

At makeshift National Mall graveyard, clergy demand gun control

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Clergy from California to Connecticut created a makeshift graveyard symbolizing victims of gun violence on the National Mall on Thursday (April 11) as they exhorted Congress to pass legislation to limit access to firearms.

Standing in front of 3,300 grave markers -- representing the number of people who have died in gun violence since December's massacre in Newtown, Conn. -- more than 25 ministers, rabbis and other religious leaders decried as "idolatrous" a society that values guns more than human life.

"We don't have a Second Amendment issue," said the Rev. Matt Crebbin of Newtown Congregational Church. "We have a Second Commandment crisis.

"The near infatuation with the gun is moving dangerously close to becoming a full-blown worship of a false idol," continued Crebbin, whose in December presided over a nationally televised memorial service for Newtown victims.

Other clergy, speaking to a crowd of mostly reporters, picked up on the idolatry theme. They singled out for particular blame those lawmakers who take gun-lobby money and ignore the national will. Polls show that most Americans support universal background checks and tighter gun control.

"The nation is so far ahead of where our political leaders are," said the Rev. Jim Wallis, president of Sojourners, a liberal Christian group that organized the grave-markers project and a 24-hour vigil on the National Mall. "Our political leaders need

to catch up."

Most of the grave markers were wooden crosses, but some were placards printed with the symbols of other religious traditions -- Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Each represents a life taken, said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"Every one of those religious symbols represents one of God's children," he said. "See the one there? That's a mother, who won't be there to comfort her child the next time they're sick."

Emotions ran high among the clergy. The Rev. Sam Saylor of Blackwell Memorial AME Zion Church in Hartford, Conn., broke down in wails and fell into the arms of his fellow pastors after he spoke about Newtown and his son, Shane Oliver, who was 20 when he was gunned down last year.

Since Oliver's death, life will never be the same for his family, just as, since Newtown, life will never be the same for the country, Saylor said.

"We can't ever go back home again," he said. "Business in Washington can never be the same again. We can never take life for granted again."

It is unclear whether members of Congress feel similarly. Even supporters of the background-check bill introduced this week in the Senate acknowledge that it faces high hurdles. And opposition looms even larger for other gun control measures, including an assault weapons ban and limits on high-capacity magazines.

One passerby shouted at the clergy, as a closing prayer was offered, that people have a better chance of going to jail than getting shot.

But most tourists strolling by the gathering seemed sympathetic to the clergy's cause.

"It's silly that the American people so overwhelmingly want something to happen and Congress refuses to act on it," said Tim Keene of North Yarmouth, Maine.