

# God and guns culture under fire as protests mount

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS)—The shooting at The Covenant School, which left seven dead including the shooter, highlights a dual reality of life in Nashville. It's a place where God is everywhere—and so are guns.

That tension is apparent in a drive along Interstate 65, headed south of Nashville. On the east side of the highway is a billboard that asks passersby to “Pray for Nashville,” with a heart in the middle of the message. A few doors down is a massive indoor shooting range.

Even as residents have prayed for the victims of the March 27 shooting—six students and staff—and reached out with love and kindness to grieving families, there's historically been very little political support for restriction on the right to bear arms.

## Protesters call for gun reform

But in the wake of the state's deadliest school shooting, Tennessee's God and guns culture is coming under fire by outsiders and Nashville residents alike. Hundreds of protesters rallied at the Tennessee Capitol on March 30, calling for reforms like red flag laws.

Some made their way into the visitors' gallery of the Tennessee House of Representatives, where they shouted “No justice, no peace” at the behest of several Democratic lawmakers, according to social media video posted by *The Tennessee Holler*, a local progressive news site.

After the shooting, Tennessee lawmakers put on hold a proposal to expand

concealed carry rights for adults to carry any firearm, including rifles such as the AR-15, out of respect for the victims and their families.

But gun reform activists argue this is merely a delay tactic until the spotlight has moved on, at which point the majority Republican state Legislature will go back to lifting gun restrictions.

They note the decision earlier this year by Tennessee's attorney general to settle a lawsuit that allows any adult to carry a concealed handgun without a permit, background check or safety training, and another proposed bill that would allow 18- and 19-year-old Tennesseans to carry handguns without a permit.

## **Guns everywhere**

Tatianna Irizarry-Meléndez, who described herself as a Christian mom of three, said she was surprised by how ubiquitous guns were in Nashville when she moved here nearly a decade ago. Her employer at the time, a company known for its Christian culture, sponsored gun classes and people would often post about guns they wanted to sell or trade on a company message board.



Police and others stand outside Covenant School and Covenant Presbyterian Church in Nashville

after a shooting at the school March 27. (Photo from Metro Nashville Police Facebook page via BP)

When she heard about the shooting, Irizarry-Meléndez said, she prayed for the victims and their families, but she also worried about her own kids. If a shooting could happen at Covenant located in Green Hills, a wealthy community—it could happen anywhere.

No one is safe, she thought.

The Covenant School tragedy has made her want to become more involved in efforts to prevent mass shootings by passing legislation limiting the kinds of guns used in the shooting. She also worries about teachers in schools, who are being put at risk when they show up in the classroom.

Three staff members at Covenant—the head of school, Katherine Koonce; custodian Mike Hill; and substitute teacher Cynthia Peak—were killed during the shooting while protecting children.

Irizarry-Meléndez said she honored their actions and those of the police officers who confronted the shooter. But she also felt a sense of guilt that our culture is asking the impossible of school leaders.

“Teachers and adults that work in schools are not there to be bulletproof vests,” she said. “It feels wrong to me that if my child was to survive a horrific event like this, it will be because a teacher took a bullet.”

She said her faith requires her to do more to prevent that from happening.

**‘Enact policies that can make a**

# difference'

Lawyer and author David French, who lives in Franklin, a suburb of Nashville, attended a prayer service for victims of the shooting at Christ Presbyterian Church, which belongs to the Presbyterian Church in America, the same denomination as Covenant.



(Shutterstock Image)

French, who spent nearly two decades in the PCA, said he had been to Covenant before and knew people at the church.

Writing about the service for *The New York Times*, French said he prayed for the families of those who had been killed in the shooting and that lawmakers would find wisdom and “moral courage to enact policies that can make a difference.”

French, a native Southerner, said he is a gun owner mostly because he and his family have been threatened in the past. He is skeptical that broad gun control measures will work.

But he does support so-called red flag laws, which would bar people who are in crisis or deemed a danger from buying or having guns. French pointed to a Florida red flag law, passed in the wake of a mass shooting, that has been highly effective.

Even so, he fears passing that kind of law will be difficult in Tennessee, where the GOP has a supermajority and any Republican lawmaker who supports gun regulation would likely lose their seat in a primary.

## **‘A real sickness in our society’**

French told Religion News Service he is concerned guns have become a fetish in the South, especially among his fellow Christians and among the state’s politicians. He pointed to the case of U.S. Rep. Andy Ogles from Tennessee, who sent out Christmas cards with family standing in front of a decorated tree, holding rifles.

“It’s almost mandatory for a Republican candidate to pose with an AR-15,” French said.

French also worries about the state of America’s soul—and the incongruity in how Americans seem to love both God and violence. Both set the country apart from other industrialized nations.

“There’s a real sickness in our society,” he said.

Lee Camp, professor of religion at Lipscomb University in Nashville and host of the “No Small Endeavor” podcast, agrees guns have become something of an idol for conservative Christians. He sees it as part of a larger idea in American history that justifies violence in God’s name.

“This presumption of righteous violence in service to the kingdom of God is a very old conceit,” he said. “And it has done immense damage.”

## **Choosing John Wick over Jesus**

Pastor Mike Glenn of Brentwood Baptist Church, one of the largest congregations in the area, said that in Nashville, there’s often a veneer of

Jesus painted over everything.

But that veneer of Jesus doesn't change people on the inside or give them the moral and spiritual foundation to deal with crises or tragedies or hard situations.

"When things get hard, you flip back not to your training in Christ but to the world," he said. "You handle things the way John Wick would. Or you handle it the way Clint Eastwood would."

Glenn said the gospel message contradicts the way the world around us operates. But he fears his fellow evangelical Christians have lost faith in that gospel. That will make it hard for folks in Nashville and the South to work together to respond to gun violence.

"The gospel message is that you never respond to evil with more evil," he said. "You know, you don't overcome hate with more hate. You bless those who curse you. The first response of a Christian to anybody is love. And love is not this warm feeling toward you. It's that I'm actively going to seek your best and want to take action so that your life is the best."

Pastor Kelli X of The Village Church in Madison, Tenn., said prayer and action have to be linked. Otherwise, she said, quoting the New Testament Book of James, faith without works is dead.

"I believe in praying with my feet," she said. "I believe in praying with my vote."

A mother of two, the pastor said she believes no school is immune from the kind of shooting that happened at Covenant. She worries nothing will change.

"I'm heartbroken and working very hard not to be numb to another mass shooting, another mass murder," she said.

## **‘Desensitized to this type of violence’**

For Pastor Aaron Marble of historic Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church, the news that the daughter of Covenant pastor Chad Scruggs was killed hit like a “gut punch.” Marble, who has young children, said he can’t imagine what Scruggs is going through.

He said pastors often deal with a range of emotions in their work—going from visiting church members on their deathbeds to welcoming new children into the community.

Marble said he worries Americans have begun to accept these kinds of shootings as a normal part of life. That’s just not right, he said.

“When children are murdered at school, it should be really difficult to go about our next day as usual,” he said. “I think our country has become desensitized to this type of violence.

“Even when it happens in your own city, in your own backyard, there is a dull nulling of what should be excruciating pain.”