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To: Senate Committee on Judiciary

From: Howard N. Kenyon, Vice President
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon
0245 SW Bancroft St., Suite B, Portland, OR 97239

Date: April 1, 2019

Re: Support for SB 1013, relating to murder; prescribing an effective date

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Howard Kenyon. I am testifying in support of SB 1013 and its changes to reduce Oregon's use of the death penalty.

I am Vice President of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon (EMO). EMO is a statewide association of Christian denominations, congregations, ecumenical organizations and interfaith partners working together to improve the lives of Oregonians through community ministry programs, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, public policy advocacy and climate justice work.

I am here to share why EMO supports SB 1013.

EMO has a long-standing commitment to work for reforms in the criminal justice system, so that it better reflects our shared values of mercy, efficacy and second chances. Toward that wider goal, reducing use of the death penalty has been key for the past few decades that the state has used the penalty in sentencing.

There are legal arguments to change the current language governing our sentencing laws. There are public safety arguments that the death penalty fails at its goal of deterrence. There are strong fiscal arguments to reduce use of the death penalty. There are arguments of fairness, noting the racially discriminatory nature of our justice system as a whole, and the use of execution in particular. But we speak from the moral and religious perspective, about why this bill is a step in the right direction for our state.

Many faith traditions emphasize the power of redemption. Every person deserves the chance to turn their life around and make amends for their bad choices. The death penalty ends any opportunity for a person to change. This bill allows more opportunity for redemption for those who have committed even terrible crimes.

There is no room for error in a sentence of death. An innocent person put to death is the gravest stain on our legal system, and the potential for this error is embedded within the existence of this penalty. People of faith know well the imperfection of every human creation, including systems of justice. (We hear the reminder to imitate our Creator in mercy, not judgement.) We encourage our system to be grounded in humility/realism about human limits; restricting the use of the death penalty is an essential part of this.

The voices of crime victims and survivors must be heard and acknowledged in this discussion. We grieve with them. We acknowledge the diverse perspectives of crime survivors about what healing and justice looks like for them. We lift up the voices

of victims who are sometimes unheard, who do not find healing in state executions.

We honor a restorative approach to justice that centers those most impacted, and seeks restoration not only through the courts but in community that surrounds all those impacted by crime. The courts are only one part of the way Oregon should encourage healing from violence and prevention of crime.

Oregon has not always had the death penalty and has only used it twice when it was legal. We have tried it, and it has had negative effects across the justice system, by instilling a widespread pressure toward harsher sentencing.

The changes reflected in this bill will move us in the right direction toward fixing the problems our current sentencing system holds. We have a chance for change: a chance to redeem our legal system from the trajectory it is on.

Faith communities understand that no one is disposable. Our commitments to respect each person's dignity is revealed in how we treat those who seem hardest to love.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I ask your support for SB 1013, and I urge the Committee to move this bill forward.