

ERLC chief Leatherwood urges red flag law in Tennessee

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—In late March, Brent Leatherwood got what he called “the most terrifying call a parent could imagine.”

There was a shooter at the Covenant School in Nashville, Tenn., where his three children attend.

His children survived the attack. Three of their schoolmates did not. Three of the staff at the school also were killed.

But Leatherwood’s personal connection to the school seems to have translated into a professional decision.

Letter to Tennessee lawmakers

Identifying himself as a Covenant parent, a gun owner and the current president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Leatherwood—a former Tennessee Republican Party official—wrote to the state’s political leaders last week urging them to act to [prevent gun violence](#).

In a letter addressed to Tennessee’s lieutenant governor, the speaker of its House of Representatives and every legislator, Leatherwood said God had given them the responsibility “to oppose evil and protect innocent lives.”

He urged them to act in support of a proposal from Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee to pass a “red flag” law to remove guns from people who are a danger to themselves or others.

“This proposal values life, both the life of the person in distress and anyone who may become a target in their anguish,” Leatherwood wrote.

“Removing their ability to inflict harm on themselves or others is in line with our state’s strong commitment to protecting the sanctity of life.”

‘Never an excuse for inaction’

Leatherwood, who declined an interview request, told legislators and other state leaders they could respect the Second Amendment and still protect children. He thanked legislators for a new law that allows private schools to hire police as school resource officers.

The governor signed that law days after the shooting. He also signed an executive order allowing more background checks on firearm sales.

In Leatherwood’s letter, he cited the Bible, specifically a passage from Genesis about every person being made in God’s image, and Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Yes, it is true we live in a world tainted by terrible acts and deeds, but that is never an excuse for inaction,” he wrote.

“While it may not prevent every instance of this sort of violence, it will prevent some, and thereby save innocent lives. That should be more than enough reason to advance this proposal.”

‘Minimize the threat of gun violence’

Southern Baptists have passed resolutions in recent years calling for action on the pandemic of mass shootings in the United States. In 2018, they passed a resolution in the wake of a mass shooting at a Texas church in Sutherland Springs, calling on “federal, state, and local authorities to

implement preventative measures that would reduce gun violence and mass shooting.”

A 2022 resolution, which Leatherwood quoted in his letter, also called for action.

“We earnestly pray for our local, state, and federal leaders to recognize the seriousness of the ongoing threat of mass shootings throughout our society and to take concrete steps, towards solutions that uphold the dignity and value of every human life, especially the most vulnerable among us, and to minimize the threat of gun violence throughout our society,” the resolution read.

Passing gun legislation in Tennessee, where evangelicals are one of the largest faith groups, is complicated. State leaders have worked for years to loosen gun regulations—including allowing people over 21 to carry concealed weapons without a permit.

The shooting at Covenant has led to large protests at the statehouse, by students and by faith groups calling for action on gun violence.