

Court halts Texas execution for now, will hear oral arguments

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The U.S. Supreme Court halted the execution of a Texas inmate who had asked the state to allow his pastor to lay hands on him and pray for him at the moment of his death—a request the state denied.

The court granted the temporary [stay of execution](#) hours before John Ramirez, who was convicted and sentenced to die for the 2004 murder and robbery of a Corpus Christi convenience store clerk, was scheduled to die.

Significantly, the court called for oral arguments regarding the case in October or November.

Ramirez had asked prison officials to allow Dana Moore, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Corpus Christi, to lay hands on him and pray for him when he is executed by lethal injection.

When the Texas Department of Criminal Justice denied Ramirez' request, citing security concerns, [Ramirez filled suit](#).

Lower courts sided with TDCJ, saying the state agency has a “compelling interest in maintaining an orderly, safe and effective process” when carrying out executions.

‘The power of touch’

Moore began his role as spiritual adviser to Ramirez four years ago, after two members of his church who knew the inmate and had been visiting him no longer were able to make the 300-mile trip from Corpus Christi to Livingstone.

After Ramirez made a profession of faith in Christ on Texas Death Row, Second Baptist Church allowed him to join the congregation by proxy, Moore said.

Ramirez wants Moore not only to pray, but also to lay hands on him at his most difficult imaginable moment, and Moore wants to be able to honor that request.

“We learn from Scripture the power of touch,” Moore said. “Jesus touched people, and they were healed. People touched Jesus and received healing. Jesus welcomed children and took them in his arms. ... Touch is powerful.”

Several cases regarding spiritual advisers

The Ramirez case marks the fifth time in two years the Supreme Court has been presented with a question regarding a spiritual adviser being present in the execution chamber.

One case involved a Texas Death Row inmate Patrick Henry Murphy, who wanted a [Buddhist spiritual adviser](#) in the execution chamber. At the time, TDCJ allowed its employed chaplains in the death chamber, and it only had Christian and Muslim clergy on staff.

For a time, TDCJ responded by prohibiting any spiritual advisers or chaplains from being physically present in the execution chamber, a policy that [drew criticism](#) from across the religious spectrum.

That outcry led the TDCJ to [change its policy](#) and permit condemned inmates to be accompanied in the execution chamber by the spiritual adviser of their choice, subject to verification and a background check. However, the spiritual adviser is required to stand in the corner and not make physical contact with the condemned during the procedure.

First time court granted full review

While the Supreme Court has been presented with several cases in recent years involving the question of a spiritual adviser in the execution chamber, the Ramirez case marks the first time the court has granted full review, including briefing and oral argument, said Jennifer Hawks, associate general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

“Cases about the religious exercise of prisoners boil down to the tension between protecting the ability of inmates to practice their religion and ensuring the safety and security of the prison,” Hawks said. “In agreeing to hear this case, the court takes on the weighty question of whether the safety protocols of an execution justify denial of a prisoner’s free exercise.”

Moore agreed the Supreme Court could render a “big decision” regarding religious liberty.

“It’s a time for prayer,” he said. “Scripture commands us to pray for those in authority, and that includes the Supreme Court—praying for wisdom.”