

Ending Use of the Death Penalty in Texas: Steps You Can Take

On May 2, 2008, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church approved a resolution seeking to end the use of the death penalty in Texas. Now is the time for us to act on that resolution. National momentum clearly is moving in the direction of repeal, as evidenced by the significant number of state legislatures that are examining the necessity and utility of capital punishment. Even in Texas, which still accounts for the majority of executions carried out in the United States each year, juries have begun to accept alternatives to the death penalty at increasing rates as more people come to recognize the often devastating flaws in the system.

For more than 50 years, the United Methodist Church has opposed the use of the death penalty and has urged its elimination from all criminal codes. Seeking to end the use of the death penalty does not diminish the suffering of victims of violent crimes and their families or the sacredness of lives taken through violence. Instead, while expressing concern about crime and the value of life taken by murder or homicide, as well as caring for the families of victims and perpetrators, ending the death penalty affirms the on-going possibility and hope for redemption that is fundamental to the gospel of Jesus Christ – Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. As United Methodists, “we believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore and transform all human beings.” Social Principles, Para. 164 G, *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*.

- In 2010, Texas carried out **17 of the 46** executions that took place nationwide. The State has executed **466** people since 1982.
- There are **315** people currently on death row in Texas.
- Over the last seven years, new death sentences in Texas have declined by approximately **70%**, which mirrors national trends.
- **138 people** nationwide have been released from death row due to evidence of their wrongful conviction, **12** in Texas.

So what can we do? In an effort to educate ourselves about the death penalty and how we might act to end its use so that every possibility is provided in this life for even the most hardened criminal to be redeemed through Christ, consider undertaking one or more of the following activities over the next year as your church calendar permits:

- Hear testimony from a murder victim’s family member (<http://tcadp.org/what-we-do/victims-outreach/>) or an exonerated death row inmate
- Look for the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty’s (“TCADP”) information booth (with Murder Victims’ Families for Reconciliation) at the Annual Conference of the Texas Conference UMC (May 29 - June 1, George R. Brown Convention Center)
- Clergy: Sign the Clergy Sign-on letter developed in 2010 to be used in a future legislative session. UMC clergy currently represent 1/3 of Texas signers.
<http://tcadp.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/TCADP-Interfaith-Sign-On-Letter.doc>.
- Distribute information on the death penalty, including materials developed in cooperation with the General Board of Church and Society and/or watch one of the following films and hold a discussion:
 - **“The Empty Chair.”** In this balanced and compelling portrayal, four families that have lost loved ones to murder confront their notions of revenge, forgiveness, and healing. This film works well with audiences that hold mixed views on the death penalty or with groups that are addressing the issue for the first time. It includes commentary from Sister Helen Prejean. 2003. 52 minutes. DVD available on loan from TCADP.
 - **“Executing the Insane: The Case of Scott Panetti.”** Scott Panetti was sentenced to death in Texas despite a long, documented history of paranoid schizophrenia. The film is a powerful portrait of the impact that Panetti’s mental illness – and his death sentence – has had on his family. 2007. 27 minutes. Available on DVD from TCADP.
 - **“70X7 the Forgiveness Equation.”** The film covers the stories and struggles of two families who lost family members to murder. Speaking for themselves, these individuals share how they coped with unforeseen bereavement, profound feelings of helplessness, rage and revenge, and, for some a move towards reconciliation and forgiveness. 70X7 derives its title from scripture: “Peter asked Jesus how many times shall I forgive someone who harms me? Seven times?” And Jesus answered, “no Peter, not seven times but 70X7 times.” (Mathew 18:21-22) DVD available on loan from TCADP.
 - **“At the Death House Door.”** This film presents the journey of Reverend Carroll Pickett, the

former Texas death house chaplain who accompanied 95 men – including Carlos DeLuna, likely an innocent man - to their executions. 2007. 1 hour, 37 minutes. DVD available on loan from TCADP.

Draw from GBCS resources on the death penalty: <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=frLJK2PKLqF&b=3631781&ct=3955949>

Literature/handouts, speakers, films and discussion guides for all of these suggested activities are available (at no cost) from TCADP. To learn more about any of these initiatives, to request resources, or to support the work of TCADP, please contact the TCADP office at (512) 441-1808 or send an email to info@tcadp.org.

Learn more about TCADP's Religious Outreach efforts at <http://tcadp.org/what-we-do/religious-outreach/> including the video of Bishop Huie's statement at the Religious Leaders Dialogue that was hosted in January at the Hobby Center.

As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a person is not where one stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where one stands at times of challenge and controversy."