Faith-based gun control advocates on the Senate's failure to act

By Daniel Schultz
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After the Senate refused to take up several gun-control proposals Wednesday, I checked in with faith-based activists on the legislative process. (See my earlier *Century* article.) Many expressed frustration but also tentative hope for future prospects. "I'm deeply disappointed and very angry at the vise grip the NRA has on this issue," says Katherine Willis Pershey of the #ItIsEnough campaign.

Many activists weren't thrilled with the legislation to begin with. Bryan Miller of Heeding God's Call called it "an unimpressive horse-traded bill" that would have expanded background checks but also "would have likely given the gun industry new markets and the pro-gun community new privileges."

J. Herbert Nelson, Director of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness, agreed. In a statement released yesterday, he said that "the Manchin-Toomey amendment [to expand background checks]...fails to go far enough toward achieving legislation that will effectively reduce gun violence."

"There comes a time," Nelson's statement continues,

> When we have to decide about compromise – is this the best we can do and should we accept it? Well, this may be the best that Congress thinks it can do, but it is not. Barring major and unexpected amendment votes, this bill will not be the bill we need. It is not adequate nor is it justice.

And as often happens after a legislative defeat, advocates are taking stock of strategy and tactics. "I believe it was a major mistake for portions of the faith community to have vigorously supported the Manchin-Toomey [amendment]," Miller argues—because it "included nothing to address the public's wish, and the simple need, for a ban on assault weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines."

Some players seem inclined to take an imperfect bill over none at all. "The compromise is far from perfect," says Vincent DeMarco of Faiths United to End Gun Violence, "but it will save many lives by expanding background checks far beyond

where they are now required." DeMarco remains hopeful that Manchin-Toomey can still be passed at some point. His plan is to "then build on that to enact something like what Maryland just enacted, which New Jersey has had since 1966: fingerprint licensing of handgun purchasers."

Wednesday's loss may actually have had the paradoxical effect of radicalizing gun-control supporters. President Obama himself sent a clear message that votes against gun legislation would be politically costly, urging voters "to let your representatives in Congress know that you are disappointed, and that if they don't act this time, you will remember come election time." J. Herbert Nelson had a similar message:

> We need common sense gun laws in this nation! We need courageous political leaders! It is time that we begin to hold these elected officials accountable for the promises they make to serve the best interest of the country.

Bryan Miller was more philosophical, but no less determined:

> If there was a "good" about yesterday's mess, and I hope there was, it was that it showed people of faith and others that evil clearly abounds in the debate about guns and the violence they produce. That evil is in the sales and profits of the gun industry and its promoters and protectors, who value the income gun sales create, the seeming power that a gun in the hand provides and the petty fear that drives a small, but loud, portion of the American electorate to demand that our political leaders pay them fealty while ignoring the death and destruction that happens periodically in mass shootings and daily in communities of color.

There's no telling when—or if—gun control legislation will make it through Congress. But it doesn't look like the activists are going anywhere. "I've been waiting for 25 years for this to happen," DeMarco told a columnist about his success in Maryland.

Nobody considers yesterday's defeat to be the end of the story. "It was a setback, but I think we will prevail," DeMarco told me. "The president and majority leader are not giving up, and neither are we!" Katherine Willis Pershey echoed the sentiment:

> Attending several rallies and vigils this year, including Crosswalk, I've heard many family members who have lost loved ones speak. I am humbled by their grief and commitment. I am particularly thinking of the man whose son was shot and killed in 1997, and has stood up at countless events, year after year, to beg

for common sense reforms. Year after year after year.