



Seizing the Momentum

Summer 2016

Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty

Four Decades of Broken Promises

July 2, 2016 marked the 40th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Gregg v. Georgia (1976)*, which upheld the newly crafted death penalty laws of several states (including Texas) and paved the way for the resumption of executions less than a year later. The new state statutes “promised” to make the death penalty process fairer and less arbitrary.

Just four years earlier, the Court had ruled in *Furman v. Georgia (1972)* that the death penalty system, as administered at that time, was arbitrary, capricious, and discriminatory – as random as being struck by lightning, in the infamous words of one Justice. With the *Gregg* decision, however, the Justices reversed course and took the position that the death penalty did not offend “the evolving standards of decency which mark the progress of a maturing society.”

Three Justices who voted with the 7-2 majority in *Gregg* – Justices Blackmun, Powell, and Stevens – later changed their minds about the constitutionality of the death penalty. In an interview in 2010, newly-retired **Justice John Paul Stevens** said, “I really think that the death penalty today is vastly different from the death penalty that we thought we were authorizing.”

“On the occasion of Gregg’s ruby anniversary, let’s ask a more refined question, which more directly honors the case’s peculiar history: Is arbitrariness less of a problem than it was before the Supreme Court got involved in 1972? In other words, has Gregg worked? The answer is a conclusive, resounding no.”

-Professor Evan J. Mandery

(The Marshall Project, “It’s Been 40 Years Since the Supreme Court Tried to Fix the Death Penalty — Here’s How it Failed,” March 30, 2016)

The landscape has changed dramatically over the last 40 years as more and more states abandon the death penalty in law or practice. Last year, death sentences in Texas dropped to their lowest level on record and jurors rejected the death penalty in more cases than they imposed it.

To date in 2016, Texas juries have imposed two new death sentences and rejected it in one case. Prosecutors are seeking death less often, unwilling to burden their counties with the exorbitant expense of trials or face juries now demanding a higher standard of evidence in light of story after story of wrongful convictions.

Yet the death penalty itself remains arbitrary and discriminatory, a system of punishment where factors such as geography and race often matter more than the circumstances of the crime itself. In Texas, just eight counties account for 70% of new death sentences since 2011. In these high-use counties, death sentences are disproportionately imposed on African-American defendants.

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Scheduled Executions 2016

- July**
- 24– Perry Williams (withdrawn)
- August**
- 23– Robert Pruett
- 24– Jeffrey Wood
- 31– Rolando Ruiz
- September**
- 14– Robert Jennings
- October**
- 5– Barney Fuller
- 19– Terry Edwards



U.S. Supreme Court **Justice Stephen Breyer** took note of these disturbing statistics last summer in his dissent in the case of *Glossip v. Gross*. Even more recently, **Judge Elsa Alcala** of the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals questioned whether the death penalty is being applied fairly, in light of racial disparities, excessive delays, and the risk of error.

As we reflect on the last four decades, it is obvious that the promise of fairness that allowed for the death penalty's return in 1976 has not been fulfilled. Thank you for standing with us as we continue to expose the flaws and failures of this broken, irreversible and unjust system.

Book Review: *Executing Grace*

By Jason Redick



Shane Claiborne, author of
Executing Grace

When I first heard the title of Shane Claiborne's latest book, *Executing Grace*, I was unsure of the topic. While Shane has been a longtime supporter of the death penalty abolition movement, he has also sought to speak for a radical interpretation of what it means to be a Christian. Then the subtitle was revealed, "How the Death Penalty Killed Jesus and Why It's Killing Us." It was then that I knew this would be a powerful book that would spread a message of death penalty abolition far and wide.

I immediately noted a few observations when I received the book:

- The front cover has symbols for an injection needle, lynching rope, electric chair and the Cross. This is a powerful statement that all four of these methods of killing someone are related. While this correlation may not be new to many Christians, it does seem to be a stark statement to put on the cover of a book.
- At almost 300 pages long, this has to be one of the most thorough writings specifically related to the Christian response and understanding of the death penalty. The 14 chapters each represent an argument or theme that show the injustice of the death penalty.
- And lastly, as I began reading the book, I noticed names at the bottom of each page. Thumbing through the book, I began to do the math; 300 pages multiplied by about 5 names per page equals the roughly 1,500 people (1,437 at the time of this writing) who've been executed by the US since 1976 when the death penalty was reinstated. All of these observations revealed to me that Shane was committed to exposing the death penalty and all of its shortcomings.

As I began reading the book, I quickly appreciated the tone and feel of Shane's writing. Often times, I found myself feeling like I was sitting across from Shane as he shared (or had others directly share) stories of murder victims, family members, and people of faith. Stories of how the death penalty failed to deliver. Stories of how people's faith had transformed their understanding of the death penalty. And stories of how we can do better as a nation. The stories are what make this book stand out, although there is plenty of discussion on theology and even some data sprinkled in. Hearing directly from (and about) those who have been personally affected by violence and murder that the death penalty is broken reminds us that theirs are the stories that should be at the center of our efforts.

After reading the book, I was thankful that we have agreed to host two events with Shane here in North Texas: in Dallas on Tuesday, September 28th and in Fort Worth on Wednesday, September 29th. My hope is that we will have an opportunity to engage many people of faith through this book and the upcoming events that will take place. Whether you are new to the death penalty abolition movement, on the fence, or a longtime death penalty abolitionist, this book is a worthy and meaningful read.

Visit <http://executinggrace.com/> to learn more about Shane and his new book. For more information about TCADP's events with Shane this fall, contact Jason at Jason@tcadp.org.



Texas Death Penalty Developments in 2016 (as of July 15, 2016)

Executions: 6 out of 15 nationwide

Scheduled executions (through November): **7**

States that have carried out executions this year: 5 (Texas, Georgia, Alabama, Missouri and Florida)

States that have abandoned the death penalty in law or practice: 28

Individuals currently on death row in Texas: 244

New death sentences: 2
(Kaufman and Webb County)

Jury rejections of the death penalty: 1 (Bell County)

Cases that will be considered by the U.S. Supreme Court: 2

More information is available at
www.tcadp.org.

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Seizing the Momentum

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TCADP would like to give a special thanks to Sarah George and Tina Trimble for volunteering in the TCADP office!

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View photos from our events, connect with more than 4,600 other supporters, and learn about important death penalty developments. "Like" us today!



Voices of Experience: Joyce Washington



Joyce Washington

Leveria Washington, Jr. – known as Rockwell to his family and friends – was a well-liked person who loved all sports, recalls his mother, Joyce Washington. He was a star player on his high school’s football team in Tyler, Texas, where he was called the “Rock of Gibraltar.”

After high school, Leveria moved back to Dallas, where he attended Paul Quinn College for two years. He wanted to pledge Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Leveria also attended ITT Business School for a while before landing a job at UPS.

On July 9, 1991, Leveria had spent a relaxing day with friends at an apartment in Lewisville, drinking beer and playing a pick-up game of basketball. For unknown reasons, though, a fight broke out later that night between Leveria and a high school friend who was visiting from Tyler.

Leveria went downstairs to the apartment where his girlfriend lived, but she would not let him in. In the meantime, the friend grabbed a gun from his car. When Leveria returned to the apartment where the fight occurred, the friend shot him multiple times as he crawled down the hallway. He was 21 years old, the father of a young daughter.

Joyce says that the man who killed her son received only a 10-year probated sentence, which felt like a “slap in the face” to her. Despite her frustrations with the criminal justice system, however, she has never believed in the death penalty. “Putting the guy who murdered my son to death is not going to ease my pain or bring my son back.”

“I don’t believe in the death penalty. It is such a waste of taxpayers’ money.”
– Joyce Washington, mother of Leveria “Rockwell” Washington, Jr.

As the surviving mother of a murder victim, Joyce says she needed to be able to talk to someone weeks and months after the funeral, when all her friends and family members had gone their separate ways and she was left with the loneliness and sadness and hurt to deal with.

“We [victims’ family members] need to know where to get help, support, and counseling for a long as needed, to have access to someone we can reach out to and talk to anytime, one-on-one if necessary. At the time I did not feel I got the help that may be available today,” she explains.

“My son wanted the American dream – work, love, and happiness – and he was willing to work for it. He was gone too soon,” Joyce says. “His siblings and I still miss him and hurt at his passing. This is a process and it takes time, but it never heals, it just gets to where you can cope with it.”

Joyce Washington lives in Dallas, where she is active in local politics.
We are grateful to her for sharing her story with us.



This summer, TCADP is lucky to host another wonderful intern. Learn more about Madeline below:



Madeline Hoadley

My name is **Madeline Hoadley** and I am extremely excited to be interning with the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty for the summer. I recently finished my sophomore year at the University of Texas at Austin where I am majoring in History and Government. During my freshman year of college, I was accepted into the Bridging Disciplines Certificate Program, which allows students to pursue an interdisciplinary course of study outside of their degree program. I chose to focus on Ethics & Leadership in Law, Politics & Government because I am interested in the intersection of public policy and strategic community engagement.

I am originally from Canada, but spent most of my childhood in the Dallas area, which exposed me to the complexity and nuances surrounding both sides of the death penalty debate. As I entered university and began taking classes on social injustice, I was made aware of substantial flaws in the prosecution of death penalty cases and the broader criminal justice system. My wholehearted opposition to the death penalty was cemented when I completed a research project analyzing racial and mental health disparities in sentencing convictions in the United States.

I think that people often approach the death penalty in Texas as a forgone conclusion given the fact that Texas remains a national leader in inmate execution rates. However, my role as an intern at TCADP has expanded my personal understanding of the moral, political, and economic necessity for statewide death penalty abolition. In turn, TCADP's community engagement similarly works to expose Texans to the inhumane, prejudicial, and arbitrary nature of executions, complicating traditional assumptions about death penalty convictions.

I deeply admire the advocacy platform TCADP provides for shedding light on persistent structural issues surrounding the death penalty. Having the opportunity to work with TCADP has been a truly rewarding experience, and I look forward to contributing a small part in an inspiring movement to abolish the death penalty in Texas.

In memoriam: Sister Patrice Sullivan



Sister Patrice Sullivan

We were sad to learn about the death of long-time TCADP supporter **Sister Patrice Sullivan**, who passed away on May 29, 2016 at the age of 78. Sister Patrice was a member of the Congregation of Divine Providence in San Antonio. According to her obituary, after years of teaching high school biology, she decided to pursue a law degree in order to provide legal services to people who could not afford representation. She attended Southern Methodist University at age 42, passing the bar in 1984.

A passionate advocate for abolition of the death penalty, Sister Patrice led silent prayer vigils in front of the convent on the days of scheduled executions in Texas. She also pursued opportunities for TCADP to engage other religious orders of nuns on this issue.

We are grateful for Sister Patrice's steadfast witness and her positive encouragement for what she called our "faithful and effective work." May she rest in peace.



Thank You for Your Generous Support

TCADP thanks the following individuals and organizations for your generous contributions between April 28 and July 20, 2016. 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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Thanks
 YOU'VE BEEN A GREAT HELP!



Methodists Across Texas

Unite in Stand Against the Death Penalty

By Jason Redick

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As the Annual Conferences of the United Methodist Church approached this past spring, I can remember many conversations with **Kristin Houlé**, TCADP's Executive Director (and my boss). Conversations that included legislative deadlines, Annual Conference theological and power dynamics, and other United Methodist-related topics. After being part of the 2014 effort in the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church to bring about the "Resolution to Work Towards Repeal of Death Penalty in Texas," I was very pleased when we began communicating with United Methodists in the Rio Texas, Central Texas, and Northwest Texas Annual Conferences about their shared desire to bring similar resolutions forward in their respective conferences. (The same resolution was passed in the Texas Annual Conference in 2015.)

Even though United Methodists across Texas share many things in common, each conference has a unique character of its own. In part, this speaks to the wide diversity of Texas, with many different rural and urban areas that have their own unique culture. It's no surprise that these differences show up even within a denomination like United Methodism. As I communicated with local United Methodists in the various conferences that would be bringing the resolutions forward, I was eager to remind them of the beautiful language in the Social Principles of the UMC:

"We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore and transform all human beings."



Jason Redick with United Methodists across Texas standing against the death penalty

And so the time came for the Annual Conferences to begin. Central Texas, Rio Texas, and Northwest Texas Annual Conferences all took place in the span of two weeks at the beginning of June. As the conferences approached, I reached out to friends and colleagues in each conference to hear about any developments. I was even able to visit briefly with the United Methodists of Central Texas in Waco. It was a small, but passionate group. As the Annual Conferences wound down, we began receiving good news about the resolutions. Central Texas- passed! Northwest Texas- passed! And lastly, Rio Texas- passed!

The resolutions encourage clergy members of their respective Annual Conferences to sign TCADP's Interfaith Statement of Opposition to the Death Penalty and to pressure their local and state representatives to work towards abolition of the death penalty in Texas. They also call upon the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles and the Governor to commute the sentences of persons currently on death row in Texas.

Now that resolutions to work towards repeal of the death penalty have passed all five United Methodist Annual Conferences in Texas, I have had some conversations as to their value, and I have come to believe they hold power in two major areas. First, they show a real opposition to the death penalty by members of one of the larger Protestant Christian denominations here in Texas. Second, they will enhance our efforts to raise the voices of faith leaders on this issue, especially at the State Capitol. As the death penalty continues its slow death, we have faithful United Methodists to thank for standing up and speaking out against the death penalty.

We are particularly grateful to **Anne Mund** and all the members of the **Methodist Federation for Social Action- Rio Texas Chapter**; **Rev. Robert Flowers** and **Megan Hale**; **Rev. Ross Whiteaker**; **Rev. Dr. Wes Magruder**; and **Rev. Susan Buchanan** for their efforts to introduce and pass these resolutions.

SHANE CLAIBORNE
AUTHOR OF *THE IRRESISTIBLE REVOLUTION*

EXECUTING GRACE



HOW THE DEATH PENALTY KILLED JESUS
AND WHY IT'S KILLING US

"Compelling and thoughtful . . . a must-read for people of faith . . .
essential for anyone serious about grace and mercy."
—BRYAN STEVENSON, author of *Just Mercy*

TCADP presents

An Evening with Shane Claiborne: Conversation on *Executing Grace*

Dallas

September 27th
7:00PM

White Rock UMC
1450 Oldgate Lane

Fort Worth

September 28th
6:30PM

Broadway Baptist
305 W. Broadway

TCADP board members, staff, and supporters have been busy this summer. Be sure to visit our Facebook page and Instagram account to see more photos.

