

Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Will Mebane. I am the canon for Trinity Cathedral in Cleveland, Ohio. Trinity is the cathedral church for The Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. The diocese consists of the 48 counties of northern Ohio. There are approximately 112 active priests and 10 deacons serving in 95 parishes, with a membership of almost 19,000 individuals.¹ We are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion as represented in the United States by The Episcopal Church, which is comprised of 110 dioceses in 16 nations.² We trace our roots to the beginning of Christianity³ over 2,000 years ago.

I respectfully appear before you today to testify in support of abolition of the death penalty as a punishment option. My support of SB 270 is rooted in the long history of commitment The Episcopal Church has made in abolishing the death penalty in the United States.

Action The Episcopal Church has Taken Against Capital Punishment⁴

In 1958, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church opposed capital punishment on a theological basis that *the life of an individual is of infinite worth in the sight of Almighty God, and the taking of such a human life falls within the providence of Almighty God and not within the right of humans.*

Twenty years later in 1979, The Episcopal Church reaffirmed its Opposition to Capital Punishment and *called on all dioceses and individual Church members to work actively to abolish the death penalty.*

Meeting again in 1991 in General Convention, The Episcopal Church reaffirmed its opposition to capital punishment, *deplored the expansion of capital offenses and supported initiatives to establish alternatives to incarceration and to reduce recidivism.*

¹ Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, <http://www.dohio.org/about-us/about-the-diocese-of-ohio>

² The Episcopal Church, <http://episcopalchurch.org/page/anglican-communion>

³ The Episcopal Church, <http://episcopalchurch.org/page/i-am-episcopalian>

⁴ Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Death Penalty Abolition Action Group, <http://epfnational.org/death-penalty-abolition-action-group/>

Then in 2000, the 73rd General Convention of The Episcopal Church *called for a moratorium on the use of capital punishment and urged parishes and dioceses to study the death penalty and explore reasons for the Church's opposition.*

More recently in 2009, the 193rd Convention of the Diocese of Ohio *called on the Governor and Legislature of the State of Ohio to impose a moratorium on capital punishment and asked parishioners to pray for families, friends, and murder victims.* Since that time, we at Trinity Cathedral have prayed for murder victims and their surviving families and friends. We also pray for those convicted and for their families and friends while tolling the bell at the hour appointed for the execution by the State of Ohio of individuals sentenced to death. I no longer want the blood of those killed by the State of Ohio on my hands. The state need not continue to seek vengeance, retribution or punishment by death on my account. There are available alternative punishment options short of ending a life that the state did not create. It's also important to clearly understand that the state also cannot restore a life were it to execute an innocent person; an irreversible mistake that I'm afraid in all likelihood has already been made.

The death penalty:

- Does not deter serious crime;
- Prolongs suffering by the survivors of victims;
- Costs much more than life without the possibility of parole;
- Tortures persons on death row who are innocent;
- Is used against defendants who lack adequate legal representation;
- Is unevenly sought by prosecutors across Ohio;
- Is disproportionately used against the poor and minorities;
- Causes corrections officers and officials who witness executions to question whether justice has indeed been carried-out; and
- Is irreversible.

It is ironic that we find ourselves gathered here for a hearing about killing people on a day that has been set aside for expression of love...Valentine's Day. One year ago, Frank Spisak, a mentally ill man sentenced to die for the murders he committed, was executed by the State of Ohio on this very day. It is perhaps even more ironic that the first person to be executed at the Ohio Penitentiary was named Valentine. Valentine Wagner, age 56 from Morrow County was hanged in 1885 for the murder of Daniel Shehan.⁵ Are we really any safer today because the State of Ohio killed Valentine Wagner 127 years ago or Frank Spisak just last year?

Hebrew Scripture in the Book of Leviticus instructs as follows: *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself...*" (Leviticus19:18) These same words from Jesus are also found throughout the Holy Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke when he commanded *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'*" (Matthew 5:43f.) Jesus says there is no commandment greater than this. (Mark 12:31) In fact Jesus states that keeping the commandment 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' — "*is much more important than all...offerings and sacrifices*" humans can make to G_D. (Mark 12:33)

Jesus offers no exceptions to this commandment. He doesn't say, "love your neighbor except those who commit capital crimes in the State of Ohio." Are we to express our love of G_D and showing love of Jesus by killing our neighbors?

Mr. Chairman and members, I am grateful for this opportunity to testify before you and prior to making my final statement would like to commend the courage of Ohio Supreme Court Justice Paul Pfeifer, former Director of Rehabilitation & Corrections, Terry Collins and others committed to ending the insanity that is capital punishment.

⁵ Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, <http://www.drc.ohio.gov/public/capital.htm>, February 12, 2012

I conclude now with an excerpt from a 2005 letter from the bishops of Connecticut that was recently re-stated by the current bishop in a letter calling for the end to capital punishment. This committee is no doubt aware that Connecticut may soon become the next state to abolish use of capital punishment. I think the bishops' statement summarizes the basis for my support for SB 270. It is based on a belief that all life is sacred. All humans can be redeemed even when it is difficult for our frail human minds to conceive any good in persons responsible for heinous crimes against others. G_D sees the goodness that we are unable to see.

*"For us, the greatest argument against imposing death as a sentence is that we believe the will of God, as we know that will in Jesus Christ, is to value the gift of life, as a holy gift. In his ministry, when Jesus met someone who was dying, or had died, or was sentenced to die, Jesus gave life. Never did he condemn someone to death."*⁶

⁶ Excerpt from 2005 letter from bishops in The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut and re-stated in a January 17, 2012 letter by Bishop Ian Douglas