

# Bishops and religious leaders sign letter

After death penalty abolitionists were stymied in their recent bid to ban the death penalty in Maryland, Catholic bishops of Maryland joined dozens of religious leaders throughout the state in signing an April 5 letter urging lawmakers to pass a ban next legislative session.

Gov. Martin J. O'Malley had promised to sign a bill that would have replaced the death penalty with prison sentences of life without parole, but the bill died in the deadlocked Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee March 15.

"We pray that it will take only one more session for the Maryland General Assembly to realize what so many in Maryland know: capital punishment is as broken as it is ineffective, and it can't be fixed," said the 69 letter signers, which included Cardinal William H. Keeler; Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington; Bishop Michael Saltarelli of Wilmington, Del.; and auxiliary bishops.

Twenty three of the signers represented Catholic groups, including Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, several women religious and area pastors.

The signatories pointed to a 2007 survey showing 61 percent of Maryland voters agreed that a sentence of life without parole was an acceptable substitute for the death penalty.

Most capital sentences in Maryland are "set aside because of problems with their prosecution, trial and/or evidence," the letter signers said.

The letter said Maryland sometimes convicts the wrong person, as in the case of Catholic Eastern Shore native Kirk Bloodworth, who was sentenced to death for a crime he didn't commit before DNA evidence proved his innocence.

Asserting that capital justice in Maryland is "not color blind," the religious leaders cited a 2003 University of Maryland study that found death sentences in Maryland

are more likely to be given to African-American defendants.

“Maryland doesn’t need a death penalty,” the letter writers said. “The death penalty doesn’t make any of us safer and violent criminals can be locked up for life.”