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North Carolina leaders urge repeal of death penalty

by Patrick O'Neill

RALEIGH, N.C. -- With death penalty foe Sr. Helen Prejean by his side, Stephen Dear announced Dec. 2 a statewide grassroots campaign to abolish capital punishment in North Carolina, the only Southern state that has not carried out an execution in more than five years.

Dear, younger brother of *NCR* columnist Jesuit Fr. John Dear, is executive director of the North Carolina-based group People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.

Dear, Prejean and other religious leaders from around the state held a press conference to announce the "Kairos Campaign" to repeal the state's death penalty. While executions were common in North Carolina in the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, various legal entanglements have put executions on hold since the Aug. 18, 2006, execution of Samuel Flippen. North Carolina still has 158 people on death row, the sixth highest total in the nation. Forty-three executions have been carried out in North Carolina since executions resumed in 1984.

"We call this the Kairos Campaign because kairos means a special time, an opportune moment," Dear said. "And we think the time has come to help people of faith and good will in North Carolina to raise their voices and say it's time we move forward to a new future without the death penalty."

Prejean, author of the book *Dead Man Walking*, travels around the country calling for abolition of capital punishment. She has worked closely with Dear in the South for more than a decade.

Prejean said she "sees a wave building" against the use of capital punishment. Juries have been more reluctant to hand down death sentences, she said, and district attorneys have been opting for life without parole outcomes rather than the more costly death penalty.

"There's not much enthusiasm for the death penalty," Prejean said.

Prejean praised the recent comments of Pope Benedict XVI backing efforts by the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio to abolish the death penalty globally.

"I express my hope that your deliberations will encourage the political and legislative initiatives being promoted in a growing number of countries to eliminate the death penalty," the pontiff said in English during his weekly audience Nov. 30.

The pontiff urged the group to "continue the substantive progress made in conforming penal law both to the human dignity of prisoners and the effective maintenance of public order."

Sant'Egidio has campaigned for decades against capital punishment, calling on governments and international institutions to abolish or suspend all executions.

Prejean said the pontiff's comments were a call to Catholics around the world to add their voices to the death penalty abolition effort.

"He encouraged Catholics to get involved in abolition because it's against life," she said. "It's about the dignity of life -- not just innocent life."

Dominican Friar Fr. Minlib Dallh said the death penalty says something about "the person who kills, but also the kind of society we are. The only way that we can restore peace is to act peacefully."

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Dear, whose organization has already gathered more than 1,000 resolutions supporting a state death penalty moratorium, said the repeal campaign would be a similar grassroots effort that would involve teams of people traveling the state soliciting resolutions and gathering individual signatures to repeal the death penalty.

"It's the time, of course, to wake up the people," Prejean said. "The legislature is never going to act until they have constituencies behind them."

In the 2008 elections, Republicans won control of North Carolina's General Assembly for the first time in a century, and many of the state's Democrats also back capital punishment, a reality that will make the repeal campaign a formidable task.

"I'm not sure it's a good time, but I'm not sure there's ever been a good time," the Rev. Frank Dew, pastor of New Creation Community Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, said in response to a reporter's question regarding the timing of the effort.

But Dear said he's hopeful.

"[T]his next decade is pivotal on the death penalty in the United States and full of hope for those of us who oppose the death penalty," he said. "This is an issue that every person of faith and good concerned about social justice can get involved in and know we are winning, and we're going to win."

"God willing, we shall do it. We will work to end the death penalty in the sanctuaries and fellowship halls and barbershops and town halls of North Carolina. Then we will bring that wave for abolition to the floors of legislature and the governor's office and the chambers of the Supreme Court of North Carolina."

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