

Statement on Question 3 submitted by Episcopal Peace Fellowship, Maine Chapter

Question 3 on the November ballot calls for extension, with significant exceptions, of background checks to private gun sales and transfers. The arguments against this modest provision rely largely on conjuring up unlikely scenarios in which overzealous law enforcement officers go into homes and about Maine woods demanding proof that background checks have been done, or that a gun in hand is legitimately in possession of the person having it. The source of this obfuscatory propaganda is, we can be sure, the National Rifle Association, whose position is that the only laws about guns should be ones that make them more available.

The NRA and its Maine allies play upon unwarranted fears, and an inflated conception of gun owners' rights pursuant to the Second Amendment. There is a right to bear arms. The Courts also have said that Governments can, in the public interest, make laws and regulations which put reasonable limits on who can have weaponry, and what kinds can be available.

There is much about the opposition's arguments that is questionable, but perhaps one version captures best an outlook which is particularly troubling for people of faith such as those of us who participate in the Episcopal Peace Fellowship. This telling view is succinctly expressed on a lawn sign which asserts that background checks were a failure in New York, and that they address a problem which Maine does not have. If it is true that provision for background checks in New York City have not instantly solved the problem of gun violence there, it is also true that in many States where background checks are required, there have been almost 50 per cent reductions in gun-related deaths.

It is the second portion of the sign which is most telling, however. Thankfully, even Maine's small urban areas do not face the challenges that major metropolitan areas do. But to say that Mainers can rightly ignore the problem of gun violence is both shortsighted and self-centered. It is easy to imagine that many citizens of Aurora or San Bernardino or Newtown or other places where guns fell into the wrong hands once told themselves that they and their children lived safely away from the dangerous streets of New York or Chicago. For us to assume that "It Can't Happen Here" would be foolishly naïve.

It would also be morally wrong. For people of faith, there is the eternal question: "Who is my neighbor?" I may live far from the complexities of life in Portland, but was not the young woman mortally wounded there with an untraceable gun my neighbor? Her parents, originators of Question 3, would certainly suggest so. How often have guns exchanged via Uncle Henry's or gun shows migrated down to Boston or New York and been used to take human life? Under present circumstances, we cannot know. We can however predict with assurance that as gun laws are tightened in States to our south, those who Governor LePage says come here from those areas to peddle drugs will be increasingly inclined to take guns back for destructive use or sale in other places.

We cannot say that all that matters are my individual rights. We live not just as laws unto ourselves, but in community. To paraphrase the poet and priest John Donne, no person is an island entire to him or her self, and each person's death diminishes us—even if that death occurs well away from our immediate surroundings.

Adoption of Question 3 would be a modest but much needed step toward ending the scourge of gun violence which afflicts so many. Our own Bishop Stephen Lane has spoken strongly on the matter. We of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship of Maine here reiterate his concern, and urge our fellow citizens to vote positively on Question 3.

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