



Limited access

Mobilizing for gun control.

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ON JANUARY 8, a gunman shot Representative Gabrielle Giffords and several other people at a Tucson, Arizona, shopping mall. Although groups such as the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and Mayors Against Illegal Guns have informed the public about studies linking the proliferation of firearms to an increase in gun-related incidents, only a handful of political leaders responded to the shooting by calling for laws to regulate the sale and use of handguns. Instead, the gun lobby, led by the National Rifle Association, continued to succeed in its efforts to ease access to guns, whether through local ordinances or Supreme Court decisions.

To achieve its goals the gun lobby uses its significant financial resources to influence legislators and couches its public message in American values such as personal freedom, patriotism, religious faith and family. The NRA has largely succeeded in choking off funds for research studies by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control that link the proliferation of guns to increasing violence. It also seeks to counter the center's research with anecdotes about individuals defending themselves with handguns. The NRA message is well-crafted, technically sophisticated and effective: it mobilizes grassroots supporters.

Though local churches often minister to the victims of violence and their families, they do not often speak up about gun control. Yet a grassroots mobilization of churches could be the key to breaking the gun lobby's influence. In late 2008, I joined a Philadelphia-based group called Heeding God's Call. We began mobilizing local faith communities to pressure gun shop owners to sign a Gun Dealer's Code of Conduct- a code that discourages the illegal process of straw purchasing, or purchasing a gun through an intermediary and thus hiding one's identity. Although straw purchasing is a felony, most guns used in violent incidents reach the criminal market through this process.

In January 2009, several HGC members gathered for a weekly witness in front of a gun shop. We were calling attention to the owner's complicity in the straw purchasing process and his unwillingness to sign the Code of Conduct. At one point, 11 other people and I were arrested. Later we participated in a highly publicized trial. Nine months after the initial action, the U.S. attorney's office brought charges against the dealer and revoked his license.

Since then we've expanded our efforts. We held a Good Friday service near a local gun shop and handed out paper crosses printed with the name and the date of death of a gun violence victim. In another action we strung 300 T-shirts across a plaza- one for each of the victims of gun violence in the city over the previous year- and listened to the stories of victims and other gun violence survivors. HGC has also called attention to laws and practices that could be changed to make communities safer and has encouraged the church to play a stronger role in the effort to reduce gun violence.

Currently, we're maintaining regular vigils in front of two local gun shops while other local groups are monitoring two more gun shops in Northeast Philadelphia. The organization has expanded its efforts to Baltimore, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Columbus, Ohio, and is talking with groups in other cities, including a group of Christian hunters concerned about the strident positions taken by the NRA.

I believe that our effectiveness is due to the organization's faith base- participants from faith communities across the metropolitan area who represent a wide range of races, ages and faith traditions. For one thing, since the debate over gun policy is a debate about values, worldviews and spiritual outlooks, faith communities can address the issue at a deeper, more fundamental level than other groups. Like the gun lobby, congregations honor images, symbols and values. Central Christian symbols such as the foot washing's towel and basin as well as the cross are an effective contrast to the image of the gun-toting, flag-waving individualist. These symbols raise questions, inviting people to examine the underlying assumptions guiding their opinions and to investigate the use and proliferation of firearms in their own neighborhoods.

Furthermore the gun lobby frames its position by using personal stories and anecdotes. The Christian tradition is based on personal and communal stories too- stories that reach beyond the cognitive realm to the emotional core of a human being. Faith communities need to join the debate and tell the story of the man from Galilee who renounced violence even as he died a violent death. When gun violence victims and their families add their stories, those stories become part of the

central Christian story, one that challenges all people of faith to respond with conviction and compassion.

Like the gun lobby, faith communities can communicate with local people at the level of daily life. Every week we people of faith gather in formal and informal settings to exercise and strengthen our convictions. In these gatherings there is an opportunity to provide ourselves with information that encourages dialogue and reflection and helps us link our perspectives to our most deeply held beliefs. If even a small percentage of the religious community were mobilized to take one more step and go to work for gun violence prevention, it would generate a powerful grassroots force.

Finally, and most important, people of faith claim to operate under the guidance of One who transcends all of human life and history. When young David responded to the giant Goliath's challenge, he did not call attention to the stones in his bag or the power of his adversary, but rather to the fact that he came onto the field "in the name of the Lord of Hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45). When we gather as a people of faith to proclaim that our Savior's death demonstrated God's victory over death and fear, we are reminded that our power and inspiration as believers come from a place beyond this temporal world.

Although Heeding God's Call and other groups draw attention to the proliferation of handguns, they are not opposed to gun ownership. The gun lobby has framed the conversation to suggest that any limit on gun sales will lead to a ban on all guns. But HGCs goal is not to ban all guns but rather to pass sensible legislation that will mandate more extensive background checks, a ban on assault weapons and a limit to one handgun purchase per person per month.

There is significant common ground between responsible gun owners and gun violence prevention advocates. There are devout Christians on both sides of the issue, and the church is a safe space for them to come together to forge connections that go beyond the political polarities. In the current political environment, realistic alternatives will come not from political leaders but from committed and compassionate people of faith at the grassroots level who act and speak boldly. While many pastors remain reluctant to address gun violence prevention, other clergy and lay leaders are experiencing spiritual renewal as they proclaim a message of life in the midst of a culture of death. My hope is that, like the biblical Esther, churches will begin to see that they are called to "such a time as this" and lend their efforts and energy to violence-stricken communities.

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