

Faith Leaders Call for Immediate Suspension of Death Penalty in Pinellas and Pasco Counties

As religious leaders of Pinellas and Pasco Counties, Florida, we are united in calling on our elected leaders to change their practices around the death penalty. We also request that our local State Attorney sit down with representatives of our group to discuss these issues.

We are deeply troubled that our counties have sentenced individuals to death at some of the highest rates in the country. Our corrections system today can keep society safe without needing to resort to executions. We implore our local leaders to refrain from rushing to seek the death penalty.

We all believe there must be accountability and consequences for those who commit crimes. A true justice system can achieve these ends without denying dignity and respect to human lives. With the death penalty, this dignity is denied and we commit the grave error of closing off hope to the possibility for redemption.

Recent polling suggests that 64% of local voters would like the State Attorney to reduce or eliminate use of the death penalty. Voters are especially concerned about those with mental illness and individuals who were under age 21 at the time of the crime receiving a death sentence.

Last year Pinellas County clergy joined Hillsborough faith leaders to express our concern about a report that documents Pinellas County's overreliance on the death penalty. Of the over 3,000 counties nationwide, Pinellas is among only 16 counties to produce five or more death sentences between 2010 and 2015. This overly zealous prosecution of the death penalty in Pinellas has put us out of step with the rest of Florida and the nation.

We often hear from officials that the death penalty is necessary for those who have been victimized, but many murder victims' families have made clear that the death penalty prolongs their suffering. Capital cases involve years of legal uncertainty, hearings, and frequent media headlines that can reopen old wounds. Victims' families spend years and often decades waiting for an execution that may never come. Where is justice in a process that continues to re-victimize its victims?

Racial disparities in the death penalty's application suggest that it is being applied unjustly. From 2010 to 2015, a majority of those sentenced to death in Pinellas County were African American. This disproportionate use of the death penalty against African Americans perpetuates a long legacy of racial bias. A criminal justice system that fails to treat everyone equally erodes trust between our community and our officials.

The excessive use of the death penalty in Pinellas County reflects an attitude that we cannot accept – that certain offenders are beyond redemption. No matter what someone did, they remain God's creation and have intrinsic value. When holding offenders accountable, our justice system cannot lose sight of the dignity of every individual. Reforms are needed in Pinellas and Pasco Counties to reflect this truth.

Therefore we, the undersigned, call on the State Attorney's Office for the 6th Judicial Circuit covering Pinellas and Pasco Counties to suspend the use of the death penalty and to sit down with representatives from our group to discuss these concerns.

Signed:

Pastor Thomas Anastasia
St. Matthew Catholic Church Largo, FL

Peter Andre
Director of Prison Ministry, Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

Deacon Eugene Beil
St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church Hudson, FL

Reverend Emily Bell
Lakewood UCC St. Pete Beach, FL

Father Kenneth Breen, O. de M.
Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

Robert Coughenour
Westminster Shores Saint Petersburg, FL

Nancy Davidson
Prison Ministry, St Anthony of Padua San Antonio, FL

Deacon Deacon Frank DeSanto
Our Lady of the Rosary Lutz, FL

Deacon William Ditewig
Catholic Professor of Theology Lutz, FL

Pastor Gary Dowsey
Our Lady of Lourdes Dunedin, FL

Deacon Dominic Friscia
Espiritu Santo Church Clearwater, FL

Deacon James Grevenites
Catholic Deacon St Petersburg, FL

Thomas Heid
Prison Ministry, St Joseph Catholic Church St Petersburg, FL

Theresa Helmich
Prison and Life Ministry St. Timothy's Catholic Church Odessa, FL

Deacon Scott Huang
Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

Reverend Dennis Hughes
St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church Trinity, FL

Karen Jensen
Ministry Leader, Holy Family Catholic Church St. Petersburg, FL

Father Paul Kochu
St. Luke Catholic Church Palm Harbor, FL

Deacon Paul Koppie
Diocese of St. Petersburg Palm Harbor, FL

Pastor Jacquie Lewis
Trinity United church of christ Safety harbor, FL

Pastor Scott Lindner
Atonement Lutheran Church of Wesley Chapel Lutz, FL

Deacon William Lovelace
Blessed Trinity St Petersburg, FL

Deacon Jack Lyons
All Saints Cartholic Church Palm Harbor, FL

Reverend Mike MacMillan
Faith United Church of Christ Dunedin, FL

Deacon Mark Manko
Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

John Marino
Parochial Administrator, St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church St. Petersburg, FL

Deacon Michael Menchen
Catholic St. Petersburg, FL

Rev. Dr. Russell Meyer
Executive Director, Florida Council of Churches

Pastor Thomas Morgan
Roman Catholic Largo, FL

Rev. Msgr. Robert Morris
Vicar General, Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

Bishop Gregory Parkes
Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg

Deacon James Paterson
St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Church Odessa, FL

Pastor Leonard Piotrowski
Espiritu Santo Catholic Church Safety Harbor, FL

Reverend Sally Purvis
Retired Minister, Lakewood United Church of Christ St. Petersburg, FL

Bishop Steven Rosczewski
Synodal Catholic Diocese of Florida Safety Harbor, FL

Father Robert Schneider
St. Cecelia Parish Clearwater, FL

Reverend Susan Sherwood
United Church of Christ St. Petersburg, FL

Mary Strickland
Ministry Coordinator, St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church Wesley Chapel, FL

Bishop Pedro Suarez
ELCA Florida-Bahamas Synod

Deacon John Ustick
Catholic Deacon Largo, FL

Deacon Ronald Vance
St. Mary Our Lady of Sorrows Land O Lakes, FL

Olga Villeda
Jail Ministry Volunteer, Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church Land O' Lakes, FL

Deacon Michael Waldron
St. Luke the Evangelist Palm Harbor, FL

Chancellor Rick Wells
Diocese of St. Petersburg Seminole, FL

Rev. Dr. Bruce Wright
Refuge Ministries Tampa Bay International St Petersburg, FL

Deacon Joseph Zucchero
Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg