

Newtown shooting galvanizes religious gun control advocates

December 18, 2012

WASHINGTON (RNS)—The shooting deaths of 26 children and adults at a Connecticut elementary school has revived religious support for gun control, galvanizing a movement that has struggled to gain traction against the powerful gun lobby.

A banner proclaiming, "Together We are Strong," is displayed in Newtown, Conn., in memory of the children and adults who died at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. (RNS PHOTO/Arthur McClanahan/Iowa United Methodist Conference)

"We are going to win this and save lives, and faith leaders will not need to be pulled into that," said Ladd Everitt, spokesman for the Washington-based [Coalition to Stop Gun Violence](#). "They will be at the forefront of that."

Rank-and-file people of faith have flooded his office's email and social media accounts, Everitt said, giving donations and offering to volunteer in their communities following the Dec. 14 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Even though the gun control debate has been relatively dormant in recent years—despite high-profile mass shootings in Arizona, Colorado and elsewhere—religious voices have been a key part of the gun control coalition.

"Any time this movement has made a push, whether you're looking at the

Brady bill, the assault weapons ban or the 1968 Gun Control Act, faith leaders have been at the forefront of that,” said Everitt, whose coalition was started by religious activists. “We can’t win without them. We need them.”

[Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence](#) worked earlier this year to prevent passage of the National Right to Carry Reciprocity Act, which would have made it easier for people to carry concealed weapons, said Vincent DeMarco, the group’s national coordinator.

In the wake of the Newtown shootings, DeMarco said “the possibilities are much better” to try again to renew a Clinton-era ban on assault weapons that expired in 2004.

“The faith community is committed to doing this and it makes sense and it will happen,” he said, “and this sad tragedy in Connecticut is only going to add to the commitment.”



Guns for sale at a Houston gun show. (*Wired*
Photo: Flickr/M Glasgow, 2007)

His coalition of 39 Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh organizations launched in 2011 after the shooting in Tucson, Ariz., that killed six and

injured then-Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. It is affiliated with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said religious leaders already are discussing possible next steps after the killings in Connecticut.

“The immensity of the tragedy and the strong religious mandate to protect the innocent and the children clearly have created conversations in the religious communities all across America about, ‘What can we do?’” he said.

Religious groups alone cannot move new legislation forward, said Saperstein, a longtime gun control advocate, but, “If political leaders move, the religious community will galvanize to support it.”

Speaking at an interfaith vigil in Newtown on Sunday, President Obama said “these tragedies must end,” and religious coalitions and denominations quickly urged the White House and Congress to act. For example:

- The African Methodist Episcopal Church urged Congress not to be intimidated by the gun lobby and to reform gun laws. “The times in which we live, and the consequences of reckless gun use, demand courage and determination from our political leaders, the faith community and individual citizens to change them,” the denomination said in a statement.
- [PICO National Network](#), a coalition of faith-based social justice groups, asked its members to petition Obama to send legislation to Congress to renew the assault weapons ban and to require background checks for all gun buyers.
- Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde of Washington is teaming up with the Gary Hall, dean of Washington National Cathedral, to “dedicate ourselves to the work of passing national legislation to ban the sale of

assault weapons and ammunition in this country,” and asked congregants to join them.

Despite the groundswell, not all religious leaders are convinced that stricter legislation is appropriate.

Joseph Mattera, presiding bishop of the New York-based evangelical group Christ Covenant Coalition, wrote in *Charisma News* that he doesn't agree with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's call for improved background checks and tighter gun laws. Mattera, instead, is concerned about the secularization of U.S. society.

“I also believe blaming guns would be to skirt the deeper issues the humanists don't want to touch,” he wrote in a Dec. 15 commentary. “Blaming guns for this and other tragedies like Columbine and Virginia Tech massacres would be like blaming automobiles for the thousands of deaths that occur every year due to accidents on highways and streets.”