

# Baptist pastors and leaders join clemency plea for Melissa Lucio

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Dozens of Texas Baptists—including Jesse Rincones, executive director of the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas—are among more than 100 faith leaders requesting clemency for Melissa Lucio, who is scheduled to be executed April 27. (Screen capture image)

The faith leaders assert false and invalid evidence led to Lucio's murder conviction in the death of her 2-year-old daughter Mariah. Lucio, 53, is one of six women on Texas' Death Row and the only Latina woman in Texas history to receive the death sentence.

Lucio's attorneys on March 22 submitted an [application for clemency](#) to Gov. Greg Abbott and the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles.

The application urges Lucio's death sentence either should be commuted to a lesser penalty or that she be given a 120-day reprieve from execution to prove her innocence.

The March 22 application offers new evidence not presented to the jury that convicted Lucio. It includes declarations of seven scientific and forensic experts who concluded false evidence misled the jury into believing the child was killed by physical abuse rather than medical complications after a fall.

The application documents that Lucio—a survivor of sexual and physical abuse—asserted her innocence more than 100 times before affirming statements presented by officers after five hours of “coercive interrogation.”

The application for clemency also includes declarations from five of the jurors who convicted Lucio, stating they now have grave concerns about evidence withheld from them and supporting relief for Lucio.

## **‘An appalling travesty of justice’**

A letter from faith leaders representing multiple denominations is among the [supporting documents](#) submitted to Abbott and the board of pardons.

“There are numerous legal and practical reasons why the State of Texas should not carry out this unjust—and unjustified—execution. First and foremost, there is ample forensic and eyewitness evidence that Mariah's death was an accident that resulted from a head injury she suffered in a fall—not a homicide,” the letter from faith leaders states.

The letter notes Lucio's “entire life was marked by poverty, addiction and domestic violence,” but jurors never heard how her history of trauma shaped how she reacted during interrogation.

“Allowing Melissa’s execution to proceed despite the overwhelming doubts that shroud her conviction would be an appalling travesty of justice that serves no purpose whatsoever,” the letter from faith leaders states.

“It is not in the best interest of our state, our justice system, or the safety of our people. In accordance with the shared values of our diverse religious and faith traditions and in the name of mercy, we respectfully urge you to commute her death sentence.”

## **‘Violates both biblical virtues and legal principles’**

Jesse Rincones, executive director of Convención and lead pastor of Alliance Church in Lubbock, spoke at a [March 22 news conference](#) in favor of the application for clemency.



Jesse Rincones participated in a news conference announcing an application for clemency for Melissa. Lucio, who is scheduled to be executed April 27. (Screen capture image)

Rincones said he strives to guide his congregation “toward compassion,

forgiveness and justice.”

“The case of Melissa Lucio implicates all of these virtues,” he asserted.

The Lucio case “violates both biblical virtues and legal principles,” Rincones said.

He pointed out the Hebrew Scriptures set a high bar for punishment, requiring the testimony of two or three witnesses before guilt could be established.

“This case fails in that regard. Seven Fifth Circuit judges recognized that ‘the State presented no physical evidence or witness testimony’ establishing that Melissa abused Mariah or any of her children, let alone killed Mariah,” Rincones said.

Old Testament law allowed capital punishment only in cases where a life was taken intentionally and after appropriate judicial processes were followed, he added.

“As people of faith, we understand the basic biblical principle that mankind is broken by sin. That is why God removes vengeance from our hands,” Rincones said. “Consequently, broken people in a broken system will produce an unjust result.”

In addition to Rincones, other faith leaders who signed the letter to Abbott and the board of pardons include Rick McClatchy, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas; Jon Singletary, dean of the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University; Burt Burleson, chaplain at Baylor University; Robert Creech, professor at Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary; Charles Foster Johnson, pastor of Bread Fellowship in Fort Worth and executive director of Pastors for Texas Children; and Eder Ibarra, director of missions for Rio Grande Baptist Association.

Pastors include Steve Wells at South Main Baptist Church in Houston, Ricardo Brambila at Primera Iglesia Bautista in Dallas, Michael Copeland of First Baptist Church in China Spring, George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Garrett Vickrey of Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio and Ed Seay of First Baptist Church in Magnolia.

*Disclosure: Jesse Rincones serves on the Baptist Standard board of directors.*