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Posted on Tue, May. 26, 2009

Editorial: Heed their call

If there's any justice in a courtroom in Philadelphia today, a judge will find 12 faith-based activists not guilty of trespassing charges.

The defendants are surely guilty. They are guilty of trying to stem the bloody tide of gun violence in the city.

They were arrested in January at Colosimo's Gun Center on Spring Garden Street, where they attempted to get owner James Colosimo to sign a code of conduct to reduce "straw purchases" of handguns. Colosimo has refused.

Their targets include other gun shops, although Colosimo's is the worst source of handguns used in crimes on city streets. The defendants are an Episcopal rector, a rabbi, a Brethren minister, and others who have formed a group called Heeding God's Call. The group of religious institutions includes representatives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia and the Friends Yearly Meeting.

They are working to extend their effort throughout Pennsylvania, to involve other congregations in Lancaster County, Chester, Harrisburg, and elsewhere. Philadelphia isn't the only city plagued by handgun violence.

There is moral force in their movement. About 2,000 people are wounded and about 300 killed by gunfire each year in Philadelphia alone. The faith community members say it's the duty of congregations everywhere to promote peace and safety. To be your brother's keeper.

The 10-point code of conduct was created last year by a national coalition of mayors, including Mayor Nutter, and Wal-Mart - the largest seller of rifles and shotguns in the country.

Dealers who take the pledge agree to videotape all of their firearms transactions and participate in a computerized gun-trace log that will identify buyers whose previous gun purchases were used in crimes.

They also agree to conduct criminal background checks on employees and train them to deter illegal purchasers. The code states that dealers should accept only federal or state photo IDs.

The purpose of the code is to reduce the number of straw purchases in Pennsylvania, something the legislature has been unwilling to do. "Straw buyers" purchase handguns in bulk legally at a gun shop, then peddle the firearms to others on the street. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives has repeatedly notified Colosimo's that its guns end up in the hands of criminals.

But Pennsylvania legislators in the grip of the National Rifle Association have refused to enact commonsense gun laws that would curb this illegal practice. The simple requirement that a gun owner must report any lost or stolen weapon would foil many straw purchasers, who try to claim that guns used in crimes

were misplaced or stolen from them.

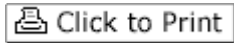
Pennsylvania also should limit handgun purchases to one per month to thwart legal buyers who are fronting for gun traffickers.

The members of Heeding God's Call also intend to bring their message to the pulpits of legislators' home congregations. They hope that building grassroots support across the state will change some minds in Harrisburg.

The dozen activists who are scheduled to go on trial today may have overstayed their welcome at a gun shop. But their movement is decidedly welcome in this city and state.

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