THE Christian CENTURY
Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully

CAN WE TALK ABOUT GUNS?

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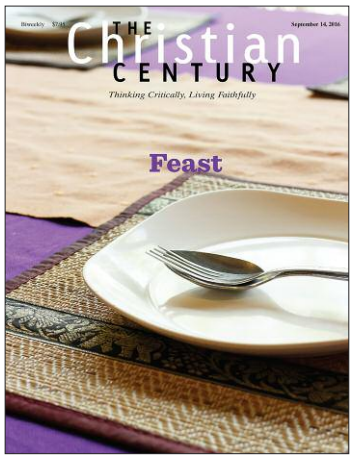
CONVERSATION GUIDE

From September 14, 2016 issue



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CONCEALED WEAPONS DON'T MAKE US SAFER, COMMUNITIES DO

Guns and the illusion of security

by Lindsey Peterson

LATELY I've been noticing bumper stickers designed in the shape of the state of Connecticut, with a gun silhouette, the letters CCDL (Connecticut Citizens Defense League, Inc.), and the statement, "Carry On!" I assume that the sticker is in support of the concealed and open carry laws and that its presence on a bumper means that the driver probably has a gun.

Thank you, bumper sticker, I say to myself, for warning me that this driver has a gun in the car. It's a clever move to keep people away. A bully move that works. I realize that I'm avoiding eye contact with the driver at the stoplight. After all, who wants to piss off the guy with a gun in his car?

As it turns out, a lot of people have guns in their cars or guns in their briefcase or handbag or tucked in their coat—all "safely" concealed. Thirteen million people.

Our friends advise us, "Don't dial drunk." Don't pick up a phone and call your ex, for example, when you're in an emotionally altered state derived from alcohol. Yet now all 50 states have concealed carry permits, enabling us to carry guns through all the emotional highs and lows that any day brings. Thirteen million people are carrying concealed weapons, including people in line at Dunkin' Donuts, people lounging at the city pool, and people playing at the miniature golf course—some of whom will lose their tempers when another golfing group jumps ahead of them on the course. People have guns in their cars during moments of road rage and even at the DMV, where tempers flare after waiting in line for an hour just to update a license. The 13 million people with a license for concealed carry represent more than 12 times the number of police in the United States.

When I pastored a church, I learned how emotionally volatile we humans are. Most of us can't always keep ourselves together. This is not a diagnosis of some particular mental health issue but rather an expression of a human reality. There

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is some "snap" that happens in a day or a week or over the year, some break in our sense of knowing how we fit in this world that causes us to act in ways that are against our well-being. Mostly we numb the pain with one of the many forms of distraction easily available to us, but there is often anger just beneath the surface, and some of us are more prone than others to expressing our anger outwardly. Now having a gun with us at all times is as easy as having a bottle of wine in the fridge. Easy access to a fatal weapon seems inadvisable to me, a move made because we think we are different than we really are. Add to that the fact that we are living in intensely uncertain times.

In an interview on the public radio program *Fresh Air,* reporter Evan Osnos described the fear expressed by people who carry concealed weapons. They "talk about this immense sense of insecurity, both physical insecurity from the idea of a mass shooting but also more broadly . . . an economic insecurity, the idea that the professions and businesses that they used to have have fallen away. . . . And also political insecurity—they feel as if their voice is no longer represented by mainstream politicians."

The rise of concealed carry is about safety, self-protection, and security. It's an expression of an instinct that drives a person who feels, as Osnos says, "as if I am losing power, and . . . as if one of the ways in which I can fortify myself is by buying a gun." Even if we don't own a gun, we are represented by state legislatures that agree that carrying a gun provides the safety and security we seek.

Here's the thing, though: we aren't safe. We aren't secure. We don't act in accordance with the rules of reason all the time. We flip out. We dial drunk. When we are not as we wish we were, or things are not going as we wish they would, we do things that are not in our best interest or in the interest of our neighbors. Carrying a gun or bringing one into our homes actually creates more insecurity: "The simple fact is, by bringing it into your life, by bringing it into your home, you significantly raise the risk of suicide, of homicide, of accidental gun death. The chances of a homicide of some kind doubles," says Osnos.

Some may argue that the "Who wants to piss off a guy with a gun?" line of thinking justifies having a gun. I argue that the effect of this kind of thinking is not safety but the opposite—increased systematic isolation and anxiety.

Scholar and author Jennifer Michael Hecht writes on suicide in her book *Stay: A History of Suicide and the Philosophies against It.* She speaks against suicide by alerting us to our essential need for each other. "We are indebted to one another and the debt is a kind of faith—a beautiful, difficult, strange faith. We believe each other into being."

We are so in need of one another that our isolation from one another, our being or feeling alone, kills us. It makes us kill ourselves. It causes us to kill others.

We aspire to feel safe and secure in our lives, but the feeling and fact of safety is always only temporary because it exists within a context that we share: we are here now but one day we will die. In that wide view, the most fundamental form of safety we can offer one another is one another. Laws, policies, community, family, and personal practices that help us to connect with one another in the midst of the nagging uncertainties of our lives are the best avenue toward a resilient security.

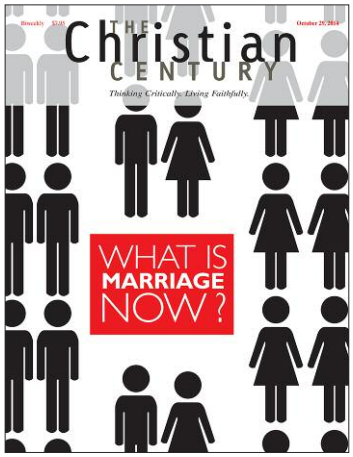
Concealed carry, which has put more guns into more hands, purses, and cars, is a fallacy of safety. Guns add tension. They introduce more walls between us. If the gun doesn't kill us, the walls that are going up between us will. CC

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever carried a gun or shot a gun? How would you describe what it was like to someone who hasn't done either of those things?

2. Lindsey Peterson writes that it is human nature to be "emotionally volatile." Do you agree or disagree? How does your response affect what you think about guns?

From October 29, 2014 issue



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The road to *Heller*

by Emily Westbrook

The Second Amendment: A Biography
By Michael Waldman
Simon & Schuster, 272 pp., $25.00

THE 2012 SHOOTINGS at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in which Adam Lanza used a semiautomatic rifle to kill 26 people, including 20 children, instantly reignited a debate over gun control. Within hours, an online petition was generated through the White House's We the People platform demanding that the Obama administration "immediately address the issue of gun control through the introduction of legislation in Congress."

At the same time, gun sales spiked across the country. The National Rifle Association held a press conference a week after the incident at which its executive vice president, Wayne LaPierre, declared that "the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," and he urged Congress to direct its attention away from gun control laws and toward putting armed police officers into every school. "Politicians," LaPierre insisted, "have no business and no authority denying us the right, the ability, and the moral imperative to protect ourselves and our loved ones from harm." He did not invoke the Second Amendment as the source of this "right," but he didn't have to. The Second Amendment and its reference to the "right to bear arms" have, through the efforts of the NRA, become intimately associated with opposition to gun regulations.

In the midst of this debate, Michael Waldman, president of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's School of Law, has closely examined the historical context in which the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were drafted and ratified. He convincingly argues that the Second Amendment does not address or protect an individual right to own guns. Its purpose, instead, was to preserve state militias and assuage public concern that the newly established federal government would disarm them. In that era, the citizen-soldier stood as a powerful symbol of state sovereignty, and the survival of the militia system in the new government was viewed by many as an essential safeguard against oppression of the states by a federal standing army.

In practice, however, militia were often poorly trained, disorganized, and unreliable. The militia system faded into irrelevancy shortly after the passage of the Bill of Rights. (The militia ideal has to a limited extent been refashioned into the National Guard.)

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The Second Amendment received little attention: gun control was left to the states, as it had always been. On the few occasions when the Second Amendment was invoked by the Supreme Court, it consistently held that it protected an individual right to keep and bear arms only within the context of militia service.

All that changed in 2008, when the Supreme Court announced, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, that the Second Amendment protects the right of private citizens to keep handguns in their homes for self-protection. Waldman argues that this seemingly abrupt about-face in constitutional jurisprudence, overturning more than 200 years of settled precedent, was the result of "one of history's most effective, if misleading, campaigns for constitutional change," a movement led by the NRA and its political allies.

Waldman traces the "road to *Heller*" back to the radicalization of the NRA in the late 1970s. The organization's "lurch to the right" was part of a larger conservative backlash against progressive reforms of the 1960s. It was then that the NRA first began to invoke the Second Amendment in vigorously opposing gun restrictions. Once primarily devoted to hunting, sport shooting, and gun safety, the NRA became a soldier on the front lines of the culture wars. Its rhetoric increasingly centered on concepts of individual entitlement, freedom, and revolution. Indeed, it adopted the language of social reform movements while tapping into the public's growing wariness and resentment of big government.

The NRA relentlessly pursued a multiphased campaign which began with aggressive proliferation of legal scholarship on the Second Amendment, followed by the election of sympathetic lawmakers, and culminating in the appointment of conservative justices. When *Heller* was presented to the high court, victory "fell like a ripe apple" into the NRA's hands.

The legal scholarship developed by gun rights proponents, which reached its apex in the 1990s, aimed to prove that the founders' intent was to grant an individual right to gun ownership that was not necessarily tied to military service. Waldman criticizes this work as mostly revisionist "law office history," often involving selective "plucking of facts or quotes out of time or out of context."

Waldman does not deny that an individual's right to own guns for self-protection (and for hunting and sport, for that matter) was recognized, cherished even, by the founders. He merely posits that this right of self-defense was not perceived to be threatened by the establishment of a central government and thus was simply not addressed in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights.

Waldman's view is supported by Supreme Court justice John Paul Stevens, whose recent book *Six Amendments: How and Why We Should Change the Constitution* includes a proposal for rewriting the Second Amendment. "The notion that the states were concerned about possible infringement of that right [to self-defense] by the federal government," Stevens writes, "is really quite absurd." Nevertheless, the *Heller* majority adopted the view of history promoted by NRA-backed scholarship, declaring that the Second Amendment codified an ancient "natural right" of self-protection.

Justice Antonin Scalia, writing for the court, applied the "jurisprudence of original intention" (originalism for short) in analyzing the Second Amendment. Originalism posits that the only proper way to interpret the Constitution is to determine what the words of a given provision meant to its drafters and those living at the time of its adoption. Scalia's brand of originalism is particularly text-focused. In his opinion in *Heller*, he takes the reader through a microanalysis of the Second Amendment's 27 words: "A well regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed."

Scalia makes short work of the first 13 words, dismissing them as a "prefatory clause" which cannot be given much weight. He allows that the purpose of passing the amendment, as announced by this prefatory clause, was to preserve the state militia but maintains that the amendment accomplishes this purpose by codifying a broader preexisting right.

He then proceeds with what Waldman describes as an "almost claustrophobic" examination of the words forming the operative clause of the amendment, relying heavily on 18th-century dictionaries and linguistic hairsplitting. Scalia concedes that *bear arms* was an idiom commonly understood to refer to serving as a soldier or waging war, but asserts that this idiomatic meaning applied only if the phrase was followed by the preposition *against*, which is missing in the amendment. He distinguishes between *the militia* as discussed in the main body of the Constitution and *a militia* as the phrase appears in the Second Amendment, claiming that the former refers to an organized state military, the latter to all able-bodied men. Scalia's interpretation prevents the announced military purpose of the amendment from acting as a limitation upon the right it confers, and he defines that right broadly as an individual right to possess arms for self-defense.

Justice Stevens sat on the Supreme Court when *Heller* was decided, and he authored a fervent dissent. He too applied a form of originalist analysis to the case but focused more on the original intent of the framers in drafting the amendment than on contemporaries' understanding of its words. He examines the historical record and concludes that the plain objective of the founders was to uphold state sovereignty though the protection of state militia.

In *Six Amendments*, Stevens proposes to remedy the court's misreading in *Heller* by revising the language of the Second Amendment so that it states that "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms *when serving in the Militia* shall not be infringed."

But the Constitution is not easily amended. Even to be considered, a proposal to amend the Constitution must be authorized either by a two-thirds vote of the House and Senate or via a convention called by two-thirds of the states. If a proposed amendment reaches that point, it still must be ratified by three-fourths of all state legislatures. Achieving that level of consensus seems impossible given the fierce intensity and emotion on both sides of the issue.

Waldman thinks Stevens makes a "better originalist argument" than does Scalia's majority opinion, but he questions what he surmises was a "strategic choice" on Stevens's part to engage in an originalist analysis in the first place. Stevens took an originalist route to reach a destination he could have arrived at through a more expansive analysis based upon judicial precedent, the balancing of interests, and recognition of present-day values and circumstances. And it's a mistake, Waldman thinks, to give warrant to originalist arguments.

Stevens own comments in a November 2013 speech at the University of Georgia seem to corroborate Waldman's theory. Stevens said that his resort to originalism in *Heller* was a means to an end, and he cautioned that "even the most qualified historians may interpret important events quite differently," concluding that originalism "cannot provide the correct answer to novel questions of constitutional law" involving contemporary concerns, such as the constitutionality of bans on same-sex marriage.

Waldman and Stevens agree that one of the most troubling consequences of the *Heller* decision is the move toward giving federal judges rather than democratically elected legislators the power to make gun laws. They share the belief that local politicians are best equipped to assess the unique conditions of their constituencies and craft effective measures that do not unduly burden individual rights.

Waldman argues that those who would see meaningful gun laws passed and upheld must work to foster popular acceptance of the government's right to temper individual rights for the sake of the greater good. To do so, they should follow the NRA's example—stimulate public debate, develop their own line of scholarship, elect officials, stack the courts.

In the short term, the reformers have no choice but to play by the originalists' rules and make "better" originalist arguments, as Stevens has done. The initial focus should be upon enlarging the scope of permissible limitations on the right to bear arms enumerated in *Heller* (where the court explicitly acknowledged the constitutionality of prohibitions of gun sales to felons and mentally ill individuals and restrictions on the right to carry guns in "sensitive" locations like schools and government buildings) by uncovering analogous regulations in place during the era of the founders.

But the long game for gun-control advocates must entail showing that originalism is unworkable in theory and misused in practice. They must revive a theory of jurisprudence based on a "living Constitution," whereby judges emphasize the spirit of the Constitution over its text and apply its broad guiding principles to resolve modern questions. The most important lesson to be drawn from *Heller*, according to Waldman, is that how the courts interpret the Constitution is largely determined by public sentiment, by the will of "the people."

The Supreme Court found an individual right to own and carry guns within the words of the Second Amendment because enough people with enough passion, coordination, and influence wanted them to. "Each generation," Waldman says, "makes its own Second Amendment." And that, he believes, is as it should be. CC

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What surprises you most about the history of the Second Amendment as told by Michael Waldman?

2. What do you see as the most instructive part of this history for us today?

3. Emily Westbrook describes how debate often unfolds in the aftermath of a mass shooting. If we could start over with a blank slate, what alternatives can you imagine for talking about guns in society?

"Then & Now" blog, April 17, 2013

Learning from the anti-dueling movement

by Randall Balmer

ON JULY 11, 1804, in Weehawken, New Jersey—just across the Hudson River from Manhattan—two longtime political adversaries faced off in a duel. The result: Vice President Aaron Burr shot and mortally wounded the former secretary of the treasury, Alexander Hamilton. (No, Dick Cheney was not the first vice president to shoot someone!)

Dueling, which Benjamin Franklin characterized as a "murderous practice," was technically illegal in most states. But it had become popular as part of a "culture of honor" among veterans of the Continental Army. Soldiers and politicians sought to mimic the European military elites they had encountered while fighting alongside them against the British. "The rage for dueling here," a visitor from France noted in 1779, "has reached an incredible and scandalous point."

Those who wished to engage in a duel found ways to circumvent local laws. Dueling was illegal in the District of Columbia, so politicians simply crossed the Anacostia River to Bladensburg, Maryland. In the early 19th century, more than 50 duels took place in the area that became known as the Bladensburg Dueling Grounds.

Not all duels ended in fatality. Because firearms were still rather crude, a duel often inflicted injury rather than death. In the peculiar etiquette of the duel, as long as shots were exchanged, "honor" had been served—and the combatants often reconciled.

Hamilton's death, however, provoked a public outcry. Newspapers characterized the duel as "dreadful" and "barbarous and vicious." At Hamilton's funeral, ships in New York Harbor flew their flags at half mast. The scene at the Trinity Episcopal Church gravesite, according to the New York Evening Post, was enough "to melt a monument of marble."

The duel in Weehawken began to galvanize popular opposition. Ministers led the charge against dueling, joined by college presidents and other leaders in society. The minister Lyman Beecher was patriarch of the family that included educational reformer Catharine Beecher, famous and infamous pastor Henry Ward Beecher and the "little woman who started the big war," Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1806, two years after Hamilton's death, Lyman Beecher published a pamphlet against dueling—in which he urged voters to pledge never to vote for anyone who supported dueling.

Evangelical reformers like Beecher pointed out that the no-

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tion of grown men pointing guns at each other was barbaric and unworthy of a civilized society. Preachers and reformers launched a moral crusade not only to outlaw dueling but also to consolidate the public's repugnance toward anyone who supported the practice. Although Congress finally passed a law against dueling in 1839, the practice continued. By the onset of the Civil War, however, reformers and moral suasion had so discredited dueling that it all but disappeared.

I'm struck by the parallels with current discussions about gun control. The rhetorical flurry following the Newtown shootings reveals an earnestness for new restrictions. But I have my doubts that legislation is sufficient, especially given the patchwork of state laws, many of which differ widely. In addition to legislation, we also need to advance a moral argument against the culture of violence that characterizes American society, from video games to motion pictures. We glorify violence on the hockey ice and the football field, not to mention the gladiatorial combat on cable television. It's no wonder that anyone thinking himself aggrieved resorts to violence.

Common-sense legislation—shoring up background checks, outlawing assault weapons—provide a starting point. But people of good faith also need to mount a moral campaign similar to that waged against dueling in the 19th century—similar even to the moral outrage against dog fighting that emerged following the arrest of Michael Vick in 2007.

The Newtown massacre provides an occasion for making that argument, just like the death of Alexander Hamilton precipitated the crusade against dueling. Just as dueling had become popular among the post-Revolutionary generation, we have become a society transfixed by guns and vigilante justice. It's all too easy to settle a score or to avenge a perceived slight by pulling a trigger, whether in Columbine or Oak Creek or Aurora or Newtown or on the streets of Los Angeles or Chicago.

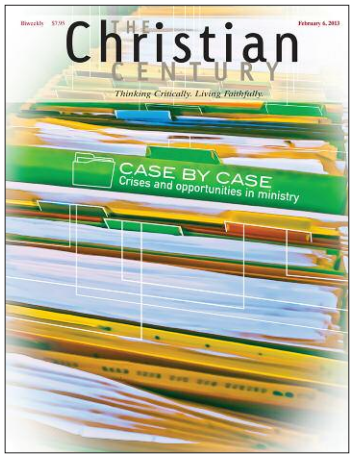
The crusade against dueling highlights the value of moral argument as a complement to the law in order to stem the ills of society. It's time for people of character to stand up and declare that resorting to violence is unacceptable in a civilized society, that the answer to too many guns is not more guns. Real reform requires more than legislation; it demands that we construct a moral consensus against behaviors that undermine the common good. CC

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Benjamin Franklin called dueling a "murderous practice." In our society today, where do you see the most potential for agreement about the immorality of a specific practice related to guns?

2. How would you gather support for a moral campaign against that practice?

From February 6, 2013 issue



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Of guns and neighbors

by the editors of the Christian Century

WHEN the Supreme Court in 2008 declared that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to own a gun, the justices made it clear that this right—like any right—is not unlimited. "The court's opinion should not be taken to cast doubt on long-standing prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill . . . or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms."

For the past 20 years, the "conditions and qualifications" attached to gun ownership have been steadily removed, mostly at the behest of the National Rifle Association, which insists on a virtually absolute right to gun possession. But the massacre of 20 children and six teachers at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, has finally led President Obama and other leaders to push for significant gun-control measures, including limits on the number of bullets that gun clips can hold; reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons; and universal background checks for all gun buyers.

The coming weeks will be a crucial period for Americans to support passage of such measures, which would serve the welfare of all (though not the financial welfare of the gun manufacturers who support and profit from the NRA's political influence).

Most Americans are horrified at the easy availability of military-style weapons. They are astonished that 40 percent of all firearms purchased in this country are sold without checking if the buyer has a record of crime, drug addiction or mental illness. That loophole exists because the 1993 Brady bill—the last significant piece of federal legislation on guns—requires background checks only for sales by licensed dealers, not for private sales. Ending the private sales loophole is a crucial step in reducing gun violence.

And such a proposal has widespread support. Though the NRA fought the Brady bill at every step and even challenged its constitutionality, polls show that 74 percent of NRA members and 84 percent of gun owners—and 95 percent of all

Americans—think submitting to a background check is a reasonable condition for gun ownership.

In the biblical perspective, social issues are always framed primarily as questions of obligation, not of individual rights: not "What do I get to do?" but "What do we owe to God and neighbor?" The biblical tradition readily accepts the fact that loving one's neighbor will entail "conditions and qualifications" on one's actions.

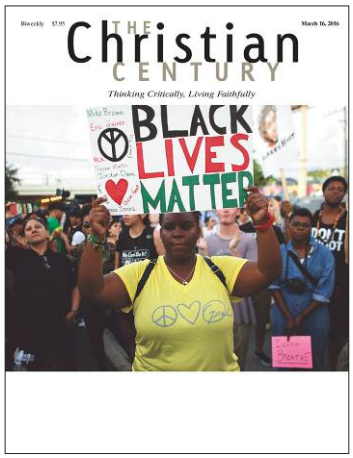
In that spirit, the book of Deuteronomy includes this very practical directive about everyday life: "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof; otherwise you might have bloodguilt on your house, if anyone should fall from it" (22:8). The point of this rule is clear, and it is as relevant in our time as in ancient Israel, as applicable to guns as to houses: if the things you want to build and possess present a life-threatening hazard to your neighbors, you need to take steps to eliminate the danger. CC

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The editors write that the weeks after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School were a crucial period for enacting gun safety measures that had widespread support. Why do you think those measures didn't pass?

2. Thinking about gun ownership in terms of duty to our neighbors, what policies might you support?

From March 16, 2016 issue



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IN TEXAS, EVEN THE PASTORS ARE CARRYING

Guns in the pulpit

by Kyle Childress

WHEN MY BARBER asked me if I believed that zombies were real, I laughed. "Zombies are on TV, movies, in books and games, but they're not real."

With agitation in her voice, my barber replied, "Well, my pastor preaches zombies are real. He says that the devil reinvigorates dead bodies and that's what zombies are."

"Where in the Bible does he get this?"

With more than a little indignation she said, "I don't know. All I know is that zombies are real, and we better get our guns and our ammunition ready."

The late Texas journalist Molly Ivins said, of watching Texas politics, "I used to laugh, cry, or throw up, and I got tired of crying and throwing up." I'd say the same goes for much of Texas church life.

Zombies might be a laughing matter, but guns are not. Since January 1 in Texas, it is legal for licensed gun owners to openly carry a gun in public places, including church, unless the church posts signs at every entrance that say no to guns—and follows specific guidelines that dictate the wording on the sign.

For several years it's been legal to carry concealed guns, but most of us didn't pay much attention. The guns were "out of sight and out of mind," and many of us clergy didn't think we had to be concerned about guns in church. The idea seemed ludicrous. Now, with the open carry law in effect, there is considerable debate in congregations as well as workplaces and businesses. Guns are still banned from schools and hospitals, but not in many places where they were previously banned, including state universities and state mental health treatment centers. A class of first-graders touring the state

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capitol in Austin will wait in line as a security agent checks each child's backpack. Then the child must go through a metal detector. Meanwhile, those who are licensed to carry a firearm are waived through, pausing only long enough to sign their name.

Last year a church down the road from us voted—over the pastor's strong disagreement—to arm the ushers. Now, as of January 1, the church's ushers are no longer the only ones armed on Sunday morning. Clergy I've talked with assume that a considerable number of church attendees are carrying guns on any Sunday, and they say that most of the churches around town have declined to post signs. Several pastors told me that even the prospect of "No Guns" signs would spark a heated debate—one that supporters felt they would lose.

The rationale of gun-carrying church members is that they want to be ready to protect themselves and their families if an armed intruder enters the church. But with the new law in place, who will know if the person is an armed intruder or an armed visitor? And even if the person is not carrying a firearm openly, that person may still be armed. Therefore, all visitors are now scrutinized, with every visitor being a potential threat. At the same time, to demonstrate their enthusiasm for the new law, some churches are posting signs that say—as an act of outreach—"Guns Welcome Here."

I've been astonished at the level of fear associated with perceived threats that are just outside our doors ready to get us. A close friend who is a dental hygienist and a devoted Catholic is considering going through handgun training so that she can become licensed to carry. As she says, "Who knows if someone might barge into the dental office and start shooting?" Down at the barbershop I've discovered that my barber is armed (zombies beware). Now I'm anxious about getting a haircut. Maybe I need a panic button like the ones that the church with the armed ushers installed throughout the building. Church members can sound an alarm if they feel threatened.

In my own congregation I underestimated the amount of fear about other people carrying guns. Over and over I've heard, "We don't want guns and the church is not the place for them, but we're in the spotlight because of other positions our church has taken. We're afraid that the signs will be a magnet for people who want to make a pro-gun statement." One member said, "The signs make a statement. If it was just me, I'd agree to posting them. But my whole family is here in church, including my new baby grandson, and I don't mind telling you I'm afraid." This is a congregation that's made courageous stands for LGBTQ persons, against racism, and for peace in the midst of the Iraq war.

Not long ago a stranger walked into Sunday morning worship at our partner church in town, a distinguished African-American congregation. He was dressed in baggy clothes, carried a backpack, and was visibly agitated. Several deacons sat with him, then visited with him afterward. He needed help, which the church provided. But after his visit the deacons decided to sit at the back near the entrances, instead of in the front row.

Our own ushers are revising where and how they greet people, and we're installing security cameras at each entrance. And, after a lot of congregational deliberation, we're posting signs at every entrance—one against open carry and one against concealed carry.

My most recent barbershop conversation was about how many pastors in town are going through handgun training so they can pack a pistol—even on Sunday mornings in the pulpit. After asking around, I discovered that there are more preachers packing on Sunday mornings than not. I was dismayed.

I keep asking myself where the witness of Christ is in all of this. Many of the pastors who are carrying guns teach and preach a version of the gospel that's different from what I know. It is a gospel of everyone looking out for himself or herself, a gospel that says, "It's a dangerous world, so get them before they get you. I'm protecting me and mine, and furthermore it is God's will and biblical teaching to do so." Loving your neighbor as yourself, loving enemies, suffering servanthood, forgiveness, the Sermon on the Mount, living and dying like Jesus—I'm hearing much less about that.

One of my deacons, the dean at a nearby college, was in a faculty meeting listening to faculty members discuss how they were all getting guns. The dean said she refused to carry a gun. It got quiet in the room, then someone asked why. She said she was not prepared to shoot and perhaps kill someone. There was a long pause and then, "What would you do if someone threatening came into the classroom?" The dean said, "I'd tell them about Jesus and try to show them the love of Jesus."

"You could hear a pin drop," she told me later. "Everyone looked at the floor, and someone changed the subject."

During a sermon on baptism a few weeks ago, I explained why I would not be carrying a gun in the pulpit or anywhere else. "It has to do with baptism," I said. "When I went down into the waters of baptism, I did not come out to strap on a gun. I came out entering into the life of the crucified and res-

urrected Jesus Christ." I went on, "In baptism our lives are no longer our own. We belong to Christ." I could see and hear some crying in the congregation.

The next week it felt as if we'd crossed a threshold. We had a new energy in church. One dad with two young children in tow said, "I'm glad to know my pastor is not packing." After the service a visitor with a graying ponytail and wearing a jeans jacket walked up and flipped open his jacket. "I'm clean," he said. "I'm not carrying. Because of Jesus, I'm not carrying." I embraced him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Does your congregation's building have a sign indicating that guns are not permitted? How have people responded? If you don't have that sign, what do you think would happen if you put one up?

2. Has anyone come to your church openly carrying a weapon? What was the response? If that hasn't happened, what do you think the response would be?

3. Kyle Childress writes about living in a culture where carrying a gun is becoming the norm. He identifies several theological issues related to this reality. As a group, discuss how the following are or are not related to guns:

- *hospitality*
- *baptism*
- *the devil/evil/Satan*