

# Oklahoma pastor advocates for life of death row inmate

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OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)—Oklahoma Southern Baptist pastor John-Mark Hart is part of a multifaith coalition advocating for the life of death row inmate Richard Glossip on grounds of biblical mercy and the pursuit of impartial criminal justice.

In the ongoing battle, the U.S. Supreme Court stayed Glossip's execution that was scheduled for May 18, marking the sixth time since 2014 that Glossip's execution has been delayed in his conviction for hiring an accomplice to murder his boss in 1997.

"There's just such a strong chance that he's innocent," said Hart, pastor of Redemption Church in Oklahoma City. "And (Gentner Drummond) the attorney general of the state is saying this man did not receive a fair trial.

"Right now, we're in kind of a holding pattern waiting on the Supreme Court's decision," Hart said. "Are they going to take up his case? If they choose not to take up his case, then there are very limited options. Really, the only option I'm aware of to save him at that point would be to reinstate a moratorium" on the death penalty in Oklahoma.

Gentner and Oklahoma City District Attorney Vick Zemp Behenna are among members of the criminal justice system who have advocated for Glossip's life. Glossip would not meet new guidelines Behenna has established for use of the death penalty, Behenna said in an April 23 letter to the Oklahoma Pardon and Parole Board.

# Urging broad criminal justice reform

Hart is among at least three Southern Baptist pastors advocating for Glossip in particular and broader criminal justice reform in Oklahoma in general. They are among 26 initial signers of the November 2022, online statement “[Christ and Capital Punishment](#),” that has since gained about 300 signatures.

Hart said he wrote the statement, endorsed by signers Matthew Beasley, pastor of Hope Community Church in Norman, and M.L. Jemison, pastor of St. John Missionary Baptist Church in Oklahoma City.

Other Southern Baptists among the initial signatories are Reid Hebert, executive director of Christ Community Health Coalition, and Jared Stevenson, a member of the staff of the Oklahoma City office of Navigators discipleship ministry. Both Hebert and Stevenson are members of Redemption Church.

Ongoing disparities in the criminal justice system are causing many, including white evangelicals, to rethink biblically based justifications for the use of capital punishment, Hart asserts.

“If Richard Glossip was not a part of this situation, we still would have written Christ and Capital Punishment and would be advocating for this change, because we wanted a more merciful, a more gracious and redemptive approach to criminal justice in Oklahoma in general,” he said. “But situations like what’s happening with Richard Glossip bring the system problems to the fore in a very powerful way.”

Signers of the statement vary in their perspectives of capital punishment, Hart said, ranging from Hart who staunchly objects to the death penalty as a defense of the sanctity of human life, to others who advocate for use of the punishment only in the most grievous cases where guilt clearly is

proven.

“We’ve got people from a variety of perspectives saying the way we’re coming together to do things right now cannot continue,” Hart said of the statement. “For us, we’re people of faith. Sometimes there are morally compelling public issues that as people of faith, we feel the responsibility to say we need to have a morally grounded dialogue about this.”

Hart has not ministered to Glossip. Helen Prejean, a Catholic nun opposed to the death penalty, is Glossip’s spiritual adviser, Hart said.

## **Call for moratorium on the death penalty**

In calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in Oklahoma, the statement asserts the state’s “past and present practice of capital punishment is complicit in a deeply troubling national history of unjust and inequitable application of the death penalty,” noting racial disparities in the use of the death penalty that adversely impact Blacks and Hispanics.

“Perhaps the gravest miscarriage of justice is to execute someone who is innocent,” the statement reads in part, “but in the last 50 years 190 former death-row prisoners [in the United States] have been exonerated of all charges related to the wrongful convictions that had put them on death row, including 10 wrongfully convicted prisoners in the state of Oklahoma.”

Messengers to the 2000 Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting passed the resolution “On Capital Punishment,” recommending it be used only when the guilt of the accused is clearly proven.

“We urge that capital punishment be administered only when the pursuit of truth and justice result in clear and overwhelming evidence of guilt,” the resolution reads, and “because of our deep reverence for human life, our

profound respect for the rights of individuals, and our respect for the law, we call for vigilance, justice, and equity in the criminal justice system.”

The 2000 resolution acknowledges imperfect justice systems in a fallen world, but it states, “God authorized capital punishment for murder after the Noahic Flood, validating its legitimacy in human society (Genesis 9:6).”