

Gun control group launches pre-election interfaith initiative

by [Elana Schor](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



Protestors attend a 2018 March for Our Lives event in St. Paul, Minnesota. (Photo by Fibonacci Blue via Creative Commons License)

A leading gun control advocacy group has enlisted more than a dozen religious leaders to boost voter turnout this fall in support of candidates who support measures to prevent gun violence.

Everytown for Gun Safety, which expects to spend \$60 million on this year's elections, is forging its interfaith effort amid ongoing concerns about shootings at houses of worship. The group's partners include representatives from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh backgrounds, several of them well-known progressive activists.

Among those joining Everytown's initiative are Shane Claiborne, codirector of the group Red Letter Christians, and Traci Blackmon, associate general minister of the United Church of Christ. Another is Rob Schenck, once an anti-abortion activist who has since shifted to support the *Roe v. Wade* decision and has sought to redefine a pro-life agenda as one that supports gun control.

"Churches, especially white evangelical churches, have largely ignored this question—I think much to their own detriment and to the detriment of the people they're called to serve," said Schenck, president of the Washington-based nonprofit Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute.

In addition to reaching out to clergy on gun policy issues, Schenck said, the Everytown interfaith project would aim to educate rank-and-file faith voters about candidates' stances on gun matters.

"You never want to pray for something you're unwilling to be the answer to," he added. "So if we pray for a reduction in gun violence, we have to be ready to act on that prayer."

Everytown, cofounded by former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, counts 6 million supporters and already has endorsed former vice president Joe Biden for president. Biden released a proposal last month to boost security at houses of worship.

"The faith community has seen firsthand the devastating effects of gun violence in places of worship and feels more than ever that they have an urgent moral responsibility to stop the scourge of gun violence in America," Angela Ferrell-Zabala, chief equity, outreach, and partnerships officer at Everytown, said in a statement. "And they're doing so by mobilizing their networks around candidates who support broadly popular gun safety measures in 2020."

Whether gun control advocates can make new inroads with voters of faith remains an open question. Michael Hammond, legislative counsel at the Gun Owners of America, identified a nexus between faith-driven and gun-rights voters. He said he sees "a social milieu, a series of values that surround the sorts of people who value the Second Amendment. Those values normally include a deep faith, a love of country—generally a conservative social issue outlook."

Asked about the resonance of gun control with religious voters following attacks at houses of worship, Hammond pointed to the role of an armed churchgoer in acting quickly to end last year's shooting at a Texas church service. Congregations that "voluntarily disarm themselves have ended up suffering a catastrophe," Hammond said.

Collectively, partners in Everytown's project are planning to host at least 50 events designed to engage Americans of faith on gun issues and promote voter registration ahead of November's elections. The effort is particularly focused on a dozen-plus states that will prove battlegrounds in presidential and congressional contests, including Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. —Associated Press