

THE DEATH PENALTY

Another Year of Justice Inequality Begins

by Chris Hockman

On Wednesday, January 11, 2017, Texas executed its first inmate of the year, and the first of the country. It came after an astonishing 4 months without an execution in one of the deadliest states for criminals in the United States.

The unlucky man was Christopher Wilkins, executed for his crimes committed in 2005, for which he confessed. Despite that confession, which showed a desire to save the state of Texas money on a needless trial, the state still set about condemning the man.

It was also on January 11, 2017, that seven souls met outside Travis Park United Methodist Church in San Antonio and joined in a vigil in support of abolishing the death penalty. Appropriately, it came the day after Dylan Roof was sentenced to death in Charleston, South Carolina. As always, there are always encouraging discussions.

"I understand," said one man passing by, "but what are you supposed to do with these people?" And the response back from one of the attendees was quick, "that is what prison is for."

There is no doubt that Roof is filled with hate, and yet, not even Roof is deserving of death, in fact he is not worth our time. What seeking the death penalty against Roof did was give him a significant platform to spew his hateful words, and will give him several more opportunities over the coming decades as he will no doubt appeal. All of this could have been avoided had the state have made a deal of life in prison and skipped this whole trial show.

People have argued that it is the death penalty that brings peace, that only by killing these terrible people can we have true peace. But tell that to the man who was interviewed after the trial about his family member's murder and could only remark that he "cries every single time someone mentions the shooting." It is certainly not peace for him, or for the countless other victims that have had to relive the horrible event time and time again through trial after trial.

Abolishing the death penalty does not excuse the crimes that these individuals have committed, but rather it looks for a new way forward. The way forward involves peace, peace for victims, peace for families, but it also allows for peace for those convicted. By providing the ability to rehabilitate and grow, true peace will be achieved.

If the idea of peace is not enough to convince the need to abolish the death penalty, there is also the phenomenal racial disparity of death sentences. Accord-

ing to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice African-Americans comprise 44% of death row inmates, this is despite being less than 13% of the population of Texas. On top of that 80% of death sentences in Texas have been imposed on people of color.

Another great reason for abolishing the death penalty is the inability of a flawed system to provide perfect answers. Since 1973, 156 inmates have been released from death row after being exonerated of their crimes, 13 of them from Texas. The death penalty is the only penalty that cannot be repaired if the state has made a mistake in the conviction.

Furthermore the death penalty is not cost effective according to a study conducted by the Dallas Morning News. That study found that the average cost of the death penalty is nearly three times higher than imposing a life sentence at a maximum security facility.

Often the death penalty is held up as a prime example of deterrence, but this, also, does not stand up to further scrutiny. The FBI Uniform Crime Report shows time and time again that the South, which accounts for 80% of executions, has the highest murder rate in the country. The death penalty fails as a deterrent.

Despite all this there are phenomenal positives in Texas, since 1999 new death sentences have dropped by nearly 80%, with most of those convictions coming from just seven counties. Our Bexar County has also been positive, seeing a marked decrease in death sentences.

The eighth amendment prohibits the inflicting of 'cruel and unusual punishments', the hope is that it would be plain that killing someone is the very definition of 'cruel'. The other bright side is that it is becoming increasingly unusual.

That prompted Justice Stephen Breyer to comment in his

dissent in the *Glossip v. Gross* case, that the death penalty is unusual because "most places within the United States have abandoned its use." "30 States have either formally abolished the death penalty or have not conducted an execution in more than eight years." Progress is coming, even in Texas—the death penalty's days are numbered.

Bio: Chris Hockman is a freelance journalist, originally from Australia who is now living in San Antonio. Chris is the organizer of the San Antonio branch of The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

