

Commentary: After Sutherland Springs, pray ... and do something

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(RNS) — Back in the South African apartheid era, I helped organize anti-apartheid efforts in our local community in Michigan. At one of those gatherings we heard a stirring address by a visiting black Christian leader from South Africa. She helpfully proposed some specific actions that we could take to promote the cause of justice in her country.

At the conclusion of her talk she also urged us to keep praying for an end to the apartheid policies. In the discussion period following her talk a young man stood to register his irritation about the call to prayer. “I’m sick of just praying about this. I want us to do something!”

Her response was for me memorable. “I’m not recommending ‘just praying.’ I gave you a number of things that you should also be doing.” But then she added: “Don’t knock praying, though. Prayer is doing something. It is petitioning the highest authority in universe. That is an important kind of action!”

I have been thinking about her comment as I have seen many online comments responding to the call for prayer on behalf of the victims of the latest church shooting in Texas. I personally was pleased that President Trump called for prayers on this occasion — as I was when previous presidents made similar pleas in times of national crisis.

Prayer is indeed an act of petitioning. And it is more. The Hebrew psalms also include many prayers of lament — which is also “doing something.” The Bible — and the Quran — give us permission to lodge our complaints

with God. “Where are you, Lord? Were you asleep when all of this was happening? Why are silent when these horrible things are happening?”

It is good to pray in these ways. And I have no objections to a president’s urging us to pray. There is a “pastoral” aspect to presidential leadership. Abraham Lincoln performed that role well, as did more recent presidents: for me some prominent examples are President Clinton’s words after the Oklahoma City bombing and President Obama’s [eulogy](#) for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, pastor of Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

But the South African speaker was right: “Just praying” is not enough. In asking us to petition the highest authority in the universe about mass killings in our country, President Trump was, in effect, pointing us to a level of authority in the universe higher than his own.

Having done that, he would do well to encourage us to reflect upon — and even to argue with each other about — what God wants us to do about the accessibility of weapons of violence in our society. We might start with what an ancient Hebrew writer reported about his own sense of what God thinks about such matters:

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

It would be good to hear a word from our president now about how we can find the laws and practices that will counter the ways we have come to rely on the instruments of violence to provide our security, both at home and abroad.

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Chicago. The views expressed in this commentary are not necessarily those of Religion News Service or the Baptist Standard. This article originally appeared on [Religion News Service](#).