

Sunday August 18, 2013

With a Bushmaster under the Bible?

By Jim Taylor

How comfortable you would feel, going to church, knowing that your minister had a 9mm Glock handgun tucked under her clerical robes?

Or perhaps keeps a Bushmaster semi-automatic rifle, the kind Adam Lanza used to kill 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut last December, parked on the pulpit below the Bible?

I certainly wouldn't feel any safer.

People don't always agree on the purpose of a church. Or a mosque, temple, or synagogue. Some see it as a site for instruction and indoctrination. Others, as the place where they worship. Still others, as a meeting place.

Personally, I value church as sanctuary.

The word sanctuary derives from Latin -- *sanctuarium*, a safe place for keeping holy things. For me, those holy things are not religious artifacts but the relationships between people. I want my church to be a place where people can be themselves, without fear of ridicule or rejection.

"Without fear" -- that's the key.

Defenceless assembly

But for some minds, that sense of sanctuary -- a safe place -- becomes a rationale for arming against potential aggressors.

Will Page, for example, pastor at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Williston, North Dakota, fears that people with evil intentions may choose religious targets simply because they know members of the congregation are not armed.

Like the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, where an intruder was able to shoot six worshippers last year. "The whole idea of a gun-free zone is inherently dangerous," Page claims.

Chris Chinn would agree. In 1996, he was held hostage by a gunman while working for the evangelical Focus on the Family organization. In 2005, he was at a New Life Church in Colorado when another gunman killed two young sisters -- and would probably have killed more, if Jeanne Assam, a church security volunteer, had not shot him.

"If an active shooter comes in," Chinn says, "there is nothing like a firearm to stop another firearm."

Chinn runs a course for "trained responders, people who have some level of training, not just good guys with guns."

Relocating the OK Corral

There may already be far more guns in church than you realize.

Deb Klutz, an evangelical minister in Kansas, admits she carries a gun in her purse when she preaches.

Texan Larry Arnold told *The Christian Post*, "I carry every time I go to church, including when I sit in the loft with the choir."

"I'm licensed to carry a gun, but I don't on Sunday morning," said pastor Brady Boyd in Colorado Springs. "It could be dangerous for a pastor to be shooting back in a big crowd of people. My church is safe because we have the right people carrying guns."

But who are "the right people"?

Chris Chadwick runs a 55-hour program that teaches selected church members how to handle and use handguns. Currently, according to the Huffington Post, he has 30 church members or pastors taking his course. “They get all the training necessary to become armed private security officers,” Chadwick says.

Legal approval

Canada, of course, has different gun laws from the Excited States of America. But what happens there inevitably has ripple effects here because of the dominance of American media.

Arkansas and North Dakota have passed laws which permit “concealed carry” in churches. So has Michigan, although the law has not taken effect yet. Georgia not only allows guns in churches, but also in bars – where disagreements are much more likely to escalate into violence. Illinois, paradoxically, prohibits guns in casinos but allows them in churches.

Democratic senator Dan Kotowski, a former gun-control lobbyist, is trying to rescind the Illinois law. “There are certain places where guns should be off-limits. Churches, as sanctuaries, are among them,” Kotowski told Associated Press.

Amazingly, for me, some clergy leaders argue that prohibiting pistols in church might contravene constitutional and property rights. A National Rifle Association representative plans to challenge Kotowski’s amendment.

Source of safety

Predictably, both sides quote the Bible to support their arguments.

So Chris Chinn’s letters and e-mails all cite the prophet Nehemiah: “We prayed to our God and posted a guard.”

Conversely, United Methodist minister Philip Blackwell in Chicago notes that when mercenaries came to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, he told his disciples to put their swords away: “They begin to fight, and he calls his guys off, and heals the one who is wounded.”

“If you’re walking around carrying a gun and think it is a tribute to the Christian gospel, you’ve been reading the wrong book,” says Blackwell. He blames the American gun lobby for inciting fear – “to turn every house into a bunker, every church into a citadel, every school into a penitentiary....”

In other words, to make sure that no place feels safe.

As Charles Burton, pastor of a Unity Fellowship Church near St. Louis, commented: “If people don’t feel safe because of the lack of community, guns won’t fix that.”

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YOUR TURN

John Willems wrote about last week’s column on the feelings of survivors, “I have books in my library that use more words and say less than this week’s Sharp Edges column. Now take on Dr. Earl A. Grollman!”

Cliff Boldt pondered people’s tendency to trivialize tragedies: “Friends in Calgary have described how many of them drove to High River to see the devastation wrought by the floods. Made a picnic trip out of it.”

Beth, who didn't give her last name, corrected my comment about Hurricane Sandy devastating New York. Also "New Jersey and Connecticut," Beth ntod. "Many not back in homes, many homes boarded up. Our post office counter is still closed, but open for P.O. boxes! But, as we say in NJ, 'the shore is open' and glorious this year.

"The part about not getting ahead of people's feelings resonates."

Isabel Gibson commented on "the almost overpowering temptation to tell someone that anything bad they are feeling is unjustified, unreasonable, out of proportion, or at least only temporary. How much harder to follow Rabbi Kushner's advice and just say 'I'm sorry' and shut up. That impulse to fix things is a good one -- when it applies to things. Not so helpful when it's applied to emotions."

Diane Robinson wrote, "You make a good case for comparing the stages one goes through following a death with the stages one goes through following a survival. I would like to add one more 'stage' to your 'survival stages': guilt. A survivor may feel guilt that s/he survived a traumatic event whereas a loved one/friend/co-worker did not."

I agree with Diane – I just don't know how to fit it neatly into a pentatonic pattern!

June Blau described sympathy as "1/3 (or less) feeling sorry for those experiencing loss and 2/3 (or more) glad it is not oneself!"

Both of Nancy Kerr's parents were preachers. After reading my column, she found herself comparing the effect each had on people:

"When I went back to churches my dad served, I heard, 'He was such a good pastor! He would call on me and when he left, I felt better. I couldn't remember that he said much, but he listened and I felt better.'

"When I returned to churches my mother served, she was remembered for her sermons; in pastoral visits, she took charge, directed and gave instructions. People would rave about her sermons!"

In her own ministry, Nancy "realized that people have different needs at different points in their lives. During a crisis, taking charge, as my preacher mom did, seemed to help. When crisis had happened and people were coping, my dad's method seemed to be what people needed.

"As a clinical psychologist, I found that listening — sometimes with open-ended questions used sparingly — seemed to help people come to their own coping decisions. Listening worked! Preaching had a place: in the pulpit."

The column two weeks ago about Joe's computer continues to generate responses. John Shaffer wrote, "I remember when I was forced into the world of computers, kicking and screaming. I was a good typist and publishing a 110 page report for a segment of my denomination. I made an error, I would have to do the page over again. Finally my wife sat me down at her computer and showed me how I could correct an error in seconds. So I entered the world of computers and now my typewriter is not only obsolete, I can not find anyone who will fix it. Maybe I need a fire and then I will not carry that typewriter or my first computer (in five boxes) from home to home. By the way, it was an Osborne computer. Anyone out there like to have it? FREE. I can't stand to throw it away."

Judyth Mermelstein let go with a small rant about Microsoft's influence on the computer industry (having survived Montreal's big ice storm, a flood, a fire, and a visit to her banker). Her letter is too long to print here, but she recommended some alternatives to Microsoft Word that some of you might like to follow up:

"OpenOffice, LibreOffice and some others ... Recently I've been using the free Kingsoft Office (Chinese but doesn't do anything nefarious in the background) ... The programs aren't quite as feature-laden unless you buy the Pro version but they handle all the basics ***better*** than the Office 2010 Starter that came with this computer (running Windows 7)."

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
