

Faith leaders urge Biden to empty federal death row

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A group of faith leaders, activists, law enforcement officials and families of murder victims called on President Joe Biden to spare the lives of about 40 inmates currently on death row in federal prisons.

The campaign is prompted by concerns the Department of Justice will lift a moratorium imposed by the Biden administration in 2021 and begin to execute prisoners after President-elect Donald Trump takes office.

Thirteen federal prisoners were executed during the first Trump administration—more than four times as many as under all the presidents combined since the federal death penalty was reinstated in 1988.

Among those asking Biden to commute the sentences of death row inmates is Sharon Risher, whose mother, Ethel Lance, was one of nine church members killed in the 2015 shooting at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. Risher cited Trump's promise to restart executions in urging Biden to act.

'A moral imperative'

"It is vital that you deny him that opportunity by commuting every death sentence remaining on federal and military death rows," wrote Risher, chair of Death Penalty Action, in a letter to Biden.

The letter, signed by more than 400 religious and anti-death penalty groups, also urges Biden to order the Federal Bureau of Prisons to

demolish the execution chamber at a federal prison in Indiana where many federal death row inmates are held and to bar federal prosecutors from seeking the death penalty in current cases.

“Ending the federal and military death penalty is not only an important step toward correcting myriad flaws in the criminal legal system in the United States, it is both good governance and a moral imperative,” the letter reads. “We will continue to work toward that goal.”

Risher and Lisa Brown, whose son Christopher Vialva was executed in 2020, also appeared at several events on Capital Hill Dec. 10, including a news conference with U.S. Rep. Ayanna Pressley, D-Mass. Pressley noted the racial disparities among prisoners on death row in calling for Biden to act.

“State-sanctioned murder is not justice, and the death penalty is a cruel, racist and fundamentally flawed punishment that has no place in our society,” she said.

In a separate statement, Pressley cited her Christian faith and Biden’s, while making the case against the death penalty.

“As someone who grew up in a storefront church on the South Side of Chicago, I believe that we are one human family,” the statement read.

“As people of faith, we have a collective, righteous mandate to save lives, and one way that we can do that is by abolishing the death penalty—a cruel, inhumane, and racist punishment that has no place in any society. I hope that President Biden, as a man who is guided by his faith, will take action while he still can.”

Among federal inmates facing execution are the gunmen in high-profile mass shootings, such as the one at Mother Emanuel and at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, as well as the Boston Marathon bomber.

Some family members of Mother Emanuel victims made national headlines for forgiving the shooter, Dylann Roof, who was sentenced to death in 2017.

However, not all families of victims agree with that decision, as reporter and author Jennifer Berry Hawes reported in her 2019 book, *Grace Will Lead Us Home*. Of the nine families affected by the Tree of Life shooting, seven supported the death penalty for Robert Bower, who was sentenced to death in 2023.

Seeking life sentences, not a pardon

Jamila Hodge, CEO of Equal Justice USA, said everyone on death row has been convicted of a terrible crime, and activists are not seeking to have death row prisoners pardoned. They are asking Biden to commute the sentences to life in prison, so prisoners still are being held accountable for their actions.

Hodge, a former prosecutor, said her Christian faith motivates her to oppose the death penalty. She believes in the possibility for redemption and in the worth of every person on death row, no matter what they have done.

“Everyone who’s on there did something heinous,” she said. “But that does not change the fact that they still have dignity and worth. And if you are acting in your faith, believe in the power of redemption.”

Faith Leaders of Color, a group made up mostly of Black pastors, and the Catholic Mobilizing Network also wrote letters to Biden asking him to commute the sentences of federal death row prisoners, drawing on the same belief in human dignity.

“As Catholics, we understand that every person is made in the image of God and that our Heavenly Father does not shut the door on anyone,” the

Catholic Mobilizing Network letter reads, echoing a message forwarded by Catholic leaders over the past week.

“President Biden has an extraordinary opportunity to advance the cause of human dignity by commuting all federal death sentences to terms of imprisonment and sparing the lives of the 40 men currently on federal death row,” the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said in an action alert.

In addition, Pope Francis specifically called for the U.S. to commute the sentences of those on death row over the weekend, asking Catholic faithful to “pray that their sentences may be commuted or changed.” He added, “Think of these brothers and sisters of ours and ask the Lord for the grace to save them from death.”

In 2018, the pontiff changed the catechism of the Catholic Church to codify teaching that the death penalty is “inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.”

Biden, a Catholic, campaigned on abolishing the federal death penalty but has not done so. His moratorium on executions did not stop the Department of Justice from continuing to prosecute capital punishment cases.

Appeal to ‘pro-life’ Christians

Joia Thornton, founder and national director of Faith Leaders of Color, cited the president’s faith as well as Biden’s long ties to Black churches in calling for him to commute death row sentences.

“Commuting the federal death row would be an incredible milestone for those who believe life has value, mercy is encompassing and grace covers a multitude of sin,” Thornton said in a statement.



Shane Claiborne

Shane Claiborne, co-founder of Red Letter Christians, a progressive evangelical group, said his opposition to the death penalty is tied to his beliefs about the sanctity of all lives. Being “pro-life,” he said, means more than opposing abortion. He shakes his head at fellow believers who want to end abortion but who support the death penalty.

“What’s haunting is that the death penalty has survived in America because of Christians, not in spite of us,” he said.

He also pointed to a story in the Gospel of John, where Jesus interrupts an attempted execution. A woman in that story was caught in adultery, and a crowd wanted to stone her to death. But Jesus, Claiborne said, stopped the execution by saying, “Let the ones without sin cast the first stone.”

Jesus also blessed the merciful and said God’s mercy is stronger than any crime people can commit, Claiborne said.

Before Trump’s first term, only three federal death row inmates, including Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, had been executed since 1988 and none from April 2003 to June 2020. Since 1927, the federal government has executed 50 death row prisoners in total.

Hodge said organizers had yet to hear from the White House but are hopeful Biden will act, especially given Trump's promises to resume what organizers called an "execution spree."

She also pointed to a proposal in Project 2025, a Heritage Foundation document outlining its hopes for a second Trump term in the White House, which called on Trump to "do everything possible to obtain finality for the 44 prisoners currently on federal death row."

"We know what will happen under a new administration," Hodge said. "Forty lives are hanging in the balance."

EDITOR'S NOTE: In the largest single-day act of clemency in recent history, the White House announced Dec. 12 Biden is commuting the sentences of about 1,500 individuals who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic and pardoning 39 convicted nonviolent offenders. The clemency did not affect federal death row, but Biden said he would continue to review clemency petitions and take further action in the weeks ahead.