

Black pastors: Gun violence isn't just a problem for white suburbs

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Black clergy have launched a new coalition to fight gun violence, saying they are undeterred by the recent failure of legislation on Capitol Hill and all too aware of the problem of gun violence.

At meetings held Tuesday (April 23) in Washington and Los Angeles, supporters of the African-American Church Gun Control Coalition called gun violence "both a sin and a public health crisis" and committed to a three-year action plan of advocacy, education and legislative responses.

"As people of God and as faithful members we have the obligation to stir the world's conscience and to call on our nation's decision makers to do what is just and right," said the Rev. Carroll Baltimore, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, which convened the coalition.

"African-American clergy leaders hear daily the cries of the parents, family and friends of those whose precious lives have been snuffed out by guns and other types of violence."

Denominational leaders have joined in recent multifaith calls to address gun violence, especially after December's deadly school shooting in Newtown, Conn. But the Rev. Stephen Thurston, president of the National Baptist Convention of America, said black pastors have dealt with such violence long before attention was drawn to gun violence in predominantly white communities.

"This is what happens every day and every week in America in some urban city," he said before the coalition meeting. "Within the black community, it has been

happening for so long."

Gun violence is the leading cause of death of black males ages 15-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Children's Defense Fund reported that in 2009 black male teens were eight times more likely to die from gun violence than white teenage males.

The clergy blasted the Senate for defeating legislation to expand background checks and ban assault weapons, but vowed to continue to work for stronger legislation and safer neighborhoods.

"I think we're more empowered, more fired up to make some changes," said the Rev. Cynthia Hale, senior pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Ga.

At the Washington meeting, dozens of clergy heard from gun control advocates and political leaders, including Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Rep. Marcia Fudge, (D-Ohio), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Other denominations supporting the new coalition include the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, Church of God in Christ, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and National Baptist Convention, USA.