

Following successful campaign, Virginia interfaith leaders explain how other states can abolish the death penalty

by [Jeff Brumley](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue



(Video screengrab)

Connecting legislation with spirituality and supporters with tangible actions propelled death penalty opponents in Virginia to victory, said two organizers of the movement during a March 29 webinar hosted by Baptist News Global.

LaKeisha Cook and Roberta Oster of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy discussed the social media and grassroots organizing tactics they employed to help successfully overturn capital punishment in the commonwealth. The victory became official on March 24 when Governor Ralph Northam signed legislation making Virginia the 23rd state—and the first in the South—to abolish state-sponsored executions.

The VICPP discussion offered guidance to anti-death penalty advocates in other states and suggested that the challenge of declining religious affiliation in the US could, in part, be addressed by attracting younger generations with social action opportunities like those used to end state executions in Virginia.

“What we do is a possible draw for people coming back into religious institutions,” said Cook, a Baptist minister and VICPP’s criminal justice reform organizer.

“One of the main complaints young adults have about churches is that they don’t do social justice work—they’re not concerned with what’s going on outside the church,” she said. “When they see churches committed to doing that type of work on a regular basis, it may be the Lord pulling people back in.”

VICPP’s grassroots, multipronged campaign was designed to remind legislators that the faith community was not letting up.

Black Christian clergy participated in a virtual press conference in January to highlight the state’s death penalty practice as an extension of lynching. Vigils were held statewide later in the month to symbolically connect the dots between slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the modern-day practice of executing prisoners, who have been overwhelmingly Black. A statewide, interfaith clergy petition drive added even more force to the movement.

“Those pieces were significant because they gave people something to participate in,” Cook said.

Oster, VICPP’s director of communications, added that the combination of social media and widespread media coverage of their events helped to connect “legislation with spirituality—and from a communications perspective, that was probably one of the most powerful tools to get the word out.”

Since the Virginia victory, the center has been advising abolitionist groups in other states on how to craft elements of their movements, Oster said. They also are in contact with advocates seeking to overturn federal capital punishment.

Adopting the faith-based approach is one of the top suggestions they offer. Its details may vary from place to place. In Virginia, having lay leaders and clergy from Bahá’í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and other traditions on board sent a powerful message to legislators, Oster said.

“I would advise any other state to look to the faith community” for support, she continued. “It’s powerful when you hear a preacher, especially an African American preacher, talk about this legacy of lynching and talk about injustice and the disproportionate number of African Americans who have been killed.”

She also suggested campaigns include endorsements from death row exonerees and the families of victims who can appear at events or on social media and can be available for media interviews.

“That strategy just resonates with people. And I would say to focus on young people as well. Teenage kids, college-age kids want that sense of fighting against injustice. They want to do something about a world that is falling apart, and this was a concrete way to actually pass a law that will stop the state from executing people.”

Death penalty opponents also should emphasize the possibility that innocent people will be executed, Cook said. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, 185 death row inmates have been exonerated since the US Supreme Court restored capital punishment in 1973.

While there was little pushback from conservative religious groups during the campaign, Cook said she is acutely aware of the theological differences between death penalty supporters and opponents.

“There are some religious groups, even some mainline denominations, that stand firmly behind capital punishment and believe that it is something that God mandates, and they’ll pull scripture out to try to make that point.”

But faith-motivated abolitionists typically see God alone as having the authority to take life. And the belief that God can redeem anyone, regardless of their crimes, also informed the campaign’s successful messaging, Cook said.

Oster said the principle played across religious traditions involved in the movement, including Judaism. “My rabbi would say the same thing. It is not up to us, it’s up to God. We are not God, so we have no right to take life.” —Baptist News Global