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**Tish Harrison Warren**

# What Should Christians Do About Guns?

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Tomorrow will mark four weeks from the day that three 9-year-olds and three adults were murdered at a Christian school in Nashville. The family and friends of those who were killed will never be the same. They are only at the very beginning of a long, hard journey through deepest grief. But in many ways, our nation has moved on.

Mass shootings have simply become a part of American life. We have had more mass shootings than days so far in 2023. More broadly, gun-related tragedies happen every day across America, including the shooting of an unarmed African American teenager last week in Kansas City, Mo. There are simply too many tragedies caused by firearms for ordinary Americans to keep track of them. Gun violence now seems so woven into the fabric of our culture that, for the most part, it recedes from sight, only gaining attention when a shooting is deemed so troubling or unexpected that it makes national news for a few days. We as a society have grown numb to daily, horrific, preventable tragedy.

The problem of guns in America is vast and complex. In a chilling 2022 piece, The Times named our age the “era of the gun,” with gun violence as the leading cause of death among children in the United States. This is a national crisis. Studies have shown comprehensively that more guns and easier access to guns leads, inevitably, to more gun deaths, which is why America is a global outlier when it comes to rates of gun violence. As German Lopez wrote

for The Times last year: “In every country, people get into arguments, hold racist views or suffer from mental health issues. But in the U.S., it is easier for those people to pick up a gun and shoot someone.”

Gun violence in America will not be reduced by short-lived outrage or hashtagging after major events. In the immediate wake of a tragedy, sometimes the best response truly is lament, grief, prayer and horrified silence. But we must not move on too quickly. After the headlines have quieted, when the culture war debate about “thoughts and prayers” is no longer trending, is precisely when we must take up the hard work of fighting for change. To reduce gun violence in the United States, we need legal change and we need social change. Both take time. And both demand a level of unity and sustained attention that is unusual in our day. Reducing gun deaths in America will require focus, persistence and cooperation over years and decades from people across a broad swath of political and ideological communities.

It is unlikely that guns will ever be banned in this country, but there are legal steps we can take to ensure responsible gun ownership. We need any and all laws that can make a difference: restrictions on the types of guns that can be sold (such as banning AR-15-style weapons), requirements of licensing, insurance and safety courses for gun ownership (as we do with driver’s licenses and vehicles), universal background checks, red flag laws, storage requirements and stricter age limits for gun ownership. We need to make it harder to get guns, which makes it easier to ensure guns stay in trustworthy hands.

Legal change alone, however, cannot help us out of the gun crisis America faces. With more guns than people in America, changed laws, as much as we need them, will not suddenly make guns disappear. Guns are a public health catastrophe, and like other public health problems, such as smoking, it takes not only policy change but also social change to turn the tide. Smoking was once so common that, as late as 1990, we could smoke on airplanes in the United States. We can still buy cigarettes in America, of course, but smoking has been dramatically reduced through a combination of policy changes and broad-based social change over time. People got tired of secondhand smoke and gruesome, preventable deaths, so smoking acquired a certain social stigma.

It’s been widely discussed that in their 2021 Christmas card photo, Representative Andy Ogles, Republican of Tennessee, whose district includes the site of the Covenant School shooting, and his family posed smiling with assault rifles in front of their bedecked tree. This kind of casual fetishization of violence, which makes light of the deaths of children, needs to become socially unthinkable. It is worthy of social opprobrium and shame. The image on the Ogleses’ card was, of course, a form of political and cultural messaging. Guns have become symbols in the culture wars, and extolling easy access to them has become part of a certain cultural identity. The cost of these wars can be counted in lost, innocent lives.

We desperately need unity across the aisle to change the culture around guns. At the very least, given the needless destruction guns are causing each day, reasonable conservatives and progressives can surely agree that we need to approach firearms with sobriety, concern, maturity and restraint. We can all unite against foolishness, recklessness and political posturing when it comes to firearms, stand against the glamorization of guns and denounce any cavalier treatment of them.

Furthermore, to achieve the social and cultural changes necessary to reduce gun violence, we need individuals and communities of faith — not just progressive people of faith, but all people of faith — to stand against the idolatry of guns in America.

I know of churches that would never hire a pastor who smoked but have shooting events at their yearly men's retreats. I know Christian parents who warn their kids about the dangers of marijuana use but don't hesitate to buy them firearms. I know conservative people of faith who affirm the need for legal and systemic change when it comes to limiting abortion but only look to personal choice and endlessly invoke the language of individual rights when it comes to gun violence. This is hypocrisy.

Leaders in the Black church have led the way in a fight against gun violence. Last June, a group of seven prominent Black pastors, led by Charlie Dates at Progressive Baptist Church in Chicago, published an open letter in Christianity Today calling on white evangelical Christians "to go pro-life on guns." Dates wrote that it is often senators "who serve in your districts, sit in your pews and listen to your preaching" who are "the greatest antagonists to a real pro-life, anti-school-shootings agenda." He pleads, "Every American child is waiting on you to use your influence to protect them." The broader church, and indeed all people of faith, must respond to their plea.

As a priest and as a Christian, I have long believed that Christians are called to love our neighbors and seek, in the words of the biblical Book of Jeremiah, the "welfare of the city." To do so, we must understand our context, our culture and the needs of our particular time and place. What does it mean to be peacemakers, to love our neighbors and to affirm the value of human life in this moment? The unavoidable conclusion is that we in America's churches can no longer claim to worship the "prince of peace" while tolerating the preventable obliteration of America's children.

Tish Harrison Warren (@Tish\_H\_Warren) is a priest in the Anglican Church in North America and the author of "Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep."

*Have feedback? Send me a note at [HarrisonWarren-newsletter@nytimes.com](mailto:HarrisonWarren-newsletter@nytimes.com).*

**A correction was made on April 24, 2023:** An earlier version of this article misidentified the biblical source for the phrase “welfare of the city.” It is from the Book of Jeremiah, not Isaiah.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at [nytnews@nytimes.com](mailto:nytnews@nytimes.com). [Learn more](#)

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