the American Bar Association to call for a moratorium on all executions until such time as death penalty cases are administered fairly;

WHEREAS, the arbitrary administration of the death penalty has led to the unjust execution of at least 23 innocent people since 1900 (Bedau/Radelet Study, Stanford Law Review);

WHEREAS, recent legislation and court rulings have further eroded access and availability of legal assistance and recourse to those charged with criminal offenses, particularly affecting the cases of death row inmates, thus exacerbating the racial and economic bias in the administration of the death penalty;

WHEREAS, judicial jurisdictions are executing more people and speeding the process of executions;

WHEREAS, many denominations and faith groups have long held positions in opposition to the death penalty, but have, with few exceptions, remained largely silent in the face of a record increase in executions and an alarming trend toward executing younger and younger people convicted of crimes;

WHEREAS, the United States is one of only five nations which have executed juvenile offenders in the 1900's (along with Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) despite international treaties and conventions condemning such a practice;

WHEREAS, some states are considering an even lower age at which the death penalty may be imposed, in light of the Supreme Court ruling which allows the execution of individuals as young as 16;

WHEREAS, the death penalty is prohibited by the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;

WHEREAS, the Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Puerto Rico (the Puerto Rico Conference of the United Church of Christ) has expressed its opposition to the death penalty;

WHEREAS, the people of Puerto Rico have consistently rejected the death penalty;

WHEREAS, the death penalty has not proven to be an effective deterrent to crime, as evidenced by studies showing that states with the death penalty do not have lower murder rates than states without a death penalty in place;

WHEREAS, there is no conclusive evidence that the death penalty brings about real healing for victims' families and, in fact, public opinion strongly supports life imprisonment without parole along with some form of restitution for victims' families as a more meaningful gesture toward healing;

WHEREAS, many criminal justice and conflict resolution experts have found that the trend toward vengeance and punishment reflected in the increased number of executions in fact undermines the goals of accountability and true restoration by leaving victims' families and the community without a role in the justice process and by preventing the offender from experiencing the full consequence of pain caused; and

WHEREAS, in the midst of a violent world, the lament of Jesus that we would "know the things that make for peace" challenges us to move beyond such instruments as the death penalty to bring about true justice, healing and reconciliation;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ Office for Church in Society, Commission for Racial Justice and the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, in partnership with other national instrumentalities and agencies (and their successor bodies), continue advocacy efforts to address the racial and economic biases in the administration and continuation of the death penalty, including efforts to reverse the trend toward limiting access to legal counsel and recourse;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ and the Office for Church in Society, in cooperation with congregations, conferences and the national instrumentalities, work with legislators to introduce a "moratorium on execution" legislation in the state and federal legislative bodies;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-second General Synod calls upon United Church of Christ national instrumentalities (and their successor bodies), conferences, associations and congregations to speak out in opposition to the death penalty and work for its abolition, with an immediate focus on abolishing the death penalty for juvenile offenders, the mentally retarded and the mentally ill;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ Office for Church in Society, Commission for Racial Justice and the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, in partnership with all national instrumentalities and agencies (and their successor bodies), engage in renewed education efforts with United Church of Christ conferences, associations and congregations throughout the United States and Puerto Rico regarding the issue of capital punishment;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that copies of this resolution be sent to the governor of each state, the leadership of each political party of each state, Puerto Rico, the President of the United States, and each member of the United States Congress; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Twenty-second General Synod of the United Church of Christ reaffirms the long-standing opposition within the United Church of Christ to the death penalty and urges the abolition of capital punishment as a means of working for justice and maintaining a faithful witness to remember "the least of these" our sisters and brothers.

Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.