

## How to Create a Supportive Space for Discussion

Open discussion is one of the best ways to conduct public education on the death penalty. It allows people to express their viewpoints and hear what others have to say on the issue, leading to greater understanding. For this reason, any discussion on this emotional and volatile topic requires a supportive space in which all can feel at ease expressing their opinions.

### Here are some suggestions that will aid in ensuring a comfortable and productive discussion about the death penalty:

- Prepare yourself as the discussion facilitator. This means planning an agenda, considering possible time limits, preparing provocative questions, etc.
- Begin the session by welcoming all participants and explaining the intention of the discussion. Review the agenda, agree on time limits, and explain the following ground rules for considerate interaction:
  - Speak from your own experience.
  - Actively listen to other participants and consider what they are communicating.
  - Do not interrupt anyone.
  - Do not attack personally those who offer differing opinions.
- Allow those participating in the discussion to introduce themselves. Use a creative icebreaker so that people can get to know each other before becoming involved in a heated discussion. This personal contact will help humanize the discourse.
- Employ techniques that will include as many of the participants as possible. Each participant must feel that s/he has been given an opportunity to present his or her views. Work toward balancing the various viewpoints, allowing as many perspectives as possible to be heard.
- Focus on facilitating the discussion, not offering your own viewpoint. There should be other people present who can raise concerns similar to yours.
- Be prepared to initiate the discussion and to keep it flowing. One tactic is to read from books, articles, letters to the editor, quotes from well-known people, or other statements that raise different points of view, in order to elicit responses from the group. Use the resources provided elsewhere in this CD. You can also distribute copies of AIUSA's fact sheets.

### Here are a few potential discussion-starters:

- What has been your personal experience with the criminal justice system? Have you ever served on a jury?
- If you had to summarize your general feelings on the death penalty, what would you say?
- How long have you held your current views on the death penalty? Have your views changed at all over time?
- To what extent have you followed executions that have taken place in your state?
- Do you have relatives or friends who have been the victims of violent crime? How do those experiences shape your views toward crime and, more specifically, the death penalty?

- Could you personally vote to sentence someone to death if you served on a jury? Why or why not?
- In what circumstances, if any, do you feel the death penalty is an appropriate sentence?
- What has shaped your opinions on the death penalty? Your religious background? Family and friends? The media? Other sources?
- What to you is the most important and persuasive argument to support your position on the death penalty?
- Have you ever wavered in your position on the death penalty? What prompted that?
- Are there alternatives to the death penalty that you believe would promote both public safety and respect for life?
- How can faith communities help victims of crime heal from the tragedy they have experienced?
- How can faith communities help break the cycle of violence in our society?