

The Honorable Ron Marsico  
Chair, House Judiciary Committee  
315J Main Capitol Building  
PO Box 202105  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2105

Dear Chairman Marisco,

I write as a person of faith, an activist and as a PA resident and person of conscience in support of Gov. Wolf's moratorium on executions in Pennsylvania. Studies consistently show that the race of the victim, the county where a crime is committed and access to financial resources often determine who will get the death penalty more than the severity of the crime. As death penalty lawyer Bryan Stevenson, founder of Equal Justice Initiative, has said: "When it comes to the death penalty, you are better off being guilty and rich than poor and innocent."

Despite having one of the largest death rows in the country — with 186 inmates — Pennsylvania has been losing steam when it comes to actually executing people. We've had only three executions since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976, and the last execution was in 1999. It seems like death is on its last leg — and not just in the commonwealth.

Maryland's governor, Martin O'Malley, signed a bill to abolish the death penalty in his state in 2013. New Jersey abolished it in 2007. Last week, Nebraska's unicameral legislature overrode a veto to end executions in the state. In fact, for the first time in decades, a majority of states have abandoned the death penalty in law or in practice.

In 2014, just seven states carried out executions — three of which accounted for 80 percent of them (Texas, Missouri and Florida). Last year, death sentences in the United States hit a 40-year low, and executions were at a 20-year low.

Recent polls show that for the first time in decades a majority of Americans prefer life in prison over the death penalty. And this is even more pronounced among young people — including young people of faith, who are deeply troubled that 85 percent of executions take place in the Bible Belt.

There are many reasons the death penalty is on life support. There have been several botched executions recently, such as that of Clayton Lockett in Oklahoma. Lockett writhed in pain for 43 minutes before dying of a heart attack. The prison warden called it "a bloody mess."

Then there are the exonerations. Ricky Jackson was released last year after spending 39 years in prison in Ohio for a crime he didn't commit. Mr. Jackson was convicted solely on the testimony of a 12-year-old boy who later recanted. We now have 150 of these stories, six of them from Pennsylvania. That means for every nine executions carried out in the United States, one person has been found to be innocent. What if an airline crashed one out of every 10 flights?

Victims' groups, such as Journey of Hope, Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation and the Forgiveness Project, are gaining traction as they insist that capital punishment creates a new set of victims and perpetuates violence instead of healing. As you listen to them, you can't help but be convinced that we can do better than killing to show that killing is wrong.

Several states are on the brink of total abolition — Montana and Kansas among them. In many states, political conservatives concerned about the high cost of the death penalty are leading the way, pointing out that all the money wasted on the death penalty could be better used to support victims, prevent crime and repair broken schools and families.

Pennsylvania — home of the original U.S. Capitol and Gettysburg and Independence Hall — holds an important place in American history on this issue. That is because the commonwealth was founded by Quakers, who had denounced slavery in 1688, nearly 200 years before it was brought to an end.

I can't help but think old William Penn was smiling down on us as Mr. Wolf made his announcement. Penn was a pacifist and a Quaker with serious reservations about the death penalty. His Quaker heritage held that every human being carries the essence of God, and that no one should ever take the life of another, not even the state.

Pope Francis, a similarly vocal critic of the death penalty, is coming to Philadelphia this year. Mr. Wolf's latest action will give him one more thing to celebrate as he visits the City of Brotherly Love in September.

*Shane Claiborne, founder of The Simple Way, a Christian organization in Philadelphia, is an activist and author ([www.redletterchristians.org](http://www.redletterchristians.org)).*

The Honorable Joseph R. Petrarca  
Democratic Chair, House Judiciary Committee  
220 Irvis Office Building  
PO Box 202055  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-2055

June 7, 2015

Dear Chairman Petrarca,

I write as a person of faith, an activist and as a proud PA resident and person of conscience in support of Gov. Wolf's moratorium on executions in Pennsylvania. I join a growing and diverse coalition of PA clergy and faith leaders in support of the moratorium. Studies consistently show that the race of the victim, the county where a crime is committed and access to financial resources often determine who will get the death penalty more than the severity of the crime. As death penalty lawyer Bryan Stevenson, founder of Equal Justice Initiative, has said: "When it comes to the death penalty, you are better off being guilty and rich than poor and innocent."

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In Faith,

Shane Claiborne

Founder, The Simple Way, a Christian organization in Philadelphia

Activist and author ([www.redletterchristians.org](http://www.redletterchristians.org)).