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# **For Immediate Release**

Virginia Council of Churches

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In a November 1957 article in Ebony, Dr. King was asked "Do you think God approves the death penalty for crimes like rape and murder?" He responded, "I do not think that God approves the death penalty for any crime, rape and murder included.... Capital punishment is against the better judgment of modern criminology, and, above all, against the highest expression of love in the nature of God."

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## Statement on the Death Penalty

In Search of God’s Justice

Discussion of the death penalty elicits anger and grief. Our churches and faith communities include victims and survivors of violent crime; we comfort those who mourn and we bury our dead; we pray for God’s grace to bring peace to their broken hearts. Our churches and faith communities also include murderers and persons who commit violent crimes; we condemn the evil of violence and we pray that God’s grace will lead to repentant hearts and reformed lives. As we reflect on our mission to pursue God’s justice, and on the witness of Scripture, we are persuaded that the death penalty offers only an illusion of justice.

At the heart of God’s justice is the dignity of the human person, created in the image of God. The death penalty is an affront to human dignity. It is not handed down to offenders by a flawless judicial system. A justice system that allows even one innocent person to be executed by the state is intolerable and unacceptable. The death penalty operates like a lethal lottery, predisposed by one’s ability to afford quality legal services, one’s race and the race of one’s victim, as well as the pressures of public opinion. There is a clear pattern of evidence demonstrating racial inequalities in the charging, sentencing, and implementation of the death penalty. A defendant is still more likely to be sentenced to death if the murder victim is white. This has been confirmed by the findings of various studies that, holding all other aspects constant, the single most reliable predictor of whether someone will be sentenced to death is the race of the victim.

From initial charging decisions to plea bargaining to jury sentencing, African-Americans and minorities are treated more harshly when they are defendants, and their lives are accorded less value when they are victims.

The death penalty is an empty assurance. It cannot restore lives lost. It cannot repair shattered relationships. It leaves no possibility of reform or recompense. It does not make our streets and homes safer. The death penalty provides only revenge, not justice, leaving us hollow inside with no place to turn for comfort. It is no substitute for the painstaking creation of communities where violence does not flourish: Communities built on respect for human rights, acceptance of personal and social responsibility, and constructive response to conflict.

God’s justice calls us to reject revenge. In Hebrew scripture and tradition, “an eye for an eye” functions to limit physical retaliation and even to substitute financial compensation (Ex 21:22, Lev 24:20, Dt 19:21). In the Christians Gospels, Jesus emphatically rejects “an eye for an eye”, commanding instead love of enemies (Mt 5:38). From the protection of Cain (Gen 4:15) to the conversion of Paul (Acts 9), Scripture testifies that God does not exact life for life.

As leaders in our respective faith communities, we call upon our congregations to pray, study, reflect, and work for a more perfect justice. Let us build a moral consensus, in our places of worship and in our communities for alternatives to the death penalty. Let us extend practical help and spiritual healing to victims and survivors of violence.

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