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## “Victims-Both Sides”

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[Death Row, Huntsville, TX]

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The United Methodist Church is convinced that the rising crime rate is largely an outgrowth of unstable social conditions which stem from an increasingly urbanized and mobile population, from a long period of economic recession, from an unpopular and disruptive war, a history of unequal opportunities for a large segment of the nations' citizenry and from inadequate diagnosis and treatment of criminal behavior. The studies of the social causes of crime continues to give no substantiation to the conclusion that capital punishment has a deterrent value...The United Methodist Church declares its opposition to the retention and use of capital punishment and urges its abolition (UMCGC, 1976).

This statement was issued by the United Methodist Church General Conference in 1976. Before that time and afterwards, numerous other religious organizations have issued statements opposing the application of the death penalty.

The issuance of these statements by leaders in our religious communities has had little, if any, substantial effect against the implementation and application of the death penalty here in the United States. Since the death penalty was reinstated and declared "constitutional" in 1976, there have been over 250 executions and the number is steadily rising. In Texas (Texas ranks first in the number of executions since the death penalty's reinstatement), there were 17 executions in 1993, with more than 19 scheduled at the beginning of 1994 (6 of those had been carried out as of June, 1994).

The application of the death penalty has been debated continuously in past decades and the debate continues today. The biblical perspective of the Old Testament's *lex talionis* (law of retribution) or "an eye for an eye" versus the New Testament's theme of forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation. The political debate over its deterrent effect and the "tough on

crime" stance versus life imprisonment being more favored and more cost effective is now in the public forum. The moral argument that the death penalty is applied in a discriminatory manner, sentencing a disproportionate number of the poor, the black, juveniles, the mentally handicapped and the disturbed to death is also being debated. Even innocent persons have been executed due to our fallible criminal justice system. The issue of the death penalty hardly needs to be debated here. What is necessary, however, is our immediate and unremitting consideration of another aspect of capital punishment--the victims.

### VICTIMS-BOTH SIDES

Currently, there are over 2,500 men, women and juveniles on death rows in the 37 states that retain the use of the death penalty in the U.S. There are at least an equal number of victims' survivors that are in pain over the senseless loss of their loved ones. It appears the death penalty will not go away within the immediate future. Neither will the pain, suffering or sense of loss for the victims' survivors. What can churches and the Christian community do to help these individuals? These victims on both sides.

### VICTIMS' SURVIVORS

The family and loved ones of the victims are the ones who suffer the most in murder cases. One would think the surviving family members would be in support of the death penalty, if only from feelings of anger and revenge. In many cases though, it is usually community outcry or an over-zealous prosecutor who dictates whether the death penalty is sought for a particular defendant.

In those cases where the death penalty is sought and received by the defendant, does this alleviate or ease the pain of the victims' survivors? Hardly. Another death does not bring back their loved ones. This only continues the cycle of violence. Because of the judicial safeguards, there still remains years of litigation in the appeal process for the death row prisoner. Until some finalization, the victims' survivors are often unable to go on with their lives. They are unable to begin the healing process. Knowing this, many victims' survivors have transcended these emotions of anger and revenge and have actively worked to prevent the legal murder of their loved ones' killers. **Murder Victims'**

**Families for Reconciliation [MVFR]** is one organization that helps in this healing process. They provide information about the needs of victims' families and the concerns of victims' families who are opposed to the death penalty in all situations. They help the victim realize that love and compassion for all of humanity is the answer, as no one has the right to take another life. Virginia Foster's son was shot and killed by a person who was charged with first-degree murder. She had this to say:

There is an old saying, 'You would feel different if it happened to you'. Well, it did to me. And I have thought so much about this person and how I have hated him for taking my loved one away from me. But after much thought and many tears I knew that my feelings on capital punishment had not changed. For I knew in my heart that killing is still wrong. And I believe that there are other ways for punishment. And I surely want this person punished. They must pay for what they did. But I don't wish them to be punished by death. For taking their life would make two killings, two murders and two guilty people. I truly believe God's commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. And I believe the person or persons who kill by capital punishment are as guilty as the person who is being punished.

Instead of feeling a need for revenge and hatred for these individuals who have taken their loved ones away and caused so much pain, these emotions are often replaced by compassion, concern and a need to understand. Many remember that these individuals are still brothers and sisters in Christ--another victim.

### **THOSE ON DEATH ROW**

More often than not, those on Death Row are considered to be monsters--incorrigible human beings who are unremorseful, unredeemable people who no longer have anything positive to offer our society. Yet, they are products of our society.

For those who have come to know them as individuals, they have found some to be very talented people. Many are fine artists, writers and poets. Some are college students. Many are very loving and compassionate human beings who only wish to be loved and understood by a society--a throw-away society--that has

condemned and forsaken them. For those who choose to become involved, the experience can be rewarding and enriching for both parties.

In an actual letter to one Death Row prisoner, a woman from Houston writes:

It's hard to explain how I feel when I get your letters and how I feel after I read them. I'm always touched and often at a loss for words. You're my brother in Christ and whatever your mood or feelings at the time, it's like I'm there with you, feeling it all too...I've never experienced any kind of violent crime and I'm sure I lack a lot of your understanding about those things, but I don't lack understanding about loving and I know that you are that and so much more. I'm sorry you have to be where you are But then again, if you look at the 'positive side, if you hadn't ended up there, we probably would have never met and my life wouldn't have been touched or blessed by your's as well as the countless others I'm sure you have reached. I love you for that and hold it dear to me always.

Whatever your opinion of the crime the person may have committed, we must not fail to realize that whatever that person has done, he or she is still one of God's children. Our objective should not be to judge. They have already been judged by society. It is our Christian obligation to give them what they really need. Perhaps the thing that most people want in their lives is peace, followed by joy and comfort. This can only be found through a meaningful and personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jack Wilcox, a volunteer Chaplain at the Ellis One Unit in Huntsville, Texas, where Death Row prisoners are housed, knows this firsthand.

My wife and I are here for one reason: because people need the Lord. The Bible commands us to spread the gospel all over the world. Why should people get involved in the Death Row ministry? Because people need the Lord. I have four sons and if not for the grace of God, anyone of them could have ended up here, or myself. I would think that someone would come to see me.

Many of those on Death Row are destitute and have been abandoned by their friends and family on the outside. Literally given up for

dead. They are left, all alone, to deal with a difficult situation. Many have suffered violence, drug abuse or been abused as a child. Many have been on Death Row for years, watching their friends and close associates taken away, never to return. Becoming involved with a Death Row prisoner can be deeply rewarding, but, you may also encounter some problems. This is where love and compassion must come in.

There are organizations such as the **Lamp of Hope Project** and the **Death Row Support Project** that can provide information and assistance to those wishing to reach out to those on Death Row. Ministering doesn't have to be done in prison. Letters can be an effective and welcomed tool to reach those on Death Row.

Christians have a responsibility to call the state to a higher standard of moral, political, ethical and humanitarian behavior in regards to the death penalty. Until this is done, there are those who need our help. As Christians, we should show love and concern for the victims of capital crimes as we would show love for ourselves. (Mark 12:31) As Christians, we should show love and concern for those on Death Row as we would for ourselves. (Hebrews 13:3).

There are study guides available for church groups and congregations who wish to become involved in this often neglected but richly rewarding ministry. The answers are not always easy to this complex issue. We must first realize that each of us has sinned and suffered. We are all in need of redemption. With the issue of capital punishment, there are no winners. Only offenders and sufferers. Victims, both sides.