

## **Testimony by David Vita of the Unitarian Church in Westport**

In Support of SB-280

Judiciary Committee Public Hearing March 14, 2012

My name is David Vita, and I am the Director of Social Justice at the Unitarian Church in Westport, CT. I am submitting testimony in support of SB-280, An Act Revising the Penalty for Capital Felonies. As a resident of Connecticut, a leader in a Connecticut faith community, and a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I strongly support repeal of the death penalty and urge you to pass Senate Bill 280.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has been working for an end to capital punishment since 1961. Our opposition to the death penalty was reaffirmed repeatedly over the years. Of main concern is the risk of executing an innocent person. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each human being. The Unitarian Universalist Association's 2005 Statement of Conscience states, "Experience shows that judges and juries wrongly convict defendants. Given the number of death row inmates released on account of innocence, it is highly likely that we have executed innocent people and will do so again in the future unless we abolish the death penalty." The death penalty is unlike any other punishment. It is the ultimate punishment with no margin for error.

I believe that the arbitrary, random application of the death penalty is also cause for its replacement by life without release. A recent 34 year study of murder cases in Connecticut showed that, far from being used in the most heinous of crimes (a common misconception), race, class and geography were the real determinants of who winds up on death row and who does not.

Members of our congregation in Westport have been advocating for repeal in Connecticut as a priority issue in our social justice work. We have written hundreds of letters to our state representatives. Four states, including our neighbor New York, have abolished the death penalty in the past few years, and we are working to make sure that Connecticut is next.

We are also concerned that our state is spending so much money on a death penalty system that harms family members of murder victims. Two weeks ago, a group of our church members attended a press conference at the Capitol with speakers who represented 179 family members of murder victims who want to see Connecticut repeal the death penalty this year. Their stories were incredibly powerful, and speak to how harmful the death penalty can be for victims' family members. I personally know two family members of murder victims who are opposed to the death penalty and I know the pain that they live with. I hope for their sakes that the legislature passes the repeal bill this year.

The death penalty is arbitrary, error-prone, costly, and needs to be abolished. Now is the time.

Thank you.

David Vita

Director of Social Justice

The Unitarian Church in Westport

(Resident of Stamford, CT)