

**Testimony at State Assembly Hearing on the Death Penalty
January 25, 2005, Albany, N.Y.**

I am grateful for this opportunity to testify on behalf of New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). NYYM comprises meetings (churches) and worship groups throughout NY State as well as in parts of Connecticut and New Jersey.

As Clerk of NYYM, I preside at our Annual and Representative Meetings. At Representative Sessions in December of 2004, Friends throughout New York were urged to testify at these death penalty hearings as part of our historic witness, and so I am here today to fulfill a personal and religious obligation.

Since the beginnings of our Religious Society, we have understood our role as followers of Christ to be one of helping establish the peaceable kingdom on earth. We believe in the sanctity of life, the oneness of humanity, and that each person carries within them a measure of the Divine Light of God.

As early as 1699, Friend John Bellers wrote:

Society has done enough for its own protection when it has rendered a murderer harmless by putting him in prison; if it does more it is acting in a spirit of revenge.

And in 1868, Friend John Bright wrote:

The real security for human life is to be found in a reverence for it. A deep reverence for human life is worth more than a thousand executions in the prevention of murder; and is, in fact, the great security for human life. The law of capital punishment while pretending to support this reverence, does in fact tend to destroy it.

Friends' historic testimonies include peace, simplicity, equality, community and integrity. In the Religious Society of Friends, the word "testimony" is used to describe a corporate witness to a truth that is revealed within the human heart and which is to be acted out in everyday life. The testimonies are far more than politically correct positions; they represent witness under the leading of the Holy Spirit. They are at base affirmative in nature, but may lead to action that runs counter to certain practices currently accepted in society at large. Thus a witness to the sacredness of human life may lead to protests against capital punishment. I am here today to affirm my belief in the sanctity of human life.

As Friends, our witness in opposition to the death penalty is both experientially and scripturally based. We take seriously the life and teachings of Jesus. We hear "thou shalt not kill" as words to live by, not words restricted to use solely on Sunday or in religious settings. When Jesus tells his disciple to "put up your sword" as the crowd comes for him in the Garden of Gethsemane, we understand this to mean that under no circumstances

are we to set his teachings aside. Friends are concerned about real life practice, and these teachings of Jesus are touchstones.

I want to pause now, in case it sounds as though I am spouting an idealistic but naïve approach to the realities of life and the problems present in society and in prison. As many here are no doubt aware, Friends speak from a long history of dedicated and positive presence in our prisons. The Alternatives to Violence Project, now world-wide, including such places as Rwanda, sprang up as a witness of New York Yearly Meeting. Friends have served as spiritual advisors and established worship groups in a number of New York prisons. I would be happy to refer people to information regarding the current work of Friends as well as work throughout our history.

The conduct of members of New York Yearly Meeting is guided by what are known as “Advices and Queries” contained in our Book of Discipline. We are advised to participate actively and fully in the political life of our country. We are to fulfill conscientiously the obligations of state and society, so long as they are not contrary to what we corporately understand to be the will of God. The 7th Advice reads:

Friends are advised to work toward removing the causes of misery and suffering. They are urged to support efforts to overcome racial, social, economic, and educational discrimination; to bear testimony against all forms of oppression; to exert influence for such treatment of prisoners as may help reconstruct their lives; and to work for the abolition of the death penalty.

We believe that no one is beyond redemption; that ultimately redemption is the work of God. We look always to the possibility of reconciliation and the restoration of relationship and community. Many like-minded people the world over know and practice this approach as restorative justice and we can point to numerous instances where it has “worked”. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission comes immediately to mind.

There are studies that demonstrate that capital punishment does not, in fact, deter the incidence of homicide; that capital punishment is applied unfairly across the geographic and racial spectrum; that pursuing capital punishment is more expensive than life without parole.

We have seen how capital punishment creates new victims – the families and loved ones of those who have committed murder. We have seen how it undermines the opportunity for murder victims’ families and loved ones to move through the necessary stages of grief in a way that opens the door to forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. We have seen how execution diminishes and degrades the humanity of all involved, how it leads to a gradual execution of the soul.

In 1956 when a Bill was before the British Parliament for the abolition of the death penalty, London Yearly Meeting wrote:

The sanctioning by the State of the taking of human life has a debasing effect on the community, and tends to produce the very brutality which it seeks to prevent. We realize that many are sincerely afraid of the consequences if the death penalty is abolished, but we are convinced that their fears are unjustified.

With this testimony I urge members of the Assembly and others to consider seriously the concerns of those who have spoken here today, to think deeply about the legacy we will be leaving future generations. I see us at a crossroads, a time when we are being given an opportunity to do away with an antiquated and barbaric notion of justice. Just as we did away with slavery, child labor and limited voting rights, so now may we do away with the death penalty. I urge us to seize this opportunity.

Thank you.

Linda B. Chidsey

Clerk, New York Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

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