Facilitation Guide

Dead Man Walking

ABOUT THIS BOOK
The book is *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* by Helen Prejean, C.S.J. In it Sister Helen described her experiences and insights as she ministered with men facing execution, and then to the families of murder victims. The book allows readers to see the reality of murder and of punishment from the viewpoints of the accused, their family, and the families of the victims.

In 1982, Sister Helen Prejean became the spiritual advisor to Patrick Sonnier, the convicted killer of two teenagers who was sentenced to die in the electric chair of Louisiana’s Angola State Prison. In the months before Sonnier’s death, the Roman Catholic nun came to know a man who was as terrified as he had once been terrifying. At the same time, she came to know the families of the victims and the men whose job it was to execute him—men who often harbored doubts about the rightness of what they were doing.

Out of that dreadful intimacy comes a profoundly moving spiritual journey through our system of capital punishment. Confronting both the plight of the condemned and the rage of the bereaved, the needs of a crime-ridden society and the Christian imperative of love, *Dead Man Walking* is an unprecedented look at the human consequences of the death penalty, a book that is both enlightening and devastating.

To Order the Book

The book *Dead Man Walking*, by Sister Helen Prejean is available in Alamosa at the Narrow Gauge Newstand (587-6712). The book can also be ordered through the Dead Man Walking project in Louisiana at a special price reserved for official study groups. Use the form at the end of this guide to make book purchases through the Project.

Guidelines for Discussion

A discussion of *Dead Man Walking* can be a rich learning experience and it can also be an intense experience. The issues of violent crime and the death penalty often stir strong feelings and deeply held opinions. In addition, the book presents these issues in an emotionally powerful way through the personal stories of its characters. Because the book allows us to hear a variety of viewpoints, it affords an excellent opportunity for discussion. As the facilitator, your role will be to help highlight the many perspectives present in the book and in your participants, rather than advocating a particular point of view. It is important to consider the emotional dynamics of the session(s), as well. You will want to draw on your own skills of active and empathetic listening – as well as coach participants in these disciplines - to help manage the strong feelings that may arise. These skills will include reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, attending body language, and even a respectful silence at times. If one or more persons begin to dominate the speaking space or wander off-track, a good facilitator will respectfully shift the focus to other participants,
viewpoints, or topics. More techniques for “sharing the space” are noted below, at the beginning of the Discussion Questions section.

As you begin the session, be sure that the group has a clear understanding of the time frame and purpose of the discussion. Be particularly clear about whether you will be discussing the book, or the issues it raises, or both. This is something that may be a good lead-in topic, so that the group can reach consensus on the purpose of your time together and primary focus for discussion – unless this has been decided and spelled out in advance of your first session. If this is not clarified, and if participants come with conflicting expectations, the resulting discussion may be frustrating for some of the group, as well as for you as discussion leader.

Begin the first session by allowing participants to introduce themselves, if they are not an already-existing group. Even for groups who know one another, a quick introductory question may help connect everyone (e.g., “why did you decide to join this discussion?” or “what is one goal or expectation you have for your participation in this activity?”) Then take a few minutes to introduce some ground rules for the discussion. This is especially important if you expect significant differences of belief and opinion, but also helpful for any group. Be aware that your tone and approach as discussion leader will go a long way toward setting the atmosphere of the session. Guidelines such as these, which you invite all participants to adopt, may be useful:

- **Dialogue vs. debate.** The focus of discussion is on dialogue: an exchange of ideas with the possibility of new insights. Debate or argumentation is to be avoided.

- **Speak the truth in love.** Be as open as you can about your own thoughts and beliefs, but be respectful toward others who may hold differing beliefs.

- **Listen actively,** in an effort to understand, and remain open to new ideas. Refrain from interrupting other participants

- **Speak from your own understandings,** rather than speaking for or criticizing others.

- **Speak freely, but share the speaking space with others.**

- **Ask questions for clarification and to increase your understanding, not for judgment.**

- **The questions for discussion are listed in categories to make it easy for you to find those that suit your group and your purposes. You may want to organize the flow of the discussion by choosing questions from several categories.**

- **If the discussion follows directly after reading the book, it will be especially important to begin the session with some time for the expression and release of emotional energy built up during the experience of reading Dead Man Walking. Questions 1-3 will assist in this initial debriefing. Unless the group is small, it would be a good idea to do this debriefing in groups of 2 to 4 persons, to allow everyone the opportunity to speak and be heard.**

- **Consider** ways to encourage participation by all members of the discussion group, and to avoid
domination by a few vocal members. Here are some ways this can be done:

- With a small group, for questions on which you would like to hear from everyone, go around the circle to give each person an opportunity to speak.

- With a larger group, it is often a good idea to break into pairs or small groups of 3 to 5 persons. If it seems useful and time permits, you can ask each group to report briefly to the larger group some insights or important points from their discussion.

- The facilitator can simply say, "I'd like to hear from some of the persons who have not said very much so far."

**Discussion Questions**

The discussion questions in this guide cover both the content of the book and issues raised by the book. The section below of content questions follows the book by chapter, and divides the book roughly in half, with the presumption that a satisfying discussion of the book will probably need at least four hours of meeting time. Other sections of the guide include biblical references and questions relating to religious issues raised by the book, a section on social justice issues relevant to the reading, and factual information related to capital punishment in the United States. Clearly, groups have many options about how to structure and focus discussion time.

**Content Questions**

*Part I, Chapters 1-5 (2 hours)*

**Chapter 1 Sister Helen Prejean’s life leading up to New Orleans, St. Thomas, Hope House, and her decision to correspond with a death row inmate**

1. Contrast Sister Helen’s own childhood and youth, pp.6-7, to that of the people to whom she teaches and ministers in Hope House, 7-9.

2. In 1980, what personal beliefs/self understanding, guided her to make the commitment to “stand on the side of the poor?” Who were some of people/writers who impacted this decision? 5, 11

3. What did she learn about the systems (economics, education, jobs/working poor, and criminal justice) to which people in St. Thomas are subjected? 8-9 How do the “gifts of her own upbringing” give her a personal advantage in dealing with these systems? 10

4. In her study of the files on Patrick, what did she learn about his crime (15), the victims and their parents? (11,17) How does she sort out her feelings about the crime, the perpetrator, the victims and “life for life” retribution? (20-22) Why do you think she includes her (quite graphic) research on execution? (18-20)

5. What does Patrick reveal about himself, in his letters to her, that moves Helen to arrange a visit? (13, 18, 22)
Chapter 2 Sister Helen visits Patrick and, eventually, his brother, Eddie. She will go through the preparation for Patrick’s first Warrant of Execution date.

1. Of what significance is Patrick’s visitor category designation, “spiritual adviser,” for himself and for Helen? Describe Helen’s preliminary visit with the prison Catholic priest: his scrutiny of her gender, dress, and attitude. 25-26

2. As she walks through “death row” for her first visit with Patrick, months later, she is struck with the meaning of its reality. Discuss her visceral feeling at each sight and sound. 27-28

3. What are some things she learns about Pat; his appearance, relationships, out-law beginnings? 28-30

4. As she drives away from the prison she recalls her own “unnegotiable moral bedrock on which society must be built…” What is that nonnegotiable and how does that create conflict for her as she goes about her ministry? 31

5. In March ’83 she visits Pat’s brother Eddie for the first time. What does she learn from this visit? What does she observe concerning a prisoner’s treatment? 32-33

6. In July, Pat receives his Warrant for Execution dated for August 19th. Helen thinks about how “surreal all of it is.” Discuss the procedure for preparation. 34-36

7. Patrick last hours are spent talking with Helen. What does she learn from him and how does she process all this? 36-40

8. Helen continues to visit Eddie, then Patrick who received a stay of execution. What does Eddie disclose about the crime, his remorse, and the trial? What did Helen, looking back, regret not saying to Eddie? 41-42

Chapter 3 Millard Farmer enlightens Sister Helen about the criminal justice system.

1. After the 5th Circuit denied appeal, Millard Farmer came on board to help Pat with another set of appeals. Helen learns about the legal system of “one-way turn-style gates.”

2. Millard discovers numerous discrepancies (violations) in Pat’s defense and trial. Discuss some: e.g. lawyer visit just one day before the trial, jury selection, unsupported claim of prosecutor about Patrick’s behavior is not questioned by defense, and ineffective defense during first sentencing trial, etc. 45-47

3. How does racism impact Patrick’s death sentence? 48-49

4. Millard points out that the public defenders appointments in Louisiana are flawed for a truly fair defense. Explain why. 49

5. What does Millard mean when he says “that is why you’ll never find a rich man on death row?” 49
6. Why is, as Millard explains, “the application of the death penalty like a lottery?” 50

7. What was the issue in the Clark case, for which the 5th circuit granted a new trial, that might help with Patrick’s appeal? 52

8. When Millard visits Patrick he finds that there are no “rocks in his wagon,” so what does he decide should be the next step? 51-3

9. How did the Governor’s new political career impact his decision about granting clemency for Patrick? 56-57

10. What discrepancies did Helen find in reading over the transcripts of Patrick’s trial? 58-59

12. Last chance of clemency is the Pardon Board hearing. Who are the people present to speak for Patrick’s life and what is said? 63-6

Chapter 4 There are four days until Patrick’s execution, April 5, 1984
1. What impact does Pat’s pending execution have on his mother and Helen’s mother? 68-71

2. What did Pat negotiate with Warden Maggio concerning Eddie? 70

3. During Helen’s visit with Eddie, what does he give her? Then when she visits Pat, he dictates a letter to the Governor concerning his not being asked to attend his Pardon Board Hearing. How is Helen affected by the letter? 73-74

4. Captain Rabelais (in charge of the death house and procedures) and Helen have a discussion about the justification of Patrick’s punishment as found in the Bible. Discuss Helen’s response. 76-77

5. In the final hours before his execution, Pat shares his feelings which he had not expressed until then. What, about Pat’s disclosure, is humbling for Helen? 82

6. As Helen stays by Patrick for his last meal and last hours of his life, she recalls how the legal system, refusal by refusal, closed the gates to a stay, confirming for Pat and Helen his certain death. While the final steps are being taken to kill Pat, what is Helen feeling and how is she managing to help him die? 88-92

7. Moments before suffering his death, Patrick looks at the witnesses and delivers his last words. What effect did Sister Helen’s guidance have on his choice of words? 93

Chapter 5 Beyond the Execution: Putting the Pieces Together
1. What was accomplished with Pat’s execution? See Paul Phelps: 100-102
2. How is modern “designed” execution different from, say, that of Joan’s described in George Bernard’s *Saint Joan*? 101

3. What was Thurgood Marshall’s argument about the death penalty? 117

4. What evidence did Helen cite about execution not being a deterrent of the crime of murder? 110

**Part II Chapters 6-end (2 hours)**

**Chapter 6  Robert Lee Willie/Vernon and Elizabeth Harvey/October 84**

1. Women’s ministry to death row inmates is being questioned. Discuss Helen’s interview with the new warden, Frank Blackburn, in light of the controversy over her experience with Patrick Sonnier. 121-25

2. What does Helen commit to doing differently this time? 118

3. What are Helen’s impressions of Robert from their first meeting? 126-128

4. In her commitment to abolish the death penalty, Helen joins the march from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. How does she hope to educate the public with this activity? 128-31

5. Discuss Helen’s first meeting with the Harveys and how she relates to their tragedy and grief over the killing of their daughter: include their feelings about the perpetrator.132-40

**Chapter 7  Reflecting on her visit with the Harveys/ Her second visit with Robert**

1. Helen understands the Harvey’s desire for retribution. What are her thoughts about “measured” retribution to replace the death penalty? 142-44

2. What does Helen think her position and role might be as Robert tells her about his crimes? 145-46

3. What is Robert’s response when Helen speaks to him of reconciliation, taking responsibility, and asking forgiveness? 147

4. How does H’s story about W.C. Fields “finding the loopholes” seem amusing, yet significant to understanding Robert? 149-150

5. What does Helen discover when reading Robert’s files? (his juvenile records, his value among inmates, his public behavior, etc.) 151-54

6. Helen said to Robert, after listening to him tell more about himself, that she is “going to do her level best to invite him past some lines he’s drawn.” What does she mean? 149

7. In an appeal petition to the 5th Circuit Court to change the sentence, what are some of the findings Ronald Tabek will use? 154-55

8. Where did the title for Helen’s book come from? 156
Chapter 8 Helen’s third visit with Robert/Pardon Board (Howard Marsellus)
1. What are Robert’s arguments, concerning his being a political prisoner, which he wants to make a part of his presentation to the pardon board? 160-61

2. What “serious issues remain unsolved” in Robert’s case, will John Craft present to the Board? 165

3. What is in Helen’s presentation as she pleads for his life? What does she reply when Board Chair, Howard Marsellus, explains that none of the five members are responsible for anyone’s execution? 166-67

4. The prosecutor’s presentation is effective and, in part, very true. What is Helen referring to? 167

5. Discuss the conversation that Helen has with Howard Marsellus, years later, in terms of his now-made-public political corruption; how his loyalty to the governor let him compromise his moral values; his feelings about denying clemency in face of personal doubt, and his witnessing Baldwin’s execution. 169-74

Chapter 9 Robert’s Last Visits/Execution Date, December, 28
1. In the time left for her visits with Robert, what does Helen do to help him and his family prepare for his death? 175-79

2. Major Kendall Coody, supervisor on death row, visits with Helen: what are his feelings about his job? 180-81

3. What do we learn about Robert from his interviews with the media? 182-83 Later, how does he explain to Helen his feelings about Hitler, etc.? 187

4. What special request does Robert ask of Helen during her first visit with him in the Death House and why? 186

5. With a little over an hour before his execution, what brings Helen to say to him “You’re a real man now, Robert?” 208

6. Do you believe there was reconciliation with Robert’s last words to the Harvey’s?

Chapter 10 Beyond the Execution
1. In her appearance with Peter Jennings on ABC, what does Jennings ask and how does she answer? 214

2. What are Helen’s thoughts about the argument that dignity and nobility exist in our modern-day executions, done in secrecy, as compared to those in times past? 215-218

3. What if the innocent are executed? Discuss the Bedau/Rodelet study. 218-220

4. Who attends Robert’s funeral and how does his differ from Patrick’s? 221-2
Chapter 11 Helen’s ministry, for both the perpetrator and the victims’ families
1. What did Helen learn about the Harvey’s work with other victims’ families when she next visits them? 224-25

2. What does Helen believe will bring the Harvey’s the “peace” that Robert’s last words and execution did not provide? 226

3. Under what circumstances does Helen continue to meet the Harveys? 227-237

4. When she attends the Parents of Murdered Children’s meeting what does Helen learn? 232-34

5. What does Helen learn when she attends the victim’s group she helped organize in New Orleans, named Survive? 239


7. Sister Helen ends her book with a recounting of her reunion with Lloyd LeBlanc. Discuss how he has been able to reconcile, forgive, and reconsider the death penalty. 242-245

Initial Reaction and Feelings
1. Dead Man Walking is a very powerful book. What were some of the feelings and strong reactions you had while reading it?

2. Patrick Sonnier and Sister Prejean seem very different. What binds them together?

3. What scenes and images stand out for you as you think back over the book? What meanings do these have for you?

4. How did the story affect you?

To the Facilitator(s):

5. A suggested question prior to a 10-minute break: Have you known anyone who was in prison? On death row? Have you ever visited someone in prison?

Discussion questions:

6. Sister Helen said that she accepted Patrick Sonnier’s request to be his spiritual adviser because she wanted him to acknowledge his crime and she wanted to help him die with dignity. What did you feel when he confessed—better, worse, indifferent? Why?

7. Sister Helen found herself in an awkward position with the families of the victims. What was her responsibility to them?
8. Sonnier said that he had never known love prior to meeting Sister Helen and that he never expected that he would have to die to find love. Have you ever experienced or witnessed the redemptive power of a love that transcends all? How do you understand this phenomenon?

9. If you were a religious professional, could you serve as chaplain to a prisoner, especially one on death row? Why or why not?

10. Who should have the moral authority to decide who lives and who dies? Discuss.

11. When asked why she is counseling death row inmates Sister Prejean says “Every person is worth more than their worst act.” Do you agree with her? Why or why not? How is this statement central to Sister Prejean’s Character?

12. What do you think about Helen’s attempt to minister with “both sides”-with the murderer and the families of the murder victims?

13. What Changes do you see taking place in Patrick or Robert? What brought about these changes?

14. What new information about the death penalty did you learn?

15. What new understandings about the experiences of murder victims and their families did you gain?

16. What new understandings about the experiences and needs of the families of persons on death row did you gain?

17. Are there portions of the book with which you disagree? What do you disagree with or have trouble understanding? Why?

18. If you were serving as spiritual advisor to a person on death row, what would you consider to be your primary responsibility?

19. Sister Helen believes that a nun, as a servant of God, should serve the poor, and she sees her political activism as a way of serving the poor. Does Sister Helen fit your own conception of a nun? While reading the book, did you find yourself looking upon Sister Helen as a heroine?

The Book In Depth, Quoting the Text

20. Sister Helen Prejean looks back on the life and career of her father-- a good man who helped the black people in his segregated community-- and reflects that "systems inflict pain and hardship in people's lives and...being kind in an unjust system is not enough" [p. 7]. Do you find her judgment to be true?

21. Lloyd Leblanc asks Sister Helen, "How can you present Elmo Patrick Sonnier's side like this without ever having come to visit with me and my wife or the Bourques to hear our side?" [p. 64] Why do you think it never occurred to Sister Helen to do this? When she eventually becomes friendly with the victims' families, how, if at all, does it affect her ideas about the killers?

22. Sister Helen accuses Edwin Edwards of condoning the death penalty so as not to risk his political career. Do you believe that Edwards is doing his job as governor by carrying out the will of the people, or should he act upon his own convictions? Robert says, "This whole death penalty ain't nothing but politics" [p. 162]. What does he mean by this, and do you think he has a point?

23. "Look how shamefully secret this whole thing is," says the lawyer Millard Farmer. "If most people in Louisiana would see what the state did tonight, they would throw up" [p. 94]. Both Farmer and Sister Helen believe that performing executions in public would turn opinion
against capital punishment. Do you agree with them? Or do you think, like many, that witnessing executions would simply desensitize citizens about death?

24. Sister Helen quotes Albert Camus on the death penalty: "To assert...that a man must be absolutely cut off from society because he is absolutely evil amounts to saying that society is absolutely good, and no one in his right mind will believe this today" [p. 22]. Do you find this a persuasive argument? What about Camus's next assertion, that the death penalty is as evil as first degree murder because it is premeditated? Does that seem a reasonable comparison to you?

25. Sister Helen believes that "to claim to be apolitical or neutral in the face of...injustices would be, in actuality, to uphold the status quo-- a very political position to take, and on the side of the oppressors" [p. 5-6]. Do you agree with this assessment? Do you believe that there is in fact any such thing in today's world as being truly apolitical or above politics?

26. Sister Helen often speaks of "government" as though it were entirely separate and dissociated from the people themselves. Do you feel this is an accurate view of government, or do you feel that the government we have does reflect, at least in large part, the opinions of its citizens? If so, do you think that it is the government's job to educate and lead public opinion or to follow it?

27. Sister Helen asks Phelps his opinions on some questions that have been bothering her. "Aren't there, I argue, some rights fundamental to human beings-- such as the right not to be tortured or killed-- that everyone, including governments, must respect? Doesn't the moral foundation of a society erode if its government is allowed to treat these fundamental, nonnegotiable rights as some sort of privilege, which they take on themselves to dispense for good behavior or withdraw for bad behavior?" [p. 103] What are your opinions on these issues?

28. Do you agree with Sister Helen that, according to Amnesty International's definition of torture, Pat Sonnier was tortured?

29. Sister Helen describes the legal system as "a system of gates that shut like one-way turnstiles, and you can't go back once you've come out" [p. 45]. The long appeals process would seem to ensure a fair trial for all, but in actuality the prisoner's success within it depends upon how good a lawyer he can afford to hire. Has the experience of reading Dead Man Walking changed your views of the American legal system, and, if so, in what way?

CLOSURE

Closing thoughts: Although set in a religious context, Dead Man Walking is not as much about religion as it is about ministry—being there for those in need, even in the face of evil, even when the shadow side of the human personality seems to prevail. It is the story of one woman's journey into the soul of another person and the redemptive power of love between two extraordinary people—one who had lost touch with what it means to be fully human, and the other, who helps him to remember. Is this not what ministry is—soul meeting soul and moving together toward something greater?

In closing the session(s), you may want to help the group summarize or reflect upon the themes or important points that emerged during your discussion. It will also be helpful to ask whether any individuals, or if the group as a whole, is moved to take further steps in regard to the issues raised by the book.
Additional Questions for Judeo-Christian Discussion and Bible Study

30. The concept of equal retribution "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19:21) was actually given in order to control the all-out vengeance that had taken place up to that time. Rather than prescribing that retribution ought to take place, it limits the response to no more than the original offense. Does this awareness make a difference in the way you would apply this Scripture to modern-day capital punishment?

31. Although the early biblical writings call for death as punishment for a wide variety of offenses, the Rabbis made such punishment nearly impossible through biblical interpretation and Talmudic law. Laws regarding evidence and eyewitness testimony were so strict as to impose a standard of proof almost impossible to meet. Do you wish that our society would enact such strict standards to guide the application of the death penalty? Why or why not?

32. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations has stated: "We believe that there is no crime for which the taking of human life by society is justified, and that it is the obligation of society to evolve other methods in dealing with crime." Suppose your discussion group were a decision-making body with the responsibility to adopt, reject, or amend this statement. Take some time for discussion and try to reach an agreement on the decision your group would make.

33. How does Ezekiel 33:11 apply to the question of capital punishment? "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live."

34. In your faith tradition, how important is the question of guilt and innocence in determining the rightness of capital punishment?

35. In the Scriptures, we find that some of the heroes among God's people were guilty of murder at some point in their lives. What examples can you think of, and how did God deal with their offenses?

36. Mr. Percy, Hope's Father says "(Sonnier or Willie?) is God's Mistake!" Would you agree? What causes human beings, created by God, to commit such inhuman acts as rape and murder?

37. If a murderer asks forgiveness, does God forgive? Should we? If we do forgive, what impact does our forgiveness have on the kind of sentence we feel is appropriate for that person?

38. How does the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was executed as a criminal affect our understanding of capital punishment from a Christian perspective?

39. What is the difference between forgiving and forgetting?
Additional Questions for Issue-Focused Discussion

40. Were your beliefs regarding capital punishment changed by reading this book? If so, how?

41. Did you find yourself supporting Patrick Sonnier’s execution, or hoping that his life would be spared? If he had been an African American whose trial was tainted by racism, how would that have affected your beliefs about the rightness of his sentence?

42. Early in Patrick’s relationship with Helen, he tells her that he didn’t kill anybody, but ultimately he confesses his real involvement in the crime. If Patrick’s original story to Helen had been true that he had been present and had participated in the crime by threatening the two young people but had not killed anyone how would that affect your view of whether he should live or die?

43. We are not told what the alternative to the death penalty was in Louisiana, but if you knew that the alternative punishment was life imprisonment with no possibility of parole, would you support the death penalty for Patrick or Robert, or the alternative? What if the alternative were life with parole possible only after a minimum of twenty-five years in prison?

44. Can a killer be rehabilitated or redeemed? Why or why not? Discuss the reason for your preferred language (rehabilitation vs. redemption); how do you distinguish the two?

45. Many people say that criminals cannot be rehabilitated or redeemed. Do you believe this? Why or why not? How do your conscience, values, theology, and belief inform your views about the death penalty?

46. The people responsible for carrying out executions rationalize their actions by saying that they are just doing their jobs. Are men like Phelps, Rabelais, and Blackburn justified in believing that they are doing the correct thing? What does the fact of the executioner's legal anonymity indicate to you? Is Sister Helen correct to compare this complicity in the execution of criminals with the obedience shown by the servants of the Nazi regime in carrying out their terrible murders?

47. A greatly disproportionate number of the prisoners executed are black. Do you think the South's history contributed to this inequity, and, if so, how? How does that history continue to mold the lives of black and white citizens? How has it led to hellish environments like St. Thomas?

48. Do you believe victims' families should have a role or a voice in the determination of sentence in a capital case, or in the clemency process? Why or why not?

49. How does healing come to families grieving the loss of a murdered child? How can we be helpful in bringing healing?

50. How does healing occur for the family members of someone convicted of a capital crime, or executed by the state? What is our role in assisting with their healing?

51. Which arguments did you find more persuasive: Sister Helen's against the death penalty, or the Harveys' in favor of it? It is true that the Harveys' loss has hardened them against the idea of mercy; it is also true that Sister Helen has never lost a family member to a violent crime. If you were in the Harveys' position, do you think that you, too, would support the death penalty?

52. How do the lives, expectations, and attitudes of the members of Survive differ from those of the members of the group founded by the Harveys? What do these differences tell us about the lives of black Louisianans as opposed to white ones?
53. Texas, the state with the highest level of executions, recently rejected the passage of Life-Without-Parole sentences. Was this sentence option rejected as a means for maintaining the death sentence? Should it be a guaranteed option?

54. Because the race of the victim is the largest predictor of whether the perpetrator will receive the death sentence, does the death penalty represent the social value we place on different racial groups? Do we attribute greater social value to white victims with stronger sentences, while attributing less social value to black victims with weaker sentences? Is this a form of racism?

**Facts and Statistics regarding the death penalty**

**Statistics and Use**

Since the Death Penalty was reinstated in 1976, the U.S. has executed 1,001 persons as of the end of 2005.

808 of those executions were in the South; 445 of those were in Texas and Virginia alone

The US has executed 22 persons who committed crimes as juveniles; in March of 2004, the Supreme Court struck down the death penalty for juveniles

11 women have been executed since 1976

Support for the death penalty has dropped from 80% in 1994 to 64% today.

Public support for the death penalty drops even further when life without the possibility of parole is an option.

Currently 12 states, plus the District of Columbia, have ruled the use of the death penalty unconstitutional. The death penalty statues of New York and Kansas were declared unconstitutional.

**Race and Victim**

58% of all those executed were white, and 34% were black

80% of the victims of these crimes were white, and only 14% were black.

Only 12 white persons have been executed for killing a black person

204 black persons have been executed for killing a white person

The odds of receiving a death penalty are 350% higher if the victim is white. Race of the victim is the best predictor of whether the death penalty will be awarded
Researchers revealed that the chances of a death sentence in cases with a black defendant and white victim increase when there are five or more white males on the jury, and the chances decrease when there is at least one black male on the jury. These jurors have very different perspectives regarding lingering doubt, defendant remorsefulness, and defendant future dangerousness.

Exonerations

Since 1973, over 150 persons have been released from death row because of evidence demonstrating their innocence.

Deterrence

The South, with the highest execution rate also has the highest murder rate at 6.7 per 100,000

The Northeast, with the lowest execution rate (most states do not permit the death penalty) has the lowest murder rate at 4.2 per 100,000.

84% of all experts on the death penalty reject the notion that the death penalty serves as a deterrent to murder.

After Canada eliminated the death penalty in 1976, there murder rate fell by 23% in the decades following. It is currently at 1.8 per 100,000.

Police officers rated the death penalty as the least effective arsenal for reducing violent crime. Furthermore, police officers are most likely to be killed on the job in states that employ the death penalty.

A study in New York analyzing data from 1907 to 1963 found that the murder rate increased in the months following an execution. This has been consistent with the “brutalizing” effect cited by social psychologists in which brutality is increasingly viewed as a legitimate means for solving disputes following executions. In other words, the state leads public behavior by example.

Cost

In California, the death penalty system costs taxpayers $114 million per year beyond the costs of keeping convicts locked up for life. California taxpayers have paid more than $250 million to execute 11 persons.

In Kansas, the costs of the death penalty are 70% more than the cost of life in prison.

In North Carolina, taxpayers pay more than $2.16 million dollars above and beyond the cost of life in prison.

In Texas, a death penalty case costs an average of $2.3 million dollars, about 3 times the amount of life in prison.
Investigation costs are 3 times greater, trial costs are 16 times greater, and appeal costs are 21 times greater, making it prohibitive for some counties to seek the death penalty.

**Arbitrariness of Defense and Jury Deliberation:**

From 1995-2000, 42% of the federal cases submitted to the Attorney General for review came from just 5 of the 94 federal districts.

In Washington state, one-fifth of the 84 people who have faced execution in the past 20 years were represented by lawyers who had been, or were later, disbarred, suspended or arrested. (Overall, the state’s disbarment rate for attorneys is less than 1%)

In North Carolina, at least 16 death row inmates, including 3 who were executed, were represented by lawyers who have been disbarred or disciplined for unethical or criminal conduct.

In Texas, about one in four death row inmates has been defended by lawyers who have been reprimanded, placed on probation, suspended or banned from practicing law by the State Bar.

In Alabama, about 40 of the approximately 185 death row inmates – some within five months of filing deadlines for state appeals – do not have counsel.

Interviews with jurors found that approximately 50% of those interviewed decided what the penalty should be before the sentencing phase of the trial. This is before they have heard penalty phase evidence or received the instructions on how to make the punishment decision.

Researchers found that jury selection methods resulted in disproportionately guilt-prone and death-prone juries. Those opposed to the death penalty will be eliminated for jury selection in death penalty cases.

The study found that 45% of jurors failed to understand that they were allowed to consider any mitigating evidence during the sentencing phase of the trial. In addition, two-thirds of jurors failed to realize that unanimity was not required for findings of mitigation.

**Victims and the appeals process:**

The average time spent between sentencing and execution is 11.2 years.

Each year, only 0.2% of those on death row are executed.

Only about 16% of those initially given the death penalty are ever actually executed.

Evidence suggests that victims in which the perpetrator is given the death sentence rather than life without parole suffer more long-term emotional trauma by reliving the events through the continual appeals process, which most often leads to a commutation of the death sentence.
Victims opposed to the death penalty report being systematically excluded from the appeals process, and have been designated as proponents for the perpetrator rather than the victim by the court.

In one case, the husband and daughter of the victim were not allowed to speak during the sentencing phase of the trial because they opposed the death penalty, whereas the sister who supported the death penalty, was allowed to read a statement to the jury.

**International and the World Community:**

China, Iran, the United States, Viet Nam, and Saudi Arabia were responsible for 95 percent of all known executions.

More than half of all countries around the world have abolished the death penalty.

United States is the only First World country to retain the death penalty.

**Selected Bible Passages for a Discussion of the Death Penalty**


If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid. (Deut. 21:18-21, NRSV)

**Genesis 4:8, 13-15** -- Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.... Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your face; I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me." Then the Lord said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a seven-fold vengeance." And the Lord put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

**Genesis 9:6** -- [God said to Noah] Whoever sheds the blood of a human by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

**Psalm 8:4-5** -- What are human beings that you art mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

**Exodus 20:13** -- You shall not murder.
Deuteronomy 5:17 -- You shall not murder.

Exodus 21:23-25 -- If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19-20 -- Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered.

Deuteronomy 19:21 -- Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Matthew 5:21-22 -- You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire.

Matthew 5:38-41 -- You have heard it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Luke 6:27, 37 -- Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.... Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

John 3:17 -- God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Romans 5:8 -- God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Romans 12:17-19, 21 -- Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." [Deut 32:35] ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 13:1-5—Every subject must obey the government authorities, for no authority exists apart from God; the existing authorities have been constituted by God. Hence anyone who resists authority is opposing the divine order, and the opposition will bring judgment on themselves. Magistrates are no terror to an honest man, though they are to a bad man. If you would avoid being alarmed at the government authorities, lead an honest life and you will be commended for it; the magistrate is God’s servant for your benefit. But if you do wrong, you may well be alarmed; a magistrate does not wield the power of the sword for nothing, he is God’s servant for the infliction of divine vengeance upon evildoers. You must be obedient,
therefore, not only to avoid the divine vengeance but as a matter of conscience, for the same reason as you pay taxes…..

2 Corinthians 5:19 -- In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

1 Thessalonians 5:14-15 -- ...admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

1 Peter 3:8-9 -- ...have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called -- that you might inherit a blessing.

Leviticus 19:18 -- [And the Lord said to Moses] You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Romans 13:8-10 -- Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

See also Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27

Psalm 25:7, 11 -- Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord! ... For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great.

Psalm 130:3-4 -- If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

Ezekiel 33:11 -- As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways.

Matthew 18:21-22 -- Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

1 John 1:8-10 -- If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
You’ve Read and Discussed the Book.

Now, Witness the Play and Meet Sister Helen Prejean.

The Adams State College Theatre program has been selected to participate in the national Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project. Partnering with Sister Helen Prejean and the Death Penalty Discourse Center, Adams State is among the first schools in the country selected to present the powerful new play Dead Man Walking. Adapted from the award-winning book and film, actor and director Tim Robbins has written an extraordinary drama that explores issues of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The production will be in performance April 21, 22, 27-30 at 8 p.m., April 26 at 12:00 p.m., and April 30 at 2:00 p.m.

Dead Man Walking is an example of a form of theatre known as Docudrama. With the goal of examining issues that challenge society, recent docudramas have explored war, racism, and justice. Some of you may have seen ASC Theatre’s production of another docudrama titled The Laramie Project that dealt with homophobia and hate crimes. These plays differ from traditional dramas in the following ways:

1. Docudramas use actual words of real people to form the text of the script. Interviews, newspaper articles, television journalism, transcripts from Congress, trials, etc. are the primary documents with which a playwright works. In short, docudrama is the theatre version of the film documentary. In the case of Dead Man Walking, the play is based upon the real life experiences of Sister Helen Prejean as expressed in her book.

2. Docudramas are cinematic in style because they often incorporate multimedia staging techniques such as voiceovers, projections, and video. These plays are staged with minimal scenery so that the words and experiences of the actual individuals are highlighted.

3. Docudramas consist of a series of short scenes that form a mosaic in which the “big picture” of the play is seen. Because of the quick transitions between scenes, these plays use a small company of actors who play multiple roles. In Dead Man Walking, the 38 characters will be played by a company of 12 actors.

4. Docudramas present the words of multiple characters so that truth emerges not from a single viewpoint but from multiple points of view. As you have discovered in your own Book Club discussions, the death penalty is a complex issue and this play gives voice to the diversity of perspectives that exist in our society. Of course, the book and play are about much more than the death penalty. It is as much about the role of reconciliation and forgiveness in our daily lives as it is about our system of justice. It is an amazing story about the power of redemption. These viewpoints are also expressed in the play.
The docudrama offers an evening of theatre unlike any other. It can be intense, emotional, provocative, and thrilling.

As part of your *Dead Man Walking* Book Club experience, plan to attend the ASC Theatre production. If you come to the play on opening night, come for the pre-show reception for Sister Helen and stay for the post-show talk back with her. Bring your own perspectives and questions for Sister Helen, the play’s director, and cast. Attend the other events that are planned such as the *Dead Man Walking* Art Exhibition, Film Series, and the one-day symposium that examines how different religions approach the topic of forgiveness and reconciliation. Add your voice to this discussion about justice in our society, the need for forgiveness, and the possibility of redemption.

For more information, please contact Dr. John Taylor at 587-7382 or jhtaylor@adams.edu.

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**This guide was adapted by the SLV DMW Theater Project from various materials including:**

**Dead Man Walking Discussion Guide** by Bob Gross
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100 Witherspoon Street, Louisville, KY 40202-1396, (502) 569-5803

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Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project

Project Materials Order Form

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* Note: You may either buy the number of printed packets you need, or buy a single CD and make as many copies of it as you require.

Please address orders and/or checks to:
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We will pay for UPS Ground shipping of scripts, books and packets. Contact Emile Netzhammer to make arrangements if you need faster shipping or if you have any other questions regarding your order, at (504) 467-3545 or emilen32@aol.com.

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We will do everything we can to help make your participation in the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project a positive and valuable educational experience. Best of success

Adams State College
Dead Man Walking Book Club Project