

SENATE JUDICIARY
EXHIBIT NO. 20
DATE 2/4/09
BILL NO. SB236

Emmaus Campus Ministry

A ministry of the Montana Synod Lutherans and the ELCA in collaboration with the Episcopal and United Church of Christ churches, and welcoming of all!

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To the Senate Judiciary Committee:

2/3/09

This is written testimony in support of SB 236, the bill to abolish the death penalty.

Why should we care from a faith perspective? We can start with the injustice of how it is served: that nationally there are a disproportionately high number of people of color, mentally ill, and/or people in poverty on death row or who have been executed. Numerous studies have shown continued bias and prejudice in resources and sentencing despite individual state's efforts to be fair. (please see www.mtabolitionco.org for sources)

In addition, many innocent people have been convicted and executed. To date, in this country, 129 men have been exonerated from death row after further evidence has shown them to be innocent. Mistaken forensics, incompetent lawyers, mistaken witnesses, and many other factors can all lead to a wrongful conviction.

But even if there was neither bias nor false convictions, from a faith perspective we still have to argue that the death penalty is morally wrong and indefensible. We no longer live "an eye for an eye", but rather are called to have compassion, to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. Taking another human life is never an acceptable response to violence. Every Christian denomination that I know of, as well as Buddhist and Jewish communities, clearly denounce the death penalty as immoral. This is one of the few issues that we are actually all in agreement on; the sanctity of life, even the life of a violent killer, is still more important than the need for revenge or the hope of future deterrents.

We live in a society that so often orients toward violence. We crave it, we are addicted to the rush that it brings, and we trust that it will make us strong and keep us safe and bring peace. But it never does. Violence always begets more violence. It is the perpetual loop of human history that always brings the same results; fear, broken relationships, grief and more violence. The problem we all face is that we are teaching our children to be prone to violence as well. They learn it early on from videos, TV, games, culture and from other each other. It is a learned behavior. It is not the only way we can deal with each other.

I am also a father of two young boys aged 5 and 8. I am an avid hunter and fisherman, I play hockey, baseball, basketball and most other sports and I see my boys wanting to follow suit. My challenge is to teach within those activities the sacredness of life, good sportsmanship, and mutual respect. We have to teach boys especially how to cope with differences, disappointments, and even conflict in healthy and non-violent ways. If we pass this bill into law, it will be a huge statement to the people of Montana. It will say that we no longer support barbaric, violent and inhumane responses to the violence in our world. It will be a model of a different path that all of us can emulate and use in our own parenting. It is one of compassion, understanding and love of the other. This is not weakness. It is a deeper strength. We can move beyond the compulsions of revenge and instead model and teach our kids a different way for our community and world.

It is time to pass this bill and abolish the death penalty in Montana. It is the wise, prudent, just, and faithful thing to do. Thank you for your consideration.

John Lund