



Summer 2014

Seizing the Momentum

Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

Executions Given Green Light Despite Ongoing Secrecy Concerns

While there's been an unusual reprieve from executions in Texas since April, other states have proceeded with lethal injections in spite of ongoing concerns about the secrecy shrouding the process. In June, three executions occurred within a 24-hour period in Florida, Georgia, and Missouri. Both Florida and Missouri also carried out executions in July.

Executions are set to resume in Texas this fall, with at least 10 lethal injections scheduled to take place in the remaining months of 2014 and into 2015.

These executions will be taking place under a veil of secrecy. At the end of May, the Office of Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott issued an order in favor of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), finding that officials do not have to disclose information about the pharmacy or pharmacist supplying the lethal injection drugs now used in executions. In doing so, Abbott's office reversed the position it had taken in multiple prior opinions over the last six years in which it upheld the Texas Public Information Act and rejected arguments by TDCJ that it needed to protect the identity of its supplier due to so-called security concerns. Several major Texas newspapers decried Abbott's change of heart, particularly in light of what the Associated Press has called "scant evidence" of threats to drug makers.

Texas	7
Florida	7
Missouri	6
Oklahoma	3
Georgia	1
Ohio	1
Total	25

To date this year, there have been eight new death sentences in Texas, three of which were imposed in Harris County. Juries rejected the death penalty in cases in El Paso and Fort Bend Counties, finding that there was sufficient mitigating evidence to warrant a sentence other than death.

In other news...

In June, delegates to the Texas State Democratic Convention once again called for "the passage of legislation that would abolish the death penalty in Texas and replace it with the punishment of life in prison without parole" as part of the [2014 Texas Democratic Party Platform](#). The platform cites the disproportionate application of the death penalty to the poor and persons of color in its call for abolition.

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Scheduled Executions in 2014

September

10: Willie Trottie
 17: Lisa Coleman

October

15: Larry Hatten
 28: Miguel Paredes



United Methodists Ramp Up Efforts On the Death Penalty

The death penalty issue was front and center this summer as United Methodists across Texas gathered for their annual conferences. From Houston to Richardson to Corpus Christi, clergy and lay leaders within the church engaged in dialogue, distributed educational materials, and heard from powerful speakers about their personal experiences with the criminal justice system. Collectively, these efforts raised awareness of the United Methodist Church's long-standing opposition to the death penalty and encouraged greater involvement in our campaign to end its use in Texas. The hard work of TCADP members Rev. Wes Magruder, Rev. Susan Buchanan, Anne Mund, Mike Renquist, Jennifer Simmons, and many other volunteers also generated nearly 150 new signatures on our [Interfaith Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty](#) from faith leaders throughout the state!

Here are a few highlights from the conferences:

- In Houston, Rev. Susan Buchanan, Jennifer Simmons, and other volunteers staffed a display table for the Texas Annual Conference, spoke about the issue at several breakfasts and dinners, and recruited 80 new supporters for the Interfaith Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty. Amazing!
- At the North Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in Richardson, members of the Conference Board of Church & Society provided numerous opportunities for participants to engage on the death penalty issue. Conference attendees proudly wore wristbands declaring "The death penalty denies the power of Christ" and heard from mitigation specialist Vince Gonzales during a special luncheon. In addition, TCADP's fact sheets were prominently displayed on the Board of Church and Society information table.

As one of the final actions at the conference, delegates overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling on all local churches and lay members of the North Texas Conference to pressure their local and state representatives to work toward the abolition of the death penalty in Texas, among other actions. What an incredible display of support!

- In Corpus Christi, [Anthony Graves](#) – who spent more than 18 years in prison, including 12 years on death row, for a crime he didn't commit – wowed a crowd of over 250 people at a "Peace and Justice Luncheon" sponsored by the Southwest Texas Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) and the Board of Church & Society. This event took place in conjunction with the Southwest Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church.

After hearing Anthony's presentation, one person wrote, "I am moved by Mr. Graves' testimony to do more to prevent injustice by helping kids in need." Another person wrote, "Anthony is so passionate and inspiring, and his story needs to be heard by as many people as possible." (We couldn't agree more!) As an important advocacy component of the event, attendees wrote postcards to their legislators, urging them to do more to end the death penalty.

Thanks again to Rev. Wes Magruder, Rev. Susan Buchanan, Anne Mund, Mike Renquist, Jennifer Simmons, and all the members of the North Texas and Southwest Texas Boards of Church & Society and the Southwest Texas Chapter of MFSA for their efforts to light the way to abolition!



Sitting from right: Anthony Graves; Anne Mund, TCADP member and President of the MFSA-Southwest Texas Chapter, who emceed the luncheon; and Rev. Edward Garcia, Pastor of Emmanuel UMC in Austin, who gave the invocation.

Photo courtesy of TCADP Board Member Mike Renquist.



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(Affiliation listed for identification purposes only.)

Volunteers

Thanks so much to the following individuals who have volunteered in the TCADP Office or provided administrative support in recent months: Vanessa Akins; Steve Miller; and Mike Renquist.

Save the date for these upcoming events!

- An important Civil Rights Conference will take place in **Houston** on Saturday, September 20 at Texas Southern University and will include a Criminal Justice Workshop.
- St. Mary's Catholic Center in **College Station** will host a special event on Thursday, September 25 at 6:30 PM featuring Jan Brown and Anthony Graves (part of TCADP's regional speakers' tours this fall).
- TCADP's speakers' tour in the **Metroplex** will take place from September 28 through October 2, featuring [Juan Melendez](#), who spent 17 years on death row in Florida for a crime he did not commit. The tour will kick off at Saint Andrew Catholic Parish in **Fort Worth** at 2:00 PM.
- Memorial Drive United Methodist Church in **Houston** will host Sister Helen Prejean on Sunday, October 5.
- The Catholic Mobilizing Network, the Diocese of Beaumont, and the Texas Catholic Conference will sponsor a Respect Life Month Death Penalty Walk in **Livingston** on October 17.
- The TCADP 2015 Annual Conference will take place on Saturday, February 21, 2015 at St. David's Episcopal Church in downtown **Austin**.

More details on these special events coming soon.

Participate in these regular events!

- Bi-monthly luncheons take place in **Austin** on the fourth Wednesday of the month (January, March, May, July, September, and November - locations vary), with a special guest speaker and an opportunity to meet with other local supporters
- Bi-monthly luncheons take place in **Dallas** on the second Tuesday of the month (January, March, May, July, September, and November at Margaux's Bridge Bistro)
- Bi-monthly luncheons take place in **Houston** on the last Tuesday of the month (January, March, May, July, September, and November at St. Anne's Catholic Church)
- **El Pasoans Against the Death Penalty** meet on the last Tuesday of the month at 6:30 pm in the Pedro Maldonado (formerly Mother Teresa) room of St. Pius X Church, 1050 N. Clark
- Vigils take place throughout the state of Texas on the day and/or evening of executions. Visit <http://tcadp.org/get-involved/stop-executions/> for details.

Full event descriptions are available at <http://tcadp.org/get-involved/attend-events/>.



Why I Should Sit on a Death Penalty Jury by Rex Castle

This spring I was excused from a jury forming to hear a capital murder case where the District Attorney (DA) was seeking the death penalty. The DA was very respectful, and we had a long, drawn out conversation about my opposition to the death penalty. He had my information because the 150+ of us who were asked to sit in this selection pool were also required to fill out a 20-page questionnaire asking us, among a host of other things, our opinion on the death penalty.

The next step in this laborious process was to wait to be called and questioned by not only the prosecution team (in my case, 4 attorneys, although only the primary attorney asks questions), but also the defense team (3 attorneys and the defendant). This questioning took place in a courtroom, on the witness stand, with a judge, court reporter, audience members and a variety of bailiffs mulling about. I've spoken professionally before smaller audiences.

I remember thinking as I left this 20-page exercise "heck, I won't even get an interview. There's no way they're going to select someone who's against the death penalty."

Besides getting a better understanding of how wrong I can be in many different circumstances, I learned two things from this process:

- First, my opinion on the death penalty doesn't matter (up to that moment);
- Second, how impotent I have been in relation to my opinion.

Let me start with the second. In 1968, as I encroached upon my teen years, I was struck for the first time with an understanding of loss when our country was deprived the leadership of first Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and then Robert Kennedy. What struck me particularly in RFK's case was his family's call to stop the killing and not pursue the death penalty for Bobby's cowardly assassin.

That is the moment, as I look back, where I first began thinking of the courage required by those most impacted to not seek this ultimate vengeance. That was the moment I pointed to when the DA asked me when I first decided not to support the death penalty.

It was later in my testimony, however, when I began to understand my alleged opposition was simply a belief I held and rarely mentioned publicly. Living in West Texas, working in conservative environments, (1) tends to provide a convenient excuse and (2) makes support of these sorts of issues difficult even though more conservative people are the folks who I believe should be most outraged by this extreme state overreach. (A different argument for a different time.)

I realized how impotent I have been since Bobby's assassination. I could accept this impotence as a hormone-raging adolescent and teenager as there were other priorities; as an adult, however, it is inexcusable.

As I left the interview in front of this panel for this jury, I committed to correct this failing. That afternoon I joined TCADP and have now penned this piece and offered any expertise I have in other arenas. These steps are a reasonably acceptable, albeit belated, start.

But now turning my attention to my first point, why do I believe my opinion, impotent or not, did not matter? After finding a defendant guilty of murder, the jury is faced with the punishment phase and 3 questions (I didn't know these):

- **First**, does the convicted constitute a "continuing threat to society?"
- **Second**, is the death sentence warranted even with any mitigating circumstances?
- **Third**, if acting in a party (others were involved), did the convicted actually cause the death?



Answering “no” to any one of the preceding by any one of the 12 jurors results in a sentence of life without parole. If faced with the preceding three questions, my opinion of the death penalty matters not...I would simply answer the questions—this is the charge to the jury.

If I had been the DA, based on our conversation, I probably would have excused me from the jury, so I agree with the DA (again, if this was his team’s decision). However, I have in my life, for some bizarre reason, sat on four juries. Out of the overall pool of 150, before the 20-page questionnaire, I was seated twelfth, so my preliminary information told the court “check this guy out.” I’m very good at ensuring juries stay semi-focused on facts and evidence. I’m very principle-centered. I work very hard at listening and I judge myself to be as fair as I can in these difficult circumstances.

In other words, I’m probably a stereotypical person who does not support the death penalty; I’m probably a lot like those reading this article who do not support the death penalty.

I’m also the exact right person, as are most of the aforementioned (e.g., you), to sit on this kind of jury.

Sitting on a capital murder jury is not “the” problem. The problem is the law. The law needs to change. Until that happens, and through our efforts it will, being impaneled to hear these cases ensures people who have an absolute sanctity for life are the ones making this horrific and difficult decision. This panel I am sure would have been one of the hardest things I’ve ever done and would have undoubtedly been the most disgusting, but I, and I’d suggest you, would be the absolute perfect person to sit and hear evidence in such a case.

I learned I should have not excluded myself based off my opinion; I should use my opinion to drive my work to change this horrid law. With respect, I would suggest the same is true for you.

Rex Castle has spent the vast majority of his life in Texas raising and supporting his family with his wife of over 30 years. He works in the technology arena and is a national speaker and business consultant who uses his expertise in presentation and his 20+ years in human resources to take sometimes challenging and mundane subjects and weave them into delightful, engaging and educational stories.



In Memoriam: Reverend Charles Moore

TCADP Founder David Atwood offers this remembrance of Rev. Charles Moore, a United Methodist pastor and TCADP member who passed away on June 23, 2014:

“When we were starting up the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) in the 1990s, we were always looking for places for our board of directors to meet. No one really wanted us to meet in their church or school or place of business. However, when we met in Austin, Reverend Charles Moore opened his church to us as a place to hold our meetings and make our plans. So, in a real sense, he was one of the founding members of the organization. For this, we will always be grateful. Reverend Moore was also one of the rare ministers who would speak out against the death penalty in public. There are still not many religious leaders who will do that. His courage was admirable and will always be appreciated. He will be missed by those of us who look back fondly at the early days of the TCADP.”



Snapshot of Recent Activities

TCADP staff, board members, and local members sponsored or participated in the following events and activities across Texas between April and mid-July:

April

- [“The Last 40 Miles”](#) was screened multiple times at the Dallas International Film Festival. This innovative and compelling animated short film follows the story of Raymond, a condemned man taking his last journey from death row in Livingston to the execution chamber in Huntsville, Texas. “The Last 40 Miles” was honored as Best Animated Film at the Maryland International Film Festival in May!
- The [“Trial of Jesus”](#) took place at Manchaca United Methodist Church, provoking dialogue from an interesting perspective. In this powerful presentation, two Christian attorneys, Mark Osler and Jeanne Bishop, staged a mock death penalty trial of Jesus based on current Texas law. The unscripted courtroom drama featured legal arguments and live witnesses who testified about whether Jesus should live or die. The audience served as the jury.
- Members of the TCADP Houston Chapter heard from Danalynn Recer of the Gulf Region Advocacy Center (GRACE) about her work on capital trials.
- TCADP members volunteered during the Texas Junior State of America Convention in Houston and teamed up with Conservatives Concerned about the Death Penalty at the Young Americans for Liberty Texas Convention in San Marcos.

May

- Members in the Carrollton area gathered for “Witness to Death: A Hearing of Kathy Cox and a Training from Center for Theological Activism.” Kathy Cox, who is 90 years old, has witnessed over 60 executions and currently ministers to 40 persons on Texas’ death row. She has worked for social change for over 65 years from within her denominational home of the Salvation Army. The event was sponsored by Holy Covenant United Methodist Church, Center for Theological Activism and TCADP.
- The “Fair & Just” Lunch Series returned to Houston. Susan Truscott, Vice Consul for the British Consulate-General Houston, shared the history of her government’s opposition to the death penalty and her work at the consulate.
- TCADP members in Dallas launched a new bi-monthly lunch series, with special guest speaker Venerable Tashi Nyima, who spoke about his spiritual journey on the death penalty issue.
- At their bi-monthly gathering, members in Austin heard from capital defense attorney Raoul Schonemann, a clinical professor and the co-director of the Capital Punishment Clinic at the University of Texas Law School. Raoul spoke about his experience representing David Spence, who was executed by the State of Texas in 1997 and whose case was featured in the [April 2014 issue of Texas Monthly](#).
- TCADP provided an information table and spoke with participants at the 2014 Restorative Justice Conference, which took place at the College of Biblical Studies in Houston.

June

- TCADP members in Fort Worth launched a new bi-monthly lunch series and heard from Executive Director Kristin Houlé about recent death penalty developments and the work of the organization.
- TCADP staffed information tables at the Texas Black Expo in Houston and the Texas State Democratic Convention in Dallas.

July

- Members of El Pasoans Against the Death Penalty organized a screening and discussion of [“Grave Injustice,”](#) the story of Anthony Graves, at the Unitarian Universalist Community of El Paso.

More pictures of TCADP activities and events are available on our [Facebook page](#).



Volunteers Steve Miller, Paula Keeth, and Shannon Breeding staffed the TCADP booth at the Texas State Democratic Convention.



How far will you go? I didn't know until I tried. Maybe I still don't know. This is the story of a few steps I took.

The Polunsky Unit in Livingston – or the home of Texas death row – was colder than usual that morning. I thought I came prepared. My thin jacket was simply not enough. The inmate and I talked for a long time. Then came the question that changed everything for me: "When are you going to place your body into the struggle to save my life?" I was offended. Did I not just tell you all the stuff I have been doing in the struggle to abolish the death penalty in Texas? I felt like I was doing everything I could. I left without answering. Truth be known, I didn't know how to answer the question.

Multiple weeks went by and the question haunted me. How do I place my body into the struggle? Then a transformation happened. I was reminded of the story of Jesus and the almost execution of the adulterous woman. The deeply religious governing authorities were about to throw stones at the woman and Jesus placed his own body in the way. Jesus declared, "Whoever is without sin can cast the first stone." The authorities walked away in shame. I now understand what it looks like for someone to place their body into the struggle.



Photos courtesy of Rev. Jeff Hood

I was exhausted before I ever started. There is something mentally debilitating about the build up to walking 200 miles. I visited two inmates on death row and then I started walking. I felt the wind of God at my back. I had never been so hot in my life.

The first time I thought about quitting was right before the bridge over Lake Livingston. I was in tremendous pain and just 15 miles in. How was I going to finish? I looked even worse than I felt.

A blue minivan swerved to the side of the road. With a puzzled look on her face, the driver engaged me in a back and forth: "Do you need a ride?" "No, I am on a pilgrimage to abolish the death penalty." "Well, I am for the death penalty. Why are you against it?" "Because I am a Christian." "I am a Christian too and I am still for the death penalty. Why do you think being a Christian has anything to do with it?" "Because I don't believe you can love your neighbor as your self and execute them." "Damn that makes sense."

I slept on the side of the road. There is nothing comfortable about sleeping on the side of the road. Dreams on a journey like this are haunted with the faces of the departed. I woke up startled and walked on.

The robe felt like a soaking wet bed sheet by the time I arrived at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church in Huntsville for the evening event. There was nothing out of the ordinary until one of the church members walked a basin of water over to me and started washing my feet. I didn't know what to do. I was very taken aback. Why would anyone want to wash my disgusting feet? I realized in that moment that grace is so rare in our age that we don't know what to do when we encounter it, yet it seems that grace is what makes us most human and the only thing that can give us a future.

There is something less than human about denying grace to those who sit on death row. When I stopped at the site of the execution chamber, grace was on my mind. I touched the outside brick wall and prayed that Texas might know the beauty of grace.

I walked as the sun arose the next day and did not stop until the afternoon. I pushed open the doors of a bar a few miles inside of Brazos County. I desperately needed to go to the bathroom. Besides the woman behind the counter, there were five guys sitting at the bar. "What are you supposed to be?" hollered one of the guys. "I am on a pilgrimage from Livingston to Austin in opposition to the death penalty," I replied. "That has got to be the dumbest s*** I have ever heard," replied another guy. "Friends, the pilgrimage is not dumb as s*** and I will tell you why once I go to the bathroom," I offered as I pushed away. By the time I left the bar over thirty minutes later, all the guys and the woman behind the counter said that I had made them think much deeper about the death penalty than they ever had. It felt as if something magical had happened and I started walking. Later, I arrived at the Brazos County Courthouse where so many have been sentenced to death. I knelt and prayed that District Attorney Jarvis Parsons would open his heart and mind to abolishment like the folks earlier.



Everyone in town recognized me the next day. I had done an interview with the *Bryan-College Station Eagle* and landed on the front page. I walked with a group of fellow abolitionists on Texas Avenue to Santa Teresa Catholic Church and climbed into the pulpit upon arrival. I am not sure if they had ever had a Baptist preacher in their pulpit before. When I walked out, the gathered walked with me and wished me well. Later in the day, I dropped my hand into the Brazos River. The water reminded me of the baptism of love that I had experienced on my journey.

There is little to report for the last few days of the walk except that it was awful. I was in relatively unpopulated areas. I was scared and alone praying for the abolishment of the death penalty. I spent the night under a bridge one night and found softer spaces on other nights. Why am I doing this? I kept wondering about my sanity. I had to push myself harder than I ever have before. I had to conjure up a love and hope that was beyond vengeance and reason to finish. I did.



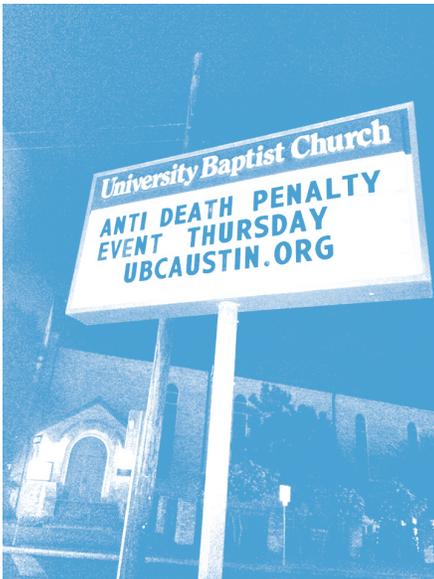
I can assure you that the gates of heaven will look no finer than the Austin skyline did to me the day I saw it after walking in from Livingston. I had arrived. There were only a few more miles to go.

When I placed my feet on the grounds of the Capitol of Texas, I could feel electricity shooting out my toes. The gathered clapped and cheered. I gave a brief statement, prayed in the rotunda and went to University Baptist Church for the concluding event.

During the program, I talked over and over about the need for us all to give our bodies to the struggle for justice. After my walk, I believe the group understood what I meant. I can think of no more fitting a place to finish my journey than where it began...in a Baptist church.

Someone at the program asked me, "How far do you think you will have to walk to abolish the death penalty for good?" I replied, "I don't know...I guess we'll both know when I stop."

Amen.



TCADP Board Member Rev. Jeff Hood, an ordained Southern Baptist minister, conducted his 200-mile pilgrimage from Friday, June 13 to Thursday, June 19, 2014. He began his journey in Livingston, where individuals on death row are incarcerated, proceeded through Huntsville, where individuals are executed, and College Station, and concluded with a brief statement and prayer on the steps of the South Entrance of the Texas State Capitol.

We express our gratitude to the leaders and members of Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church in Huntsville, Santa Teresa Catholic Church in Bryan, and University Baptist Church in Austin for supporting Jeff along his journey.

More pictures from the pilgrimage and links to media coverage are available on [TCADP's Facebook page](#). You can also watch his interview with the Texas After Violence Project at <http://www.texasafterviolence.org/one-on-one-.aspx>.

Rev. Jeff Hood is a theologian (MDiv and ThM), historian (MA) and bioethicist (MS) by academic training. Presently, he is completing a doctorate in theology at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. A graduate of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Jeff serves as the Executive Director of Center for Theological Activism, on the National Council of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and as a spiritual advisor on Texas' death row. He lives in Denton with his wife and three young sons-twin toddlers and an infant.

Thank You for Your Generous Support

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TCADP thanks the following individuals and organizations for your generous contributions between April 19 and July 22, 2014. Your financial support is critical to all of the activities and events described in this newsletter. Please let us know if we have inadvertently left you or your spouse/partner off of this list. We apologize in advance if we missed anyone.

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* signifies **Partner for Justice** or Sustaining Member, TCADP's recurring donation programs





“Executions Given Green Light” continued from page one

According to a [press release](#) issued in July by Kathryn Kase, the Executive Director of Texas Defender Service, the Chief Disciplinary Counsel of the State Bar of Texas has made a “just cause” determination with respect to allegations of prosecutorial misconduct against former Burleson County District Attorney Charles J. Sebesta, Jr. in his prosecution of Anthony Graves in 1994. As a result of Sebesta’s misconduct, Graves spent nearly two decades in prison for a crime he did not commit and of which he was completely exonerated in 2010. He twice faced execution dates during his wrongful incarceration.

Graves filed his grievance against Sebesta on January 20, 2014. During the State Bar’s initial investigation, he also submitted an affidavit detailing how Sebesta’s unethical prosecutorial misconduct forever changed his life and the lives of those around him.

I sought justice for a long time while imprisoned, having to trust the court system and the legal profession to care about justice, and to do the right thing. I am glad to see the State Bar of Texas now act favorably on my grievance at this stage. I am confident that the Bar will discipline Mr. Sebesta for his misconduct and do whatever it can to stop him from continuing to persecute me, a completely innocent man. — *Anthony Graves*

The State Bar of Texas has the power to sanction Charles Sebesta for his unethical conduct, up to and including disbarment and loss of his license to practice law in Texas. His case will be heard by an administrative judge.

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Seizing the Momentum

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