

As bells toll, clergy push Congress on gun control

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WASHINGTON (RNS) As bells tolled across the country on Friday (Dec. 21) in memory of lives lost in Newtown, Conn., religious leaders gathered outside the Washington National Cathedral to push congregants and Congress to prevent further gun violence.

"Is the need for sensible gun control a religious issue?" asked Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. "Indeed it is, for our worship of guns is a form of idolatry."

Saperstein was among 20 faith leaders who gathered outside the Washington landmark Friday to mark the one-week anniversary of the mass killing at the Newtown elementary school. They paused as the cathedral's funeral bell tolled 28 times in memory of the 26 children and adults from Sandy Hook Elementary School, as well as the gunman and gunman's mother, who also died.

Washington Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde said prayer alone was not a sufficient response to the massacre.

"Now is also a time for us to show up in ways that will prevent such deaths in the future," she said. "If we only pray and offer comfort now, and do not act, we are complicit in perpetuating the conditions that allow these crimes to occur."

The National Council of Churches has declared Jan. 6 "Gun Violence Prevention Sunday," and is providing its members with a tool kit of resources, said the Rev. Michael Livingston, former NCC president.

From mosques to Sikh temples, clergy are being encouraged to support gun control in their pulpits, send their sermons to newspapers and Congress and start interfaith community discussions to reduce bullying and address mental illness.

In Connecticut, the shooting deaths have prompted several calls from clergy for parishioners to turn in their guns.

"I asked them to look at their lives, to purge themselves of the symbols of violence, not only guns but violent video games," said the Rev. Sharon K. Gracen with Trinity Episcopal Church in Branford, Conn. "I asked them, 'If you are a gun lover, is there anything that you love more? What would it take for you to give it up?'"

Evangelical and Jewish leaders are supporting initiatives by mayors to reduce illegal gun ownership. The Progressive National Baptist Convention will consider gun buy-back programs, said its president, the Rev. Carroll Baltimore.

In addition to calls for changes in laws – banning assault weapons, restricting ammunition sales and conducting stricter background checks – some are also calling for changes of heart.

"We need a conversion," said the Rev. Richard Cizik, president of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good. "American evangelicals need to be born again on this issue."

On Friday, leaders of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a "call for action" on gun violence, telling lawmakers that "guns are too easily accessible" and calling for parents and producers of violent entertainment to acknowledge its negative effects.

Speaking outside the cathedral, retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick said the unified response of faith officials reflects a national sense that "we can't take it anymore" after previous massacres in Colorado, Wisconsin and Arizona.

"I think the religious leaders of our country have often said after these things we've got to do something, but now there have been too many of them," he said. "We have reached a moment that we cannot wait anymore."