



THE SALVATION ARMY
INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT

DEATH PENALTY



STATEMENT OF POSITION

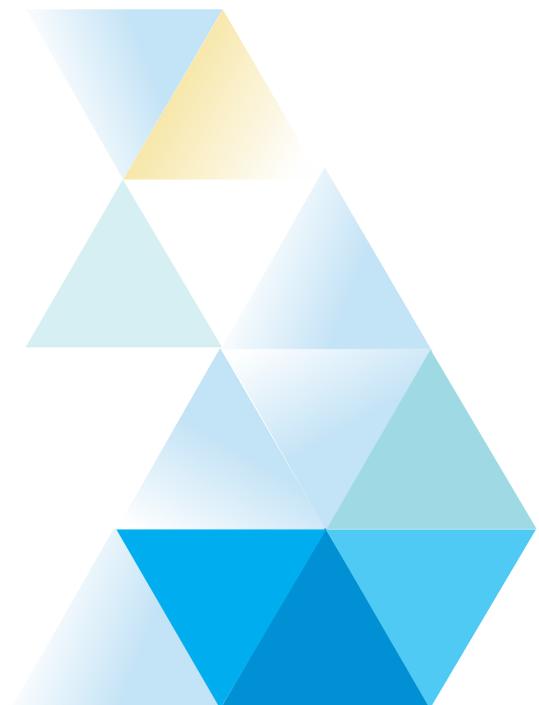
The death penalty is a practice whereby a person is put to death by the state as a punishment for crime. The Salvation Army affirms the responsibility of government to create and sustain justice, and while it recognises that this includes punishment, The Salvation Army calls for the end of the use of the death penalty.

All human life is sacred. All people are created in the image of God and have unique and intrinsic value. Those who have committed crimes must face justice, but always in ways that recognise the inviolable sanctity of their lives.

Jesus Christ, who unjustly suffered the death penalty, identified himself with sinners. Through Jesus, God wants to redeem, restore and transform all humanity. Everyone can become a new person in Christ.

The Salvation Army has extensive experience in rendering service within the criminal justice system of many countries, ministering to offenders and victims and their respective families. This experience confirms the conviction that redemption and transformation are possible for all people. The Salvation Army, in recognising the need for there to be consequences for criminal acts, advocates that such consequences should allow for the rehabilitation of offenders.

The Salvation Army uncompromisingly stands for life.



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The death penalty is a matter of active controversy. It has been abolished in a majority of countries around the world, but it is still legal in several.¹

Although exact numbers are hard to report since some countries treat death sentences as state secrets, it is known that hundreds of people are still being executed every year.²

Depending on the legal system in question, a death sentence is often pronounced for murder, terrorism, treason, rape, kidnapping, drug trafficking, blasphemy and other crimes.³

Depending on the country, death may be carried out in various ways: for instance, by hanging, firing squad, lethal drug injection, electrocution, gassing, beheading or stoning.⁴

However, there is no evidence that the death penalty is a greater deterrent to crime than life imprisonment.⁵

There is evidence of miscarriages of justice in trials resulting in the death penalty. Studies have shown that in certain contexts if the person on trial is poor, of a racial minority, or suffering from mental illness, they have a greater likelihood of receiving the death penalty.⁶ In addition, some people have been found to be innocent after the pronouncing of a death sentence.⁷

There are numerous examples in which people who are incarcerated, including some who have received a death sentence, have reformed while in prison. Spiritual counsel and pastoral care can play a significant role in supporting the law, courts, prisons and correctional programmes in their efforts to effect transformation in a person's life.⁸



¹ Amnesty International (2020), 'Death Penalty Facts and Figures: 2019'. European Parliament (2019), 'Death penalty: key facts about the situation in Europe and the rest of the world'. ² Ibid. ³ Wikipedia, 'Capital Punishment', 2020. ⁴ Amnesty International, 'Death Penalty'. Wikipedia, 'Capital Punishment'. Death Penalty Information Center, 'Methods of Execution', 2020. ⁵ Bailey, William C., 'Imprisonment v. the Death Penalty as a Deterrent to Murder', *Law and Human Behavior*, 1(3), 239-260, 1977. ⁶ Amnesty International, 'A clear scientific consensus that the death penalty does not deter'. Amnesty International, 'Death Penalty Facts', 2012. Death Penalty Information Center, 2020. Office of the High Commissioner, United Nations Human Rights, 'Race', 2017, and 'Death penalty disproportionately affects the poor, UN rights experts warn', 2017. Baumgartner, F.R., Neill, B., 'Does the death penalty target people who are mentally ill? We checked', 2017. ⁷ Gross, S.R., O'Brien, B., Hu, C., Kennedy, E.H., 'Rate of false conviction in capital cases', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111 (20): 7230-7235, 2014. Death Penalty Information Center, 'Innocence', 2020. ⁸ OWN (Producer), Cohen, Lisa R. (Director), *Serving Life* (documentary motion picture), Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), USA, 2011.

GROUNDS FOR THE POSITION OF THE SALVATION ARMY

Every person bears the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and so human life has intrinsic value. Sin mars that image but does not remove it completely. All people – without exception – are of value to God, holding a special place in his creation (Psalm 8:5), irrespective of age, gender, race, religion, health or social status, or their potential for achievement. No matter what a person does, the value and dignity of their life cannot be eradicated. The right to life is universal. The Bible makes it clear that human life is sacred: it is God who gives life (Acts 17:25).

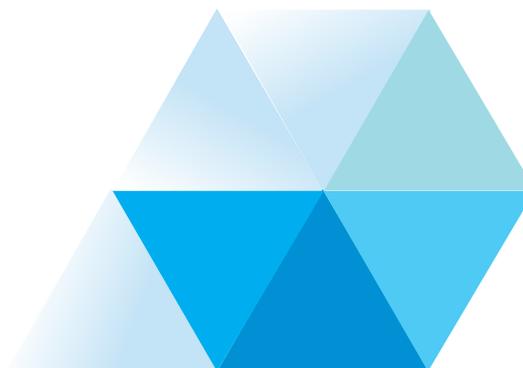
Despite the sanctity of our lives, the Bible teaches that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). Although the wages of sin is death, God graciously extends the gift of life (Romans 6:23). We don’t deserve God’s grace and mercy, yet we receive them (Ephesians 2:8). In the Book of Ezekiel, God says, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23).

The gospel offers hope and redemption to fallen mankind. As recipients of God’s grace, we are called to extend grace to others as well. Such grace was manifested and demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Followers of Christ aim to live Christlike lives,

motivated by justice, humility and grace, rather than vengeance and hate (Luke 6:27-31). The Book of Romans gives us clear instructions for this, stating: ‘Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord’ (Romans 12:19).

Scripture recognises the pain of injustice and does not silence those hurt by it. ‘How long, LORD ...?’ is the biblical lament of those whose cry is for injustice to be set right (Habakkuk 1:2). In Psalm 147:3 we read that ‘He [the Lord] heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds’. Similarly, 2 Corinthians 1:4 tells us that God ‘comforts us in all our troubles’.

There are those who support the death penalty from a biblical point of view, believing that God commands the death penalty. The Salvation Army does not support this interpretation of the Bible. Government has been ordained by God to create and sustain justice in society. To do that, it is authorised to use force when justice demands it (Romans 13), but the modern state has at its disposal means to punish serious crimes without taking life.⁹



⁹ C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 310, InterVarsity Press, 2011.

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

1. The Salvation Army will work to help Salvationists gain a sound biblical and theological understanding in regards to the death penalty.
2. The Salvation Army will be prepared to work with international organisations towards the universal elimination of the death penalty.
3. The Salvation Army will be prepared to join hands with other organisations to advocate for social justice and for governments to implement alternative non-lethal punishments at their disposal, which will support criminal reform.
4. The Salvation Army as a church will support professional counselling and pastoral care for families and victims as well as convicts, where possible, providing programmes in our centres with an intention of effecting restorative justice and the rehabilitation of broken lives.
5. The Salvation Army will be prepared to share its ministry experience and willingly cooperate in advising governments on both crime prevention and the development of just and humane penalty systems.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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Approved by the General, June 2020

The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters.

