



Spring 2015

# Seizing the Momentum

Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

## TCADP Releases Interfaith Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty, Endorsed by More Than 550 Faith Leaders Statewide

On March 9, 2015, more than two dozen faith leaders from across Texas joined representatives of TCADP and Texas Impact for the first Texas Faith Leader Advocacy Day on the Death Penalty. The lobby day occurred in conjunction with the release of an Interfaith Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty and Texas Rabbis' and Cantors' Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty. Participating faith leaders came from Abilene, Allen, Carrollton, Denton, Fort Worth, Weatherford, Huntsville, Houston, Beaumont, San Antonio, Cuero, Georgetown, and Austin.

More than 550 religious and spiritual leaders statewide have endorsed the Interfaith Statement; among them, the signatories represent 25 different faith traditions, including Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reform Judaism, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ. More than 20 Jewish leaders in Texas endorsed the accompanying Rabbis' Statement.



Photo courtesy of JeffCamphoto.com

Affirming the sanctity of human life and human capacity for redemption, the statements reflect both moral and practical concerns about the death penalty rooted in diverse religious traditions. The endorsing faith leaders call on Governor Abbott, members of the 84th Texas Legislature, and other elected officials to take a closer look at the reality of capital punishment in Texas and seek alternative ways to achieve healing and justice for all those who suffer in the wake of violent crimes. They declare "We should do all we can to make sure our state's resources are directed towards the improvement of life, not its destruction."

During the lobby day, faith leaders met with legislators to deliver copies of the statement and voice their support for House Bill 1527, sponsored by State Representative Jessica Farrar (House District 148-Houston), which would repeal the death penalty in Texas. Rep. Farrar filed HB 1527 on February 17, 2015; she has sponsored similar legislation in every session since 2007. For the first time, an abolition bill also was introduced in the Texas Senate; State Senator Eddie Lucio, Jr. (Senate District 24-Brownsville) filed Senate Bill 1661 on March 13, 2015. Both bills remain pending before their respective committees.

Read more about the Faith Leader Advocacy Day from the perspective of participants Rev. Ross Whiteaker and his daughter, Ellice. In this issue of *Seizing the Momentum*, you'll also find personal insight into what it's like to be part of the TCADP Lobby Corps from members Keeley Crowfoot and DJ Compton.

### Also in this issue:

- Texas death penalty developments
- Meet our new board members
- TCADP members host vigils across Texas
- Thank you, donors!
- Photos from the TCADP 2015 Annual Conference

### Scheduled Executions in 2015

#### April

- 9 Kent Sprouse [Executed]
- 15 Manuel Garza [Executed]
- 23 Richard Vasquez [Stay]
- 28 Robert Pruett

#### May

- 12 Derrick Charles

#### June

- 3 Lester Bower Jr.
- 15 Gregory Rousseau



## The Whiteaker Perspective on Faith Leader Advocacy Day

Among the two dozen faith leaders who joined TCADP at the State Capitol on March 9<sup>th</sup> were **Rev. Ross Whiteaker** of Branch United Methodist Church in Abilene and his daughter, **Ellice Whiteaker**. Here's what they thought about their day of lobbying.



### Ellice Whiteaker

It was the first day of my spring break and my dad and I were in Austin lobbying with TCADP. A group of faith leaders from a variety of traditions were coming together to try and stop the death penalty in Texas. I am very proud to say that I was with them on that day. We gathered in the representative's lounge. The organizers passed out our schedule and told us to begin our meetings. By the time my dad and I entered Representative Susan King's office I was feeling a lot more comfortable with the meetings. She greeted us with a firm hand shake. We introduced ourselves and my dad began telling her why he was there and who he represented.

As they talked I looked around, I saw thirty clocks ticking on the wall and thought, "why so many clocks?" Then, my brain snapped back to what my dad and Rep. King were saying. I had just enough time to hear the last few sentences my dad said before Rep. King asked me, "What do you think?" Not expecting her to want the opinion of a fourth-grade girl, I blushed and replied, "Well, I don't think it's right to kill people even if they have done something wrong." Rep. King nodded her head, "Is that your thought or your dad's?" I replied confidently, "It's mine." A few minutes later we left. I walked out feeling very proud of myself for what I said.

So just remember who you are and state your own opinion, because one day you just might make a difference.



### Rev. Ross Whiteaker

In 2011 my family and I moved from Denver, Colorado to Abilene, Texas in order to serve a United Methodist Church in Abilene. While in Colorado working on my graduate degree, I worked as a community organizer and was part of an effort to abolish the death penalty which failed. Upon moving to Texas, I decided that as part of my public witness I would begin advocating for the abolition of the death penalty. Eventually I found my way to TCADP and was invited to participate in the Faith Leader Advocacy Day at the State Capitol.

While it is obvious we have a lot of work to do in order to finally see the end of the death penalty in this state, I left Austin more hopeful than when I arrived. Seeing the determination and love in the face of the other advocates was very motivating. The conversations I had with representatives left me encouraged. To be completely honest, it had been quite some time since I had gone to a representative's office to advocate for my position and I was afraid I would be too rusty to be effective.

Photo courtesy of  
JeffCamphoto.com

After meeting the other leaders and hearing their stories, I was able to let go of the nerves and remember those who are sitting on death row. I was able to remember my call to ministry and the call to social justice ministry that we all have received. I was able to forget my own self-consciousness and remember that to have an effective public witness we have to sacrifice for those that are less fortunate than ourselves and that are being taken advantage of by a system that doesn't recognize their humanity.

If you are reading this newsletter it is likely that you are already politically active. If for some reason you are not, or if you were like I was and feared that you had lost your "chops," I want to encourage you to allow the community involved with TCADP to re-motivate you to work for change that helps the world become what it should be - a place where all people are seen as completely human and treated as such.

### **Seizing the Momentum**

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#### Volunteers

Thanks so much to the following individuals who have volunteered in the TCADP Office or provided administrative support in recent months: Lauralee Harris; Lindsey Pearlstein; and Mike Renquist.

We are immensely grateful for your assistance!



### Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2015 (As of April 22, 2015)

**Executions:** 6 out of 13 nationwide

**Stays of execution:** 5 (the stay granted to Lester Bower by the Supreme Court has been lifted and his execution rescheduled)

**Individuals current on death row:** 266

**Jury rejections of death penalty:** 2

**New death sentences:** 0

More specific information on cases is available at [tcadp.org](http://tcadp.org)

#### ICYMI: The American Pharmacists Association and the Board of Directors of the International Academy of Compounding Pharmacists

"The American Pharmacists Association discourages pharmacist participation in executions on the basis that such activities are fundamentally contrary to the role of pharmacists as providers of health care."

*-Adopted by The American Pharmacists Association (APhA) House of Delegates, March 30, 2015*

"While the pharmacy profession recognizes an individual practitioner's right to determine whether to dispense a medication based upon his or her personal, ethical and religious beliefs, IACP discourages its members from participating in the preparation, dispensing, or distribution of compounded medications for use in legally authorized executions."

*-Adopted by the Board of Directors of the International Academy of Compounding Pharmacists, March 24, 2015*



**Connect with TCADP on Facebook!**

**View photos from our events, connect with other supporters, and learn about important death penalty developments.**



## TCADP Welcomes New Board Members

TCADP is proud to introduce you to three new Board Members: **Rev. Susan Buchanan, Lauralee Harris, and Professor Ana M. Otero**. All three women bring a wide variety of professional experiences and a vast knowledge of death penalty issues to the board. They were elected during the TCADP General Membership Meeting on February 21, 2015.



### **Rev. Susan Buchanan, Treasurer**

Rev. Buchanan has served in a variety of ministries connected to the United Methodist Church, from congregational pastor to hospital chaplain to campus minister. She is currently appointed as the Director of Recruitment and Student Services of the Houston-Galveston Extension Program for the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. Rev. Buchanan believes that as this region is the home of the most active death chamber in the nation, people of faith in Texas have a special responsibility to work for the abolition of the death penalty. She became involved in TCADP several years ago in order to make a greater commitment to advocacy and education on death penalty issues. Rev. Buchanan lives in Houston.



### **Lauralee Harris**

Lauralee is a native Texan. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the University of North Texas, her Masters of Public Administration from Angelo State University, and a Doctorate in Public Health from the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth. She has more than 20 years of experience as an Executive Director in the non-profit arena and has been heavily involved in social justice and human service issues.

In the nine years she served as the Executive Director of the Mental Health Association of Tarrant County, Lauralee helped to start an advocacy program for people living in unlicensed care homes, a law enforcement training and liaison program designed to divert people with mental illness from arrest into treatment, a mental health court to prevent incarceration of people with mental illness, and a suicide prevention program. She now has a consulting business assisting nonprofit organizations in administrative, board, program and resource assessment and development as well as grant writing. Lauralee recently moved to the Austin area to be closer to her son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren.



### **Professor Ana M. Otero**

Ana earned her J.D. from Rutgers University in 1985. She obtained an MBA from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 1982, and a Masters of International Affairs from Columbia University in 1977. In 1975, she obtained her BA from Columbia University, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and Cum Laude. Upon graduation from law school, she practiced law in Florida. She moved to Houston in 1991, and began working as a Staff Attorney in the Judicial Division of the Municipal Courts. In 1997, she was appointed Associate Municipal Court Judge and served in that capacity through September 2006.

In 1998, Ana was hired as Visiting Professor at Thurgood Marshall School of Law and was promoted to Associate Professor in 2002. Her scholarship focuses in the area of the death penalty. During her tenure at Thurgood, she has been selected numerous times as 3L Professor of the Year, most recently in the Spring 2014. In 2002, and most recently in 2008, she was chosen by the law school faculty as Thurgood Marshall School of Law's Professor of the Year. For the past ten years, Professor Otero has worked extensively with the Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO) as a lecturer in numerous workshops and as Director of two of its programs: The Mid-Winter Bar Workshop, and the Sophomore Summer Institute.

Most recently, she served as a member of the Texas Capital Punishment Assessment Team organized by the American Bar Association's *Death Penalty Due Process Review Project*. In September 2013, the Texas team issued a comprehensive report with recommendations to help ensure fairness and accuracy in the state's death penalty system. "*Evaluating Fairness and Accuracy in State Death Penalty Systems: The Texas Capital Punishment Report*" is the culmination of a two-year review of Texas capital punishment laws, procedures and practices. She served on this committee along with former Gov. Mark White, who oversaw 19 executions during his term.



There's a lot of work to do before the 84th Texas Legislative Session closes June 1<sup>st</sup> and no group knows that better than the TCADP Lobby Corps. Founded in 2012, the Lobby Corps plays a vital role in our activities throughout the legislative session. This volunteer lobbying group consists of 20 people who have been trained to advance TCADP's legislative agenda and meet with legislators. Their work has significantly increased our visibility and capacity in the State Capitol. TCADP Lobby Corps members get an inside look at what really goes on in the Capitol. In this issue, we highlight two of our Lobby Corps members, **Dr. Keeley Crowfoot** and **DJ Compton**, and get their take on the session.



### **Dr. Keeley Crowfoot, Austin, Texas**

I have had no prior experience interacting with politicians and I felt very intimidated to be addressing the abolition of the death penalty with representatives. I was surprised at how quickly I have become comfortable meeting with Texas Legislators and their staff members. After one day of training and some shadowing with more seasoned volunteers I was let loose to engage legislators and their staff members on this important issue and I have to say I feel prepared with information and have the support of TCADP to help me with any questions/concerns that arise.



### **DJ Compton, Allen, Texas**

I was starting early retirement late last year and TCADP sent out the e-mail mentioning they were looking for applicants for the Lobby Corps. I had joined TCADP in 2014 after hearing about it from a fellow member of my religious faith. I knew that I wanted to spend my retirement focusing on giving back, and this opportunity seemed perfect. I'm a 5th generation Texan whose grandparents had to work hard to put food on the table and care for their children. I can relate to many of the stories of struggle that affected the lives of death row inmates as I can imagine one of my family members in the same situation with the slightest change of circumstances. I wanted to do something that could help make a change.

Working with Kristin and Vanessa and the other experienced lobbyists has been so great. I was quite nervous about starting; even though I had worked with regulators while I was overseas, this seemed different. But, I have been provided with everything: training day with the role playing helped, but also partnering with an experienced lobbyist on my first few visits when we handed out the annual reports was vital to showing me the process. All of the talking points and materials really help in working with the staff.

I've been really pleased with the interaction with staff members. Having assigned legislative offices has enabled me to build a rapport with some individuals, and I've found some champions for our cause in unexpected places. I am very hopeful that it's not a matter of "if, but when" that the death penalty will be abolished in Texas.

It's important to have some background information on the legislators and understand their priorities as I go into the offices. Staff members are really busy, however, they are always willing to meet. I try to come prepared and try to be a resource for them so that I'm not adding more to their busy plates.

Each visit gets easier, and I schedule appointments rather than just dropping by. I have been excited to meet younger staff members who are willing to listen and are taking this initiative very seriously. I am more excited with each visit.

I have been assigned some diverse districts, from the most conservative to districts that have a higher distribution of people of color. For the more conservative districts, cost is the one argument which resonates the highest, as well as the arbitrary use of the death penalty. For other districts, their faith and the impact of the number of death sentences given to people of color speaks to them.

*For more information about TCADP's legislative agenda, please email [khoule@tcadp.org](mailto:khoule@tcadp.org).*



## TCADP Members Host Vigils Across Texas

TCADP members are currently organizing, attending, or leading vigils in 19 different Texas cities. In this issue, we highlight two members, **Rev. Jeff Hood and Jason Redick**, and their vigils. For more information about vigils in your area, please visit <http://tcadp.org/get-involved/stop-executions>.



Board Member **Rev. Jeff Hood** recently wrote an article featured in *The Huffington Post* detailing his vigil in Huntsville during Holy Week. What follows is an excerpt from "24 Hours at the Cross: A Holy Week Confrontation with Execution in Texas."

For many years, I have worked against the death penalty. From lobbying to walks to vigils to fasts, I have sought to place my body into the conversation. People consistently ask me, "Why do you care so much?" My gut reply is always the same, "I am a follower of Jesus committed to his teaching of loving your neighbor as your self...and I know I can't love my neighbor and let them be killed." Throughout Lent, I have studied and prayed over the last words of persons executed in Texas. Through it all, I have consistently been reminded that a society can't kill people to teach people to stop killing people. We have got to stop this evil cycle of violence. I believe that love is the only antidote there is. At the cross, Jesus showed us that the fullness of love is found in giving

your life so that others might live. If Christians would give their lives to love, there would be no death penalty. How much longer will we have to wait for Christians pick up their crosses and demand an end to executions? I can't wait on anyone else. I'm taking my cross to Huntsville.

At the Walls Unit, the red bricks are piled high and the infrastructure resembles a fortress. Behind the wire and concrete is the place where person after person has been executed in Texas. During Holy Week, I knew I needed to carry my cross down and share the love of God. I cannot let hate and violence continue without question. For the follower of Jesus, the biggest questions are always in the form of a cross. On Maundy Thursday at 3pm, I will begin a 24-hour vigil holding a 12-foot cross. Throughout my time there, I will remember the victims of this evil process and pray for an end to the death penalty. On Good Friday at 3pm, I will end the vigil by celebrating communion with other clergy. Wherever you are, I invite you to participate in person or in prayer. Together, we can embrace the love of God and stop the killing.



For the full article, please go to [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-jeff-hood/24-hours-at-the-cross-a-h\\_b\\_6979416.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-jeff-hood/24-hours-at-the-cross-a-h_b_6979416.html).



TCADP member and youth minister, **Jason Redick**, hosts vigils in Carrollton for every execution. The Ecumenical Vigil sponsored by Advocates for Justice and Peace is located across from Holy Covenant United Methodist Church.

All are welcome to join.  
Holy Covenant United Methodist Church  
1901 E. Peters Colony  
Carrollton, Texas 75007  
6:30 PM on days of execution

Please contact Jason Redick at [jredick@hcumc.org](mailto:jredick@hcumc.org) for more information.



## Thank You for Your Generous Support

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TCADP thanks the following individuals and organizations for your generous contributions between January 29—April 23, 2015. Your financial support is critical to all of the activities and events described in this newsletter. Please let us know if we inadvertently left you or anyone in your household off of this list. We apologize in advance if we missed anyone.

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# TCADP 2015 Annual Conference: February 21, 2015

## Death Penalty Fault Lines: A Seismic Shift in Ground

