



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Monday, October 24, 2011

CONTACT: Kristin Houlé, Executive Director,
512-441-1808 (office); 512-552-5948 (cell);
khoule@tcadp.org

San Antonio Religious Leaders Gather for Dialogue on the Death Penalty

Austin, Texas – Tonight at the Laurie Auditorium of Trinity University, from 7:00 to 9:00 PM, seven prominent San Antonio-area religious leaders will take center stage to engage in a critical dialogue with each other – and with the public – about the death penalty. Moderated by Karen Clifton, Executive Director of the Catholic Mobilizing Network, “The Religious Leaders Dialogue on the Death Penalty” will explore perspectives on the death penalty in a city with deep religious roots. This is the second in a series of interfaith dialogues that the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) has convened in conjunction with other community partners; the first took place in Houston on January 18, 2011. The dialogue will feature remarks by the panelists and a question and answer session with the audience.

Religious leaders representing seven different faith traditions will join together to express their deeply felt concerns regarding the use of the death penalty. The panelists are: Rev. Malvyn Ahmad Rashad Berry, Associate Minister of Canaan Missionary First Baptist Church; Father Larry Christian, St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church; Bishop Robert Hibbs, Retired Bishop Suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas; Elder Hilary Shuford, Executive Presbyter of Mission Presbytery; Rabbi Samuel Stahl, Rabbi Emeritus - Temple Beth-El ; Bishop Ray Tiemann, Southwestern Texas Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America; and Rev. Virgilio Vázquez-Garza, Assistant to the Episcopal Office, Southwest Texas Conference United Methodist Church. Bishop Oscar Cantú, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, will provide closing remarks.

“This event is taking place at a time of unprecedented national scrutiny of the death penalty in general and Texas’ record on executions in particular,” said Bishop Oscar Cantú, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of San Antonio. “In our congregations, our parishes, our synagogues, and throughout our community, increasing numbers of Texans are beginning to question the wisdom, efficacy and virtue of the death penalty as a means to confront crime and achieve justice.”

Since 1976, Bexar County juries have sentenced 75 people to death, the third-highest number among all counties in Texas, behind Harris and Dallas Counties. Of these death sentences, 33 have resulted in execution, 19 have been commuted to sentences other than death, and 23 are still pending.

New death sentences in Bexar County have dropped in recent years, however, reflecting both statewide and national trends. Overall, new death sentences in Texas have declined more than 70% since 2003, reaching a historic low in 2010 when just eight people were sentenced to death statewide. Bexar County has sentenced three people to death since 2007, with the most recent sentence in 2009. In this same time period, Bexar County juries rejected the death penalty in two capital murder trials, opting instead for the sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The Religious Leaders Dialogue is part of the Bexar County Campaign to End the Use of the Death Penalty, a community organizing effort that seeks to reframe the debate about the death penalty by focusing on its local impact as an expensive, arbitrary, and error-prone public policy that diverts scarce resources from effective crime prevention measures and meaningful victims' services.

"Recent high-profile executions and exonerations have infused the public conversation about the death penalty with new energy and renewed urgency," said Kristin Houlé, Executive Director of the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. "Now, more than ever, we urge all concerned citizens and community leaders to come together to address the realities of the death penalty system and consider this ultimate punishment through the lens of long-standing religious positions that call for its abolition."

The Religious Leaders Dialogue on the Death Penalty is sponsored by: Bishop James E. Dorff of the Southwest Texas and Rio Grande Conference of the United Methodist Church; Catholic Mobilizing Network; Jesuit Fathers of San Antonio; Marianist Social Justice Collaborative; Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation; National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty; St. Mary's University; Temple Beth-El -Rabbi Barry Block; Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission; Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty; and Texas Impact.

The event is free and open to the public.

Media Availability

For information on the death penalty in Texas or background on this event, please contact TCADP Executive Director Kristin Houlé at khoule@tcadp.org, 512-441-1808 (office), or 512-552-5948 (cell).

To arrange an interview with any of the religious leaders participating in the dialogue, please contact TCADP Program Coordinator Vicki McCuiston at info@tcadp.org, 512-441-1808, or 512-968-1968.

The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty (TCADP) is a statewide, grassroots membership organization working to end the death penalty in Texas. TCADP engages in outreach, education, and advocacy aimed at raising awareness of issues related to the death penalty and mobilizing the citizens of Texas - and their elected officials - to support abolition. For more information, visit www.tcadp.org.

###