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Faith communities should do more to confront gun idolatry

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

When I was a college freshman, I spent a weekend in rural Missouri with my roommate's family. John and I went rabbit hunting one morning.

It was the first time I ever fired a gun. I hit a rabbit in the head while John, an experienced hunter, gutted two. It was a good time for me to quit hanging around guns. I have not fired a gun since.

But that doesn't mean guns haven't been on my mind. Americans have no choice but to think about guns. They're everywhere. As a newspaper reporter, I've stood over the bodies of people killed by guns, and I once covered on the porch of an inner-city house while police across the street tried to flush out a gunman who had fired at them.

Gun violence in this country is a scandal, and I'm pleased to say I'm not the only Presbyterian who thinks so. The Rev. James Atwood has spent almost four decades trying to prevent gun violence through his preaching, writing and activism.

He was in Kansas City not long ago, speaking in several venues and preaching to my congregation. His book, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Exposé*, contains the core of his persuasive message as he seeks to alert the country to the reality that guns kill 30,000 people in the U.S. each year, a number far, far higher than any other developed country.

What I especially found engaging about Atwood is that as a gun owner and hunter, he has the kind of credibility I would not have because I've never owned a gun. But more than that, Atwood thinks theologically, and he believes gun violence is in many ways the result of idolatry.

"For masses of Americans, guns have become idols," says Atwood, who chairs the gun-violence-prevention group Heeding God's Call of Greater Washington, D.C.

The leadership of the National Rifle Association "and those zealots who have never seen a gun they didn't like validate the accuracy of the warning" that unwarranted fascination with firearms can become idolatrous, he says.

"Divine attributes are ascribed to those things that are made with human hands and whose purpose is to kill," Atwood says. He quotes former NRA executive J. Warren Cassidy: "You would get a far better understanding of the NRA if you approach us as if you were approaching one of the great religions of the world."

As Atwood writes in his book, "There are political dimensions whenever guns are discussed, but what happens in society because of guns makes them a profound spiritual concern that must be dealt with by people of faith."

Many faith communities in this country have been voices favoring sensible gun legislation that would protect both vulnerable citizens and our Second Amendment rights. In 2010, for instance, my Presbyterian denomination issued an excellent report called "Gun Violence, Gospel Values," partly under Atwood's guidance.

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And earlier this year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops submitted testimony before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee listing ways to reduce gun violence.

"The Church," the statement said, "has been a consistent voice for the promotion of peace at home and around the world and a strong advocate for the reasonable regulation of firearms."

And yet precious little happens that results in a reduction of gun violence in the United States. Even the horrific slaughter of innocents in Newtown, Conn., in December couldn't bring our legislators to take even limited action.

It's an outrage. It puts the United States into the uncivilized category when it comes to how we deal with guns, and Atwood is right that part of the problem is that "the faith community has been asleep -- sound asleep."

This is a huge national problem, but because the corrupting power of money is stopping our elected leaders from taking action, we're going to have to start solving it congregation by congregation. What will yours do?

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for the *Star's* website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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