

# Death penalty opponents find new allies among evangelicals

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**By G. Jeffrey MacDonald**

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CARRBORO, N.C. (RNS)—Stephen Dear has spent the past 10 years waging an uphill battle to abolish the death penalty in the American South—with virtually no help from the region’s powerful evangelical ministers.

But unlike in years past, Dear has new confidence that within six months, he can round up 100 conservative clergy in North Carolina alone to sign an open letter denouncing the current system of capital punishment.

“Even five years ago, I wouldn’t have thought of doing this,” said Dear, executive director of People of Faith Against the Death Penalty, based in Carrboro, N.C. “It’s easier now to be an abolitionist church leader who opposes the death penalty on biblical grounds and to be accepted for that.”

These are hopeful times for death penalty opponents. The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments this month on whether death by lethal injection violates the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment. New Jersey recently became the 14th state to ban executions. And Gallup Poll data show public support for the death penalty in murder cases has slipped

from a high of 80 percent to 69 percent the past 13 years.

In this shifting environment, religious leaders who oppose the death penalty are seeking high-profile venues where they can portray executions as inherently immoral.

But the fate of the death penalty in America, observers say, hinges largely on whether its rank-and-file evangelical and Catholic supporters can be persuaded en masse to reconsider.

“One of the pillars that the death penalty has rested on is religious support in certain areas of the country,” said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Washington-based Death Penalty Information Center, which opposes the death penalty.

“If that support goes—and I think it is weakening because people don’t support the death penalty as it’s being practiced—then the political leaders have less to turn to for why they support it.”

Catholic clergy have been among the most visible—and influential—in making the moral case against capital punishment. Catholic bishops provided key testimony, Dieter said, before New Jersey lawmakers voted to abolish the death penalty.

Parish priests are spreading the message that “pro-life” also means anti-death penalty. For more than two years, they’ve used sermons, bulletin inserts and a DVD titled “A Culture of Life and the Penalty of Death” as part of a campaign to keep the issue before churchgoers.

“A parishioner is more likely to oppose the death penalty if his or her pastor is strongly opposed to it,” said political scientist Gregory Smith.

Plus, minds can change. A 2005 Zogby poll found 29 percent of U.S. Catholics once favored the death penalty but later came to oppose it.

Clergy from mainline Protestant denominations that have opposed the death penalty for decades recently joined hands with pragmatists who fear the death penalty can claim innocent victims or doesn't effectively deter crime.

For the moment, the death penalty has support from at least two-thirds of Catholics, evangelicals and mainline Protestants, according to a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. White evangelicals show the strongest support, at 74 percent, but that's down from 82 percent in 1996.

Catholic bishops hope evangelicals will come to seek consistency on pro-life issues by opposing the death penalty along with abortion and euthanasia, said Thomas Shellabarger, domestic policy adviser at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

He has reason for hope. At least three prominent evangelicals—Joel Hunter, Ronald Sider and Tony Campolo—are calling for an end to the death penalty in new books coming out early this year.

Whether Southern evangelicals as a group will come to embrace either moral or pragmatic arguments against the death penalty remains a wide-open question.

But Dieter sees potential every time conservative Christians explain publicly why they're also abolitionists.

"There's something to that 'life' perspective" that resonates with evangelicals, Dieter said.

"If (opposition to the death penalty) is brought up by a liberal, then it doesn't go as far with evangelicals. But when it comes from the pope, then there's some common ground in the idea that life is to be respected on all levels."

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