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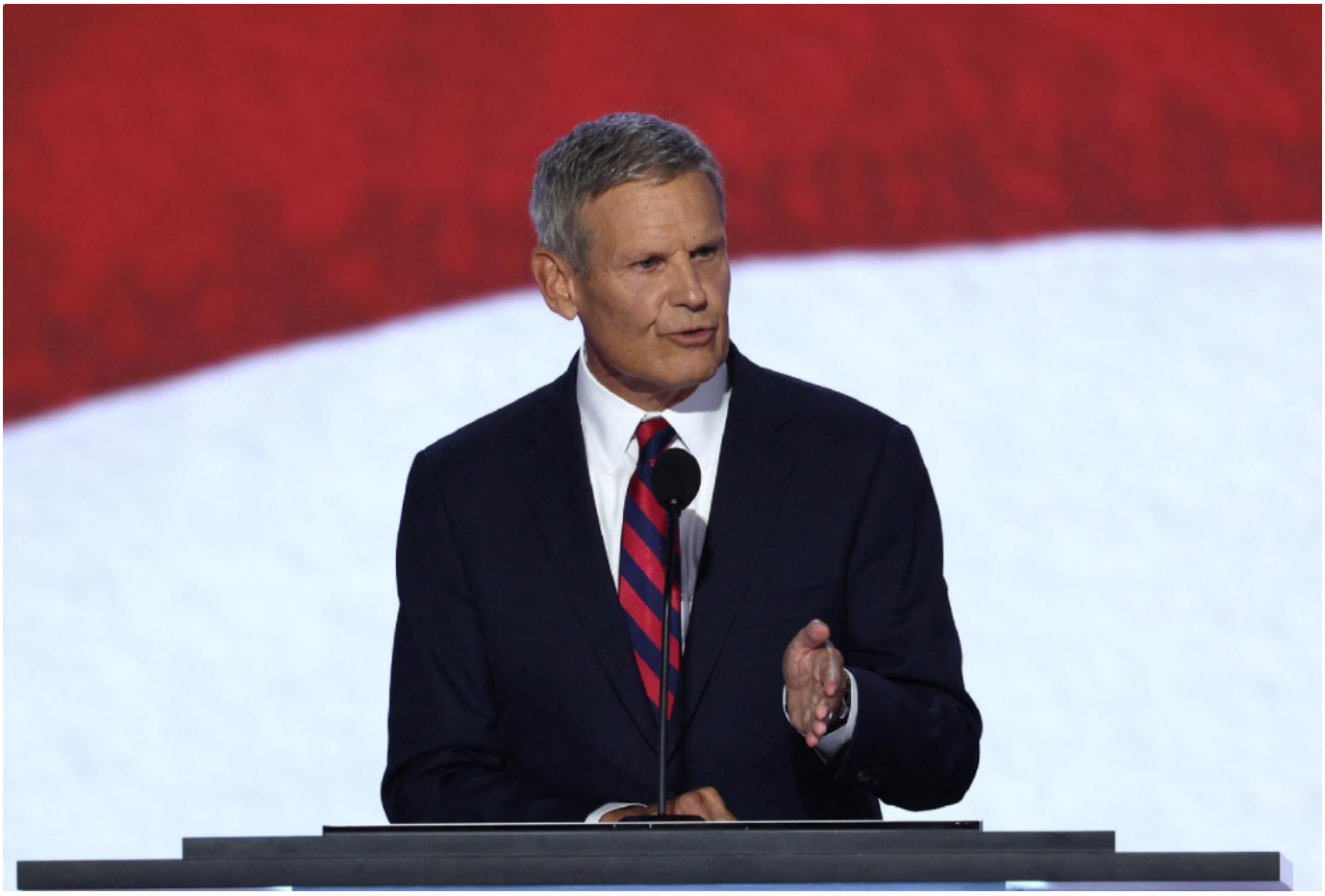
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Tennessee Christian faith leaders in early December called on the state of Tennessee and Republican Gov. Bill Lee to stop all executions.

Among speakers at a Dec. 8 press conference in Nashville was Rick Musacchio, executive director of the Tennessee Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's three Catholic bishops — Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville, Bishop David P. Talley of Memphis and Bishop Mark Beckman of Knoxville.

Musacchio said the church has continuously stated her long opposition to executions and the death penalty.

"That opposition is based on the Catholic Church's longstanding social teaching rooted on the foundation of the Gospel, which respects the dignity of human life from conception until natural death," Musacchio said. "The death penalty is simply an affront to that Gospel value."



Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee is pictured in a July 16, 2024, photo. Tennessee's Catholic bishops and other faith leaders in a joint press conference Dec. 8, 2025, called on Lee to end the death penalty in the state. (OSV News/Reuters/Mike Segar)

The faith leaders also called on Lee to halt the execution of Harold Wayne Nichols, scheduled for Dec. 11. Nichols was convicted of raping and murdering 21-year-old Karen Pulley in 1988. But the execution took place as scheduled.

The press conference, held at the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Nashville, was organized and hosted by Tennesseans for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, or TADP, and also featured Presbyterian, Baptist, United Methodist faith leaders in Tennessee, as well as the Rev. Stacy Rector, executive director of TADP; Jasmine Woodson, executive director of Tennessee Conservatives Concerned About the Death Penalty; and Nichols' spiritual adviser.

After Nichols was executed, TADP said in a statement that the organization was "heartbroken."

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"What has changed with his execution? Nothing ... only more violence, more victims, more death," it said. "Thanks to all of you who wrote, called, attended events, shared social media, and made your voices heard. We know that the death penalty is a morally bankrupt and failed system that must be dismantled. Together we will keep doing everything we can to ensure its end."

In his remarks at the press conference, Musacchio noted that Pope Leo XIV — as well as his predecessors St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis — has expressed opposition to the death penalty.

"Most recently, Pope Leo XIV, the first American pope, spoke very clearly that one cannot call themselves pro-life, opposing abortion, but allow for the death penalty and executions," Musacchio said. "It is simply an incompatible arrangement and an inaccurate understanding of Gospel teaching."

In November the Tennessee Catholic Conference issued an official statement from the bishops calling for an end to the death penalty in their state.



The Tennessee Capitol in Nashville is seen April 11, 2023, in an aerial view. Tennessee's Catholic bishops and other faith leaders in a joint press conference Dec. 8, 2025, called on Republican Gov. Bill Lee to end the death penalty in the state. (OSV News/Reuters/Cheney Orr)

The death penalty extinguishes the chance for repentance and redemption. It closes the door that mercy would open. True justice protects life, even as it punishes wrongdoing," the bishops said Nov. 10.

"A culture of life cannot coexist with the machinery of death. To oppose the death penalty is to affirm hope — that no one, even a person who has committed a grave crime, is beyond the reach of grace," they said. "God's judgment, not our retribution, has the final word."

"We pray for Karen and for her family and friends," they added, referring to Nichols' victims. "With even more executions planned for 2026, we call for a moratorium on the practice and for the abolition of the death penalty under state law."