



AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

# WINDOWS

SUMMER 2008

## **Micah 6:8**

**Former Death Row chaplain on capital punishment  
The Stewpot at First Presbyterian Church, Dallas  
Living humbly: a GA sermon by Cynthia Rigby**

# *A Change of Heart*



BY JANIS WILLIAMS

Some transformations happen over a long period of time, the result of deep thought and accumulated experience. Others take place in an instant, when new light is cast on a problem. Presbyterian minister Carroll Pickett's (MDiv'57) conversion from death penalty advocate to passionate opponent of state-sponsored executions had its genesis in a dramatic experience that was followed by years of soul-searching.

In 1980, when Pickett resigned his position as pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, to become chaplain at "The Walls," the Huntsville unit of the Texas prison system, he rarely thought about the death penalty. "Odd as it sounds, the subject never came up," he says. "Huntsville was a prison town, and the prison dominated everything there. But when my family and I moved to Huntsville in 1967, there had been no executions since capital punishment was outlawed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1964. Death row was very small and to tell you the truth, I'd never discussed the issue in seminary or any of my pastorates. The death row warden was a member of my church, and even he never mentioned capital punishment to me."

If anyone had asked, though, Pickett would have admitted that he favored the death penalty, for two reasons. First, his grandfather, a farmer and sheep rancher, had been murdered in a small Texas town near Lampasas. "My daddy was twelve when Grandfather was killed. Over the years, nobody told us how Grandfather died. But I found out when I was in seminary that he had been murdered in Lampasas one Saturday after an argument over a pool game. The other guy followed my grandfather out of the pool hall and just killed him, in front of several witnesses."

Asked whether his grandfather's killer was punished, Pickett said, "No. He was well known in Lampasas, so his friends got a local doctor to write up a death certificate saying that Grandfather had died of a heart attack. When I heard this story, I asked my father if it was true. 'Yes,' he answered. 'But we don't talk about it.' And he never mentioned it again, not to anybody. I've always assumed that was where Daddy got the attitude that capital pun-

ishment was a good thing, an attitude he passed down to me."

Pickett's view was reinforced in July 1974 when a hostage situation erupted at the prison. He was called to the office of the warden, who told him that prisoners were holding several employees inside the prison library—including two women who were members of Pickett's church. What followed was the longest prison siege in U.S. history, lasting eleven days and eleven nights. Pickett spent those tense days with the families of the hostages. In the end, the two women were killed, along with one of the prisoners. A second prisoner committed suicide, and a third was captured. With this, Pickett's support of the death penalty hardened.

Two years later, the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, and the following year, 1977, a resolution against state-sponsored executions was brought to Brazos Presbytery, which encompassed Houston and environs, and included Huntsville. Pickett and members of his congregation spoke passionately in favor of capital punishment. "My church members had been killed only recently," he says. "I believed in retribution."

This belief, however, was more theoretical than practical.

"Even when the death penalty was reinstated, we didn't think of it as affecting us at the prison," he says. "I knew there were guys on death row, but so many churches were opposed to capital punishment that I was sure somebody would stop it."

The issue moved from the abstract to the personal for Chaplain Pickett on December 6, 1982. On that day he was informed that he would be accompanying Charles Brooks, the first person in the United States to be executed by lethal injection, to the death chamber. "The warden instructed me to show up at 6:00 in the morning on the day Charlie was scheduled to die. I had never met him, and I made the decision not to read his file. I didn't want to know what he had done. I just wanted to be there with him so he wouldn't die alone.

"We spent the day talking. I learned he had become a Black Muslim in prison, but that he used to be Methodist. Charlie didn't disagree with Christianity, but

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he said the Muslims had helped him more while he was incarcerated. We talked about Jesus, and we read the Bible. He wanted to talk about the Sermon on the Mount. At one point he asked me, pointing to the Bible I held in my hand, 'Where does Jesus say it's all right to execute people?'

"'Nowhere,' I said. 'It's not in there.'"

Pickett stayed with Brooks until the drugs were administered and the prisoner drew his last breath. Then, weary, he went home and talked about the ordeal into a tape recorder. As he recorded his thoughts, and in the days following, the chaplain realized that something had happened to him in that execution chamber.

"I started thinking about the death penalty from a point of view of fairness," he says. "The more I studied, read, thought about Jesus' words, and prayed, the less justification I could find. Moses came down from the mountain and said, 'Thou shalt not kill,' as one of the Ten Commandments. 'You have heard that it has been said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you ...'" and Jesus went on to explain that as Christians we don't retaliate. We turn the other cheek. We do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

"After I watched Charlie Brooks die, it began to dawn on me that this was not God's way."

Yet during the next fifteen years, Carroll Pickett walked alongside ninety-four additional death row inmates, stayed with each in a steel cell through their final hours, watched them eat their last meal, took messages to their families, listened to them talk, or sat with them in silence. He helped each doomed man draft his

final statement. He answered any question they asked him with honesty. Will it hurt? How long will it take? How many straps? How many needles? What's that sound outside the cell? And, as he had been instructed, the chaplain persuaded each man not to fight death.

"Fighting creates a horrible death," he says. "I hear they've had a lot of inmates fight since I left, and it's a nightmare. You can't put a 250-pound man to death if he's thrashing about. That leads to bloodshed. But none of mine fought. All of my companions in the death house came to acceptance."

After each execution, Pickett talked into his tape recorder. "Since I've been in that death house, I can see the power, presence, justice, and fairness of God," he said after one execution. "It's counter-intuitive, but God doesn't tell lawyers and D.A.s how to do their work. He doesn't answer every prayer on the petitioner's schedule. But neither does he abandon people at their time of death."

In addition to everything else, Pickett came to the conclusion that capital punishment does

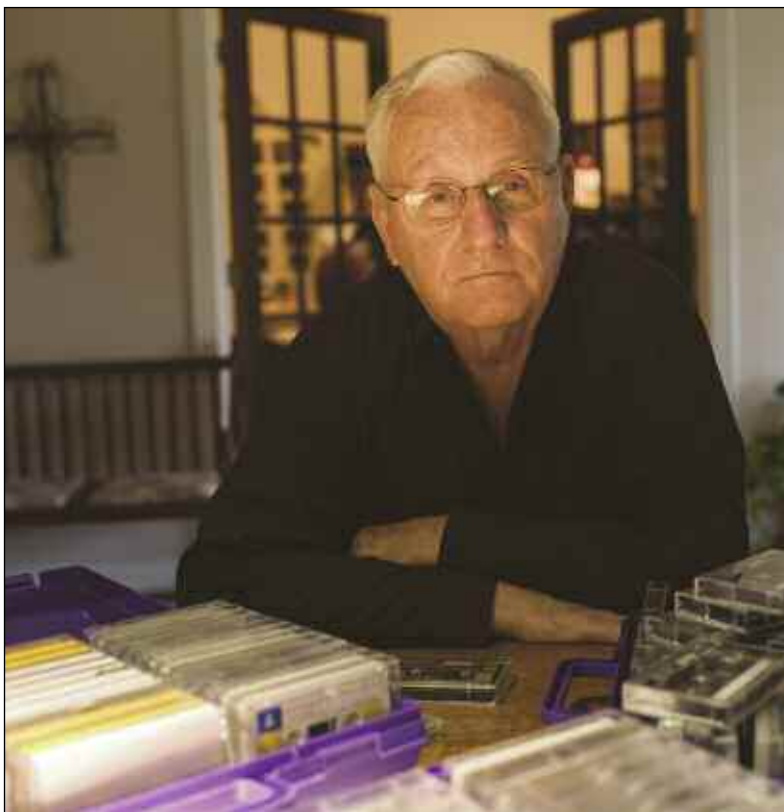
nothing to deter crime. "It absolutely doesn't work," he insists. "The crime rate keeps going up, no matter how many people we kill. And another thing: lethal injection hurts. It hurts. It's cruel and unusual punishment."

Asked how he could continue to be a death house chaplain after his change of heart, Pickett replies, "How I can be a part of something to which I object? Well, I object to cancer, but I don't turn my back on people with cancer. I developed what I called a Ministry of Presence.

"Just being there. Nobody should die alone.

"But I'll tell you this. My experience in the death house changed me completely." ▲

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Kevin Horn/IFC

Kevin Horan/IFC



## “At the Death House Door”

In 2002, using his tapes as building blocks, and working with a writer named Carlton Stowers, Carroll Pickett published a book called *Within These Walls: Memoirs of a Death House Chaplain* through St. Martin's Press. A couple of years later, the book came to the attention of two reporters from the *Chicago Tribune*, Steve Mills, and Maury Possley, who were writing a story about Carlos DeLuna—a young Texan who had been executed for a crime that Pickett was convinced he had not committed.

The reporters visited Pickett about that case, and subsequently contacted a Chicago documentary film company called Kartemquin about doing a documentary of Pickett's life. Filmmakers Steve James (“Hoop Dreams”) and Peter Gilbert (“Vietnam: Long Time Coming”) produced “At the Death House Door” for the Independent Film Channel, IFC. It debuted at the South by Southwest film festival in March 2008.

“After the film debuted,” Pickett says, “we started traveling all over the country, making appearances, showing the film, conducting question-and-answer sessions. Between March 5 and June 23, we had 375 interviews on radio and television stations, and with newspaper and magazine reporters. We even appeared before the House Judiciary Committee in Washington, D.C., at the request of the National Coalition Against the Death Penalty. The IFC set up all these interviews.”

**Non-profit organizations interested in hosting a screening and discussion of “At the Death House Door” can get more information from [www.ifc.com/atthedeathhousedoor](http://www.ifc.com/atthedeathhousedoor). The film is available for download (\$3.99) on iTunes; check [www.ifc.com](http://www.ifc.com) for re-broadcast schedule and [www.kartemquin.com](http://www.kartemquin.com) for the DVD release date. Pickett's “Fresh Air” interview with Terry Gross is available on [npr.org](http://npr.org). For a list of the Reverend Pickett's upcoming appearances, e-mail [budanne@hotmail.com](mailto:budanne@hotmail.com).**