

Gun control in sight: Faith groups seize political moment

by [Daniel Schultz](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue



The "Knotted Gun" sculpture at the U.N. Some rights reserved by [Jim, the Photographer](#).

Days after the December mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence convened a press conference. The national coalition petitioned Congress to demand background checks for all gun purchases, ban high-capacity weapons and magazines and make gun trafficking a federal crime. Representatives of 47 religious organizations signed on—not just liberals but also evangelical leaders such as Samuel Rodriguez and T. D. Jakes.

The group was ready to respond to the tragedy because ending gun violence has long been a cause among faith-based activists. Some mainline denominations have been working on the issue since the 1980s. The National Council of Churches worked to pass the assault weapons ban of 1994, which has since expired. According to Washington office director Cassandra Carmichael, since Newtown the NCC—at the request of the Connecticut Council of Churches—has provided pertinent worship and pastoral resources. Carmichael notes that the group is also doing coordinating work to “make sure the moral message doesn’t get lost.”

In fall 2010, activist Vincent DeMarco, working under the auspices of the Brady Campaign, began to pull together a broad faith-based coalition. The project, modeled on DeMarco’s successful antitobacco work, eventually became Faiths

United. Years of partnerships through the NCC and elsewhere paid off: DeMarco's coalition started with 17 charter members and quickly expanded.

This year, Faiths United has worked with Auburn Seminary's Auburn Action program to translate its statement into action: a recent Faiths Calling event generated more than 10,000 phone contacts with congressional offices. Auburn Action also supports several state-level petition drives and one in the Los Angeles region, along with a multifaith Gun Violence Sabbath sponsored by the PICO National Network.

Not all faith-based efforts are what Bryan Miller calls "grasstops" work, meaning national mobilization and activism. Miller directs Heeding God's Call, a Philadelphia-based organization with several chapters in Pennsylvania and Maryland. The group works with local churches and religious leaders to pressure gun-store owners into signing a code of conduct designed to prevent straw purchases, in which a buyer passes a weapon along to a third party, circumventing regulations.

Heeding God's Call puts its partnerships together one phone call at a time. In the Philadelphia area, it's garnered the support of 70 churches, synagogues and mosques. In addition to its gun-store campaigns, the group holds prayer vigils—Miller calls them "murder-site witnesses"—at the locations of gun homicides. According to Miller, the goal is "to let people in damaged communities know they're not totally isolated, that there are people who are concerned about the violence they're facing." For now these events are held only in Philadelphia and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, but Miller plans to expand to other cities as well.

Chicago has seen a startling uptick in gun violence in recent years. In 2012, 2,400 people were shot there; 435 of them were killed. Early last year, All Saints Episcopal Church responded by organizing an event just before Holy Week: CROSSwalk, a liturgical procession across downtown Chicago to remember the victims and press for change.

The turnout—1,500 participants—was impressive enough to convince the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago to make it an ongoing project. CROSSwalk Chicago director Jacqueline Clark expects 2,500 people to come out on the Friday before Holy Week for the second annual event. Others will get involved by advocating for tighter straw-purchasing regulations or volunteering to build and maintain memorials to slain children.

Like Heeding God's Call, CROSSwalk Chicago works hard to build a local coalition to address a chronic problem. Clark speaks of the "very slow work" of "building relationships across lines." Still, she works with a sense of urgency. "Aurora is like a weekend in Chicago," she says, referring to the 2012 Colorado shooting that killed 12 and injured dozens. "Not that Aurora isn't particularly horrifying," she clarifies. But the comparison serves as "a reminder that this violence is taking place in our city and in many cities" day to day—not just in mass shootings.

Yet mass shootings do spark new efforts for change. In the wake of Newtown, Christian writers Ellen Painter Dollar and Katherine Willis Pershey began conversing about gun violence. Inspired by Gary Wills's provocative claim that American gun worship is tantamount to idolatry, Dollar and Pershey formed an online campaign, #It Is Enough, using social media to encourage action on the 14th of each month—the day of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary.

Like other activists, Dollar and Pershey have relatively straightforward goals: universal and effective background checks, a ban on high-capacity weapons, improved tracing of weapons used in crimes and education on gun violence. Pershey, a Disciples of Christ minister serving a United Church of Christ congregation in suburban Chicago, has also begun a Shalom Seekers group within her church.

But while activists' immediate goals may be narrowly drawn, the endgame is anything but. "I believe we need stronger gun laws," says Pershey. "I also see that as one piece of a larger picture, which is the transformation of a violent culture."

The NCC's Carmichael wants to "totally eliminate" the problem one day, to "create communities that don't produce this kind of gun violence."

Of course, recent U.S. history is littered with the husks of failed faith-based campaigns to change society. What makes these activists think this time will be different?

DeMarco has the answer out before the question's finished: "Newtown changed everything." He makes an analogy to the galvanizing effect that police brutality in Birmingham had on the civil rights movement. What strategy will Faiths United employ to overcome the powerful NRA lobbying machine? "The same strategy that worked on tobacco. Nobody thought tobacco companies could lose in Congress, but they did, because the faith community has moral authority and the ability to

mobilize people from one end of the country to the other, across party lines and ideological lines.”

Carmichael feels that the Newtown tragedy prompted a new level of awareness and concern. “There was something about those shootings that motivated people to action,” she says. “It just seems like it’s time for it to end.”

Pershey echoes this sentiment, pointing out that her slogan “It is enough” refers not just to Jesus’ comment to sword-wielding disciples but also to feeling fed up with gun violence. Miller of Heeding God’s Call points to the basic religious imperative to “save the lives of God’s children,” an idea he says is spreading through the faith community. “There is so much death and injury,” he says. “People are aware of it and want to change it.”

Gun-control advocates are cautiously optimistic. “We’ve seen a lot of movement in Congress already,” says DeMarco. “People are talking about universal background checks in a way they just hadn’t before.”

Jim Winkler of the United Methodist Church recalls a recent meeting with representatives of the Obama administration. They “essentially committed that President Obama and Vice President Biden are going to be personally and actively involved on gun control,” he says. “There’s no doubt—that’s just gigantic.”

But the prize is not yet in reach, and the activists know it. “It’s going to be a fight,” says CROSSwalk Chicago’s Clark. And like any coalition project, faith-based efforts on gun control find members working at different speeds, with some far ahead of others on certain issues.

Yet Miller feels that “the faith community has to be out front” on gun control “in order for this country to reach the low levels of gun violence that every other developed country has.” And while “there’s been a major change since Newtown,” Miller is cautious: a long-term effort is needed, yet some might be satisfied to “just take whatever’s done in Washington in the next two months and say, ‘OK, that’s it.’”

The problem, says Miller, is that “even if [Congress] enacted the three major things they’re working on—an assault-weapons ban, a limit on high-capacity ammunition magazines and universal background checks—there’s still going to be thousands of Americans dying from guns every year.”