

Testimony in Favor of HB 2282
Corrections and Juvenile Justice Committee
February 19, 2019
Sister Therese Bangert - Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth

Chairperson Jennings and Committee,

My Community, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth,
 have a 30-year-old stance against the death penalty.
It was this issue that brought me to the legislature and its processes back in 1987.
I have been walking with it almost daily since.

But in the summer of 2016, I encountered it anew.
When I moved to Kansas City, Kansas in 1996,
 I responded to the invitation to become a Police and Fire Chaplain.
I joined a group of dedicated-faith-filled-volunteer pastors.
Each of us carried a pager provided by the police department.
Ordinarily we carried it for 48 hours a month.
When the pager went off - day or night - we went.
We went right to the scene or occasionally the emergency room of a hospital.
Our calls were the most painful things - homicides, suicides, natural deaths.

So on a late spring afternoon in June of 2016,
 I was texted telling me that a Police Officer had been shot
 and to please report to the Detective Bureau.
Armed with begging prayers in my heart,
 I arrived to find co-workers in shock but hopeful because they had heard that
 Det. Lancaster was talking and he was being taken to surgery.
I stood vigil with them - listening, praying -
 Listening to stories of a co-worker they loved
 Praying that KU staff could again do their thing of bringing healing.
After about two hours the shocking news came
 that Det. Lancaster had died.

During the next months, I returned to the Detective Bureau
 Just to touch down with people with whom I had kept vigil -
 just checking in on them
 and taking them Snickers for the community candy bowl
 that they said Det.Lancaster often visited.

I watched from a distance as the court case against Mr. Ayers begin to unfold.
When I could do it gently, I shared my stance against the death penalty.

I had one detective who told me he was for the death penalty
 While another responded to him
 “I’m not for it. We make mistakes.”

Other responses I received

God is the Judge, not me.

Let the person be in prison for life.

And one police officer who had been with Det. Lancaster on the day of his murder taught me something new.

We were both leaving a meeting where the first responders and the law enforcement people

At the scene the day of the murder were honored.

I commented that it could not be easy to re-live that painful, horrible day.

He responded that it had been difficult for him, just now, to hold himself together.

Then he immediately commented . . .

“and the coming trial . . . I have been on the stand before for 20-30 minutes but I have never been there for hours . . .”

That comment struck me . . .

For years I have shared my belief that we often fail to include in our discussions

The impact that the death penalty has on judges, jurors, wardens and correction officials asked to put someone to death.

This officer raised a new concern -

Someone who would want to do the best he could for his peer/friend but months in advance being anxious about how he would do.

Then 9 months after the June murder,

Mr. Ayers was in Court having pled to Life in Prison Without Parole.

I am not privy to why Mrs. Lancaster did not push for the death penalty.

But I know on that sentencing day,

The law enforcement community who loved and respected Det. Lancaster Shared with the Court who he was and his goodness.

They did not give the limelight to Mr. Ayers.

In my opinion, they showed us GRACE out of tragedy.

In the 31 year walk with this penalty and my 22- year-walk as a police chaplain

I am even more convinced that the path to healing and wholeness

And the GRACE GOD provides in abundance to all of us

Is not reflected in the death penalty.

I respect your journey with deciding your vote on this bill.

You have my prayers as you continue your legislative service.

I want to share a short quote (from a much longer statement)
from a fellow legislator - Sen Sherman Jones (RIP).
Senator Jones, a Black man,
gave opposition testimony on the Senate floor back on 1994
when Kansas returned to the business of death.

His quote:

. . . When I came to the legislature five years ago, it was expected of me to be a proponent of capital punishment. Indeed, I had fought crime on the streets of Kansas City and investigated some of the most hideous crimes imaginable as a police officer. Yes, I could have been a proponent of capital punishment due to what I had experienced or if I believed in vengeance. But I do believe that I was affected most by the fact that I was also an observer of the system. - **enforcement, judicial and penal**. What I saw was not pretty, not fair, and certainly, in many cases, inhumane as it related to the poor and minorities vs. the influential and the majority. Black on black crime drew very little attention, but black on white crime received great notice and front-page coverage. It was quite simple for any observer to see there was a problem here. I'm afraid, we've seen no great change in the mind-set of the people of this state. . . . “