

Expelled Tennessee lawmakers find support among clergy

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Former Rep. Justin Jones, Rep. Gloria Johnson, and former Rep. Justin Pearson raise their hands outside the House chamber after Jones and Pearson were expelled from the Tennessee Legislature on April 6. (AP Photo/George Walker IV)

The last time Tennessee legislators tried to make the Bible the state's official book, a pastor warned them to be careful what they asked for.

Johnny Shaw, a Democratic state representative and minister from West Tennessee, [warned](#) his colleagues in 2021 that few can live up to the Bible's standards.

"I don't want to be embarrassed to be coming off as the holiest state in the nation and then not living up to it," he said.

Shaw's words came back to haunt his colleagues on April 6, when Justin Jones, one of two Democratic lawmakers voted out of the Tennessee House of Representatives for breaking the body's rules, recounted alleged past sins of the state legislature.

Among those sins, according to Jones: Caring more about House decorum than taking any action on gun control legislation in the wake of mass shootings.

"They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wounds," said Jones, reading from the biblical Book of Jeremiah. "They give assurances of peace where there is no peace."

Jones, a Vanderbilt Divinity School student who represented part of Nashville, and Justin Pearson, who represented a district in Memphis, were expelled from the House for disrupting a March 31 legislative session. Their Democratic colleague, Gloria Johnson of District 90, who also faced expulsion, remains in the House after an effort to remove her failed by one vote.

All three were accused of interrupting House business days after a mass shooting at the Covenant School in Nashville that left three 9-year-old students and three staff dead. They stood in the well of the House chamber to protest a lack of action on gun control by the House, which is controlled by a Republican supermajority.

Jones and Pearson, who are Black, and Johnson, who is White, joined with protesters, shouting "No action, no peace," as the session was adjourned, at times using a bullhorn. Their action broke House rules, according to their colleagues.

The session devoted to their expulsion was filled with religious references and, at times, soaring spiritual rhetoric.

Rep. G.A. Hardaway of Memphis spoke on the Democratic legislators' behalf, telling his colleagues, "We all need more Black Jesus."

Several legislators, including Rep. Harold Love, an African Methodist Episcopal Church pastor, reminded his colleagues of their efforts to make the Bible an official state book. He urged his colleagues to show grace to the lawmakers known as the "Tennessee 3."

But Republican Rep. Gino Bulso argued the trio of Democratic lawmakers had broken the rules—and those same rules allow a two-thirds majority of the House to expel them for violating decorum. Republican representatives charged that, rather than

protest, the Democrats could offer legislation—although supporters of the Tennessee 3 were quick to note the House’s GOP leadership have [limited](#) debate and used the Republican supermajority to control the legislative agenda.

Bulso also argued the Tennessee 3 did not deserve forgiveness because they had not repented or made amends for their actions.

“Forgiveness follows contrition, it follows penance,” [said](#) Bulso, whose son is the priest of a prominent Nashville Catholic parish. “We have neither.”

Pearson also referred to the Bible and faith as lawmakers debated whether or not to expel him. In a defiant speech delivered shortly before the vote was taken, he compared the moment to Holy Saturday—a period of waiting that falls between Good Friday, when Jesus died in the biblical account, and Easter Sunday.

“I don’t know how long this Saturday in the state of Tennessee might last, but we have good news, folks,” he said. “We’ve got good news that Sunday always comes. Resurrection is a promise.”

The days following the shooting at Covenant School have been filled with prayers for the victims and their families and appeals for God’s comfort, but some gun control advocates say they have little hope the response will translate into legislation or a consensus to address gun violence.

Aaron Marble, pastor of Jefferson Street Missionary Baptist Church, long a center of the social justice movement in Nashville, said the city’s Black pastors and others who favor gun restrictions have increasingly found themselves at odds with state Republican leaders.

With no common ground, said Marble, and little interest from the GOP in what he called “practical steps,” when gun rights and religion collide in Tennessee, gun rights win.

“I think this collision might reveal that sometimes we are praying to a different God,” he said.

But protests show little sign of abating, with demonstrators continuing to decry Republican lawmakers for failing to enact gun control. Many have taken to singing the Christian gospel song “This Little Light of Mine” as a protest anthem, with fans of Nashville’s Major League Soccer team, Nashville SC, chanting the song during a

televised match on April 8.

Tennessee lawmakers and activists alike have also expressed outrage at the expulsion of Pearson and Jones but not Johnson, arguing the move is [evidence of racism](#) among House GOP members.

On April 7, William Barber, a Disciples of Christ pastor and activist, announced plans to lead a “Moral Monday” protest event in Nashville on April 17 at the request of Tennessee clergy. Barber, who recently launched a [new advocacy-focused center at Yale University](#), said during a press call that participants plan to carry children’s caskets through the streets of Nashville “to remind the nation what this issue really is all about.”

“As clergy, we can no longer just do the pastoral work,” Barber said, noting faith leaders are often the ones burying the victims of gun violence and comforting families. “We must do the prophetic work of changing policy.”

Jones briefly joined the press call with Barber, saying he “grew up in the moral movement with Rev. Barber” and the Poor People’s Campaign, the national advocacy movement Barber co-chairs. The two remain close: Barber wrote the forward to Jones’s 2022 activism-focused book, *The People’s Plaza: Sixty-Two Days of Nonviolent Resistance*, and said in an interview that Jones called him the morning before his expulsion to ask for prayer.

Jones celebrated the idea of clergy coming to Tennessee to protest, accusing the House of “politically crucifying not only us but this movement,” and saying calling a gathering of clergy and other protesters “will be a resurrection.”

Kelli X, who pastors the Village Church in Madison, Tennessee, said she stood in the rain outside the Tennessee Capitol with her 15-year-old daughter for three hours protesting the House’s action. She joined all the faith leaders on the call in railing against the actions of the state’s Republican supermajority.

“They say that they are Christian, they have made the Bible the state book,” the pastor said. “But we have seen that what they worship is power and guns.”

Barber said he and others are planning to stage similar demonstrations later this year in Washington, DC, but are currently focused on Tennessee. —Religion News Service