

Clergy, other critics call for end to Maryland death penalty

ANNAPOLIS – Clergy members criticized the death penalty as immoral in testimony before a commission that will make recommendations to state lawmakers by year's end.

The clergy joined other expert witnesses who testified against the death penalty

Sept. 22, during the final hearing of the Maryland Commission on Capital Punishment.

"God loves every one of his children. There is no justification for taking a life," said the Rev. Peter K. Nord, executive presbyter of The Presbytery of Baltimore. "We are a religion of second chances."

Reverend Nord also submitted to the panel a letter from 28 churches and religious organizations, including Catholics Against Capital Punishment.

The billions of dollars spent on death penalty could go toward improving education, providing services to people with mental illness and adding police officers.

"We should make sure that money is spent to improve life," the letter said, "not destroy it."

The Rev. Dr. John R. Deckenback, conference minister for the Central Catholic Conference of the United Church of Christ, Baltimore, also argued the death penalty should be abolished.

"We believe the state of Maryland should not be a partner in death, nor should the state in any way sanction killing," Rev. Deckenback said.

His view echoes that of Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, who testified against the death penalty in August.

Another witness, James Abbott, the police chief of West Orange, N.J., told the

commission of his about-face on the death penalty.

He had supported it all his life, he said, until he served on a commission studying the New Jersey death penalty.

“It turned out that what sounded good in theory was actually a complete failure in practice,” Mr. Abbott said. “And I am convinced that there is simply no way to fix it and make it right.”

He said serving on the New Jersey Death Penalty Study Commission, which completed its work last year, showed how much families of victims suffer as capital cases wind through years of appeals.

“I heard from these families, one after another,” Mr. Abbott said. “Their cries of pain were devastating.”

Mr. Abbott said that the New Jersey commission found no evidence that the death penalty deters murders. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in December.

Maryland’s commission also heard testimony about overwhelmed public defenders who can’t provide adequate representation; a lack of tens of millions that would be needed for reforms necessary for fair capital cases; and mistakes, incompetence and misconduct in crime labs leading to false accusations against defendants.

The 23-member commission, headed by Benjamin Civiletti, a former U. S. attorney general, has until Dec. 15 to make a final report to the state legislature with recommendations on capital punishment. Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, serves on the commission.