

The film “Dead Man Walking” is an excellent tool for initiating discussion about the death penalty. It is well known for its balanced portrayal of the issue and has been acclaimed by people with differing personal beliefs about the death penalty. “Dead Man Walking” can be found at most movie rental stores. Rent it a day in advance or reserve a copy to make sure that it is available for your discussion.

Discussion Guide for “Dead Man Walking” Introduction

“Dead Man Walking” is a highly acclaimed film that raises questions about capital punishment in a compelling way. It is based on the book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* by Helen Prejean, CSJ. In it, Sister Helen describes her insights and her experiences with ministering to men facing execution, and, later, to the families of murder victims. The film allows audiences to see the reality of murder and punishment from the viewpoints of death row inmates, their families, the families of the victims, and prison officials.

Guidelines for Discussion

A discussion of “Dead Man Walking” can be a rich - as well as intense - learning experience. The issues of violent crime and the death penalty often stir strong feelings and deeply held opinions. The film presents these issues in an emotionally powerful way through the personal stories of its characters. Consequently, it is important to consider the emotional dynamics of any discussion session.

- As you begin the session, make sure that the group has a clear understanding of the time frame and the purpose of the discussion. Be particularly clear about whether you will be discussing the film, the issues that it raises, or both. If this is not clear, and if participants come in with conflicting expectations, the resulting discussion may be frustrating for some members of the group, as well as for you as the facilitator.
- Establish some ground rules for the discussion, especially if you expect significant differences of opinion. Be aware that your tone and approach as a facilitator will go a long way toward setting the tone of the session. Invite participants to adopt the following guidelines:
 - Speak the truth and be as open as you can about your own thoughts and beliefs.
 - Be respectful toward others who may hold differing beliefs.
 - Listen actively and refrain from interrupting other participants.
 - Speak in terms of your own beliefs, experiences, or feelings, rather than blaming or criticizing others.
- If the discussion takes place directly after viewing the film, 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 watching “Dead Man Walking.”

Film Discussion Guides

- Consider ways to encourage participation by all 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 room to give each person an opportunity to speak.
 - With a large group: Break into pairs or small groups of three to five people. If it seems useful and time permits, you can ask each group to report briefly to the larger group on some insights or important points from their discussion.
 - The facilitator can simply say, “I would like to hear from some of you who have not said much so far.”

Discussion Questions Initial Reactions and Feelings

- “Dead Man Walking” is a very powerful film. What feelings and/or reactions did you have while viewing it?
- What scenes and images in the film stand out for you? What meanings do these have for you?
- How did the film affect you?

About the Film

- What do you think of Sister Helen’s attempt to minister to both sides - to the murderer and to the families of the murder victims?
- What changes did you see taking place in Matthew Poncelot during the film? What brought about these changes?
- What new information about the death penalty did you learn from viewing this film?
- What new understandings about the experiences and needs of murder victims’ families did you gain from viewing the film?
- What new understandings about the experiences and needs of the families of those on death row did you gain from viewing the film?
- Sister Helen’s family presents the argument that her community of faith would benefit more if she were to help “honest” people. Do you agree? How can serving those on death row or their families benefit your community of faith?

About the Issues Raised

- How were your own beliefs regarding capital punishment affected by watching this film?
- Did you find yourself supporting Matthew Poncelot’s execution, or hoping that his life would be spared?
- Early in Matthew’s relationship with Sister Helen, he tells her that he didn’t kill anybody, but ultimately he confesses his real involvement in the crime. If Matthew’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?
- We are not told of alternatives to the death penalty 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 Matthew Poncelot or the alternative? Why?
- Do you believe victims’ families should have a role or a voice in determining the sentence in a capital case? Should they have a role in the clemency process? Why or why not?
- How does healing come to families grieving the loss of a murdered child? How can faith communities help promote healing?
- 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?
- Many death penalty abolitionists believe that capital punishment denies the humanity of the individual and the possibility of rehabilitation. How do you feel about a convicted murderer’s capacity for rehabilitation?

Closing

In closing the session, 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 the group as a whole, have been moved to take further steps in regard to the issues raised in the film. Some people might want to read the book, *Dead Man Walking*, by Sister Helen Prejean (see p. 66 for information).

These questions were adapted from a discussion guide by Bob Gross, originally published by the Criminal Justice Program of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The original version is available for free from Presbyterian Distribution Service, (800) 524-2612, PDS #72-630-96- 715.