

Testimony of the Right Reverend Laura J. Ahrens, Bishop Suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut.

In Support of SB-280, An Act Revising the Penalty for Capital Felonies

Chairman Coleman, Chairman Fox, distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee: My name is Laura Ahrens, and I am one of the bishops of the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut. I speak in support of Senate Bill No. 280. I stand here speaking for the three Episcopal Bishops of Connecticut: The Rt. Rev. Ian T. Douglas, the Rt. Rev. James E. Curry and myself.

The Episcopal Church sets its public policy by the vote of lay persons, deacons, priests and bishops in convention. In 1976, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church reaffirmed its opposition to capital punishment and called on the Dioceses and Members of the Church to work actively to abolish the death penalty in their States. The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut has affirmed that position by vote of our 219th Annual Diocesan Convention on October 25, 2003. The Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut, where I serve, represents 171 congregations throughout the entire state with 65,000 members and over 400 active and retired clergy.

In addition, the bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion, (a family of churches in 164 countries with 80 million members) meeting in the Lambeth Conference of 1988 passed the following resolution: This Conference urges the Church to speak out against all governments who practice capital punishment, and encourages them to find alternative ways of sentencing offenders so that the divine dignity of every human being is respected and yet justice is pursued.

I wish to focus on two points:

First: All capital crimes are heinous crimes and perpetrators deserve consistent, appropriate punishment. It is our society's response to such crimes that is the issue of this debate. I believe that society in its response to heinous crimes has the opportunity to act out of our best or worst instincts. The death penalty plays to our worst instincts of revenge. Beyond that studies show that the imposition of the death penalty is arbitrary, racially biased, and biased against the poor. There will always be the possibility that the death penalty will be imposed on an innocent person. By abolishing the death penalty we have an opportunity to affirm and respect our dignity as a society.

Secondly: My heart breaks for the pain and suffering of victims and their families. We need to do much more to care for the needs of survivors. The death penalty is not the answer. I have learned that many members of victims' families feel that the death penalty has added additional pain to them by extending painful trials and appeals, giving notoriety to the perpetrator, and making a spectacle out of the legal process. Alternative ways of sentencing, including life imprisonment without the possibility of release, can respect the needs of victims' families for closure and dignity.

On behalf of the Episcopal Church, I urge the committee to recommend Senate Bill No. 280, An Act Revising the Penalty for Capital Crimes.