

Faith leaders urge clemency for Death Row inmate

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At least a dozen Baptists are among the 100-plus Texas faith leaders and 10 national evangelicals who have urged clemency for a Texas Death Row inmate whom they believe suffers from severe mental illness.

Andre Thomas is scheduled to be executed April 5 for the 2004 stabbing death of his estranged wife, Laura Boren; their 4-year-old son, Andre; and his 13-month-old step-daughter, Leyha Hughes.

After leaving the scene of the deadly assault, Thomas walked to his residence and stabbed himself in the chest three times. Five days later, while in the Grayson County Jail, he plucked out his right eye, citing a literal interpretation of Matthew 5:29 as his reason. Three years later, after he was found guilty and sentenced to Texas Death Row, he gouged out his other eye and swallowed it.

‘Extreme and undeniable’ mental illness

“Mr. Thomas’ mental illness is extreme and undeniable,” states a [letter](#) to Gov. Greg Abbott and the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles signed by more than 100 Texas faith leaders representing 12 denominations and religious traditions.

Pastors Steve Wells of South Main Baptist Church in Houston, Garrett Vickrey of Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio and Jake Maxwell of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, along with Associate Pastor Scotty Swingler of Sugar Land Baptist Church are among the faith leaders who

signed the Feb. 15 letter urging clemency for Thomas.

“As we understand it, granting clemency to Mr. Thomas would mean that he would spend the rest of his life in a secure psychiatric prison facility and would keep Texans safe,” the letter states.

Others who signed the letter include Stephen Reeves, executive director of Fellowship Southwest; David Morgan, executive director of the T.B. Maston Foundation for Christian Ethics; Rick McClatchy, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas; and Pastor Frederick Haynes of Friendship West Baptist Church in Dallas.

‘Perpetuate violence and compound injustice’

The letter asserts Thomas began hearing voices in his head at age 9 and attempted suicide the first time at age 10, but his mental illness went untreated. Two days before his crime, he went to an emergency room, where he was found to be psychotic. However, he was left unattended and walked out of the hospital.

“In Andre Thomas’ case, we are firmly convinced that granting him clemency is the path of morality, faith and justice,” the letter states.

Texas failed both Thomas and his victims when he was denied the treatment he needed, Reeves said.

“As a Texan and a Christian, I cannot image what good it does for us to kill a man who is so clearly mentally ill,” he said.

“To kill him now would surely be cruel and unusual punishment. He is no threat to others behind bars, but his execution will only perpetuate violence and compound the injustice.”

‘Healing, salvation, redemption and restoration’

Swingler emphasized he signed the letter requesting clemency “not out of any political conviction, but a spiritual conviction, because I want Andre to have every opportunity for healing, salvation, redemption and restoration.”

The death penalty “puts a finite timeline on someone’s opportunity for redemption,” he said.

“In Jesus’ name, I want to give every human life every available second to be healed of their wounds and saved for God’s glory. By cutting any life short, we say ‘no’ to God’s healing power and redemptive work.”

In Thomas’ case, Christians have a duty to “pray for his mind and heart, that God would perform a miracle and heal him” Swingler said. “Ending his life is to give up on healing, salvation, redemption and love.”

Morgan said his opposition to capital punishment centers on concern “that its imposition is impacted and influenced by race and poverty.”

News reports of the Thomas trial raise particular issues, he added.

“I think the reports of racial bias in the jury—that might very specifically have impacted this case—warrant, at the least, additional investigation,” Morgan said.

Vengeance, not justice

Paul Basden, pastor of Preston Trail Community Church, a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated congregation in Frisco, signed [a separate letter to Abbott](#) and the board from evangelical leaders.

Others who endorsed that letter included Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Shane Claiborne, cofounder of Red-Letter Christians; and Fisher Humphreys, professor emeritus at Samford University.

“Mr. Thomas suffers from schizophrenia, which led him to horrific acts of self-mutilation throughout his time in prison,” their letter states. “He is indisputably one of the most severely mentally ill incarcerated individuals in Texas history.”

The letter asserts if Thomas had received the intervention and treatment he needed, the outcome could have been different.

“Allowing Mr. Thomas to be executed—in his permanently disabled, mentally incompetent, and vulnerable state—would serve no useful purpose other than pure vengeance, which we believe is not something Christians can or should pursue,” the letter states.