

BELIEF by Kathryn Barlow-Williams

Clergy shouldn't carry guns to protect worshippers

There are things a pastor should never have to say. For example:

It's OK if you forget to silence your phone, but please do not answer a call and chat it up with your buddy.

Do not clip your toenails while waiting for the service to begin.

Do not mask gossip as a prayer concern. "We really need to pray for Sally and Bob. He's having an affair. I heard ..."

Thanks to Bishop E.W. Jackson of Falls Church in Chesapeake, Virginia, I have another item to add to the list:

Clergy should not pack guns to protect their flock.

Jackson appeared on Fox News hours after the shootings at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and said he would protect his church by carrying a gun to worship.

Jesus never allowed his disciples to speak or act in such ways. When evil marched into the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter tried to defend Jesus by cutting off a soldier's ear. Instead of applauding his



Kathryn Barlow-Williams: To follow Christ is risky and dangerous.

disciple's bravery, Jesus commanded Peter to lay down his sword and healed the soldier.

Beyond the theological argument against clergy packing guns are the numerous practical reasons. There is little to no evidence to prove armed civilians are effective at stopping violent attacks. In fact, they often cause more harm than good.

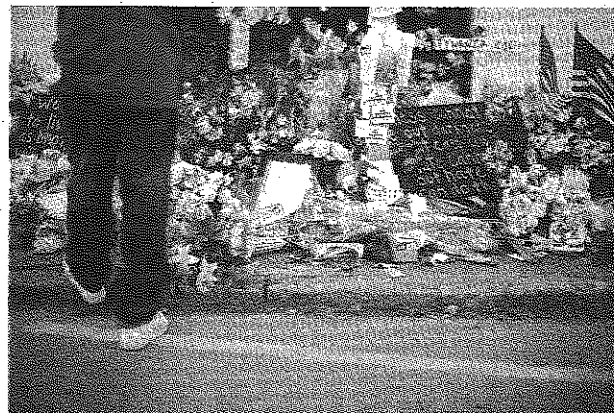
Frankly, Bishop Jackson, I don't have time to learn how to shoot a gun. Given that I never excelled at sports like basketball, archery or even throwing darts, hitting my target while seized with terror would be impossible. Perhaps I could make progress if I attended military boot camp, but that would be hard to squeeze into my schedule between hospital visits, preparing for and leading worship, attending meetings, and officiating at baptisms, weddings

and funerals, not to mention raising three teenagers with my husband.

With all due respect to my colleagues in ministry, I would not feel safer if they carried guns either. Clergy types are not known for their physicality or aggressive nature. More contemplative in nature, we tend to be a gentler, fluffy-in-the-middle, sort. (We do love those church suppers.) Handing a gun to a pudgy version of a less saintly Mother Teresa is not an effective defense against terror.

When clergy carry guns to worship and metal detectors greet visitors at our sanctuary doors, we won't need to worry much longer about a stranger killing disciples. The church will kill itself soon enough. To follow Christ is risky and dangerous. Jesus never denied that, and at the same time he never trained his disciples in military defense. He taught them to love, forgive and live generously even as they faced a hostile world.

The Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney and those



Jim Watson / Getty Images

A boy stands outside Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., site of a recent massacre that killed nine people.

gathered to study Scripture practiced Christian hospitality. They welcomed a stranger into their small group, and he

responded by shooting them. No one could prevent such an unspeakable act. I am in awe of the members of Emanuel

Church who are able to talk about forgiveness already. As the stunning bite of shock gives way to grief's suffocating yawn, may divine comfort and strength continue to breathe new life.

I am as inspired by the grace of Emanuel members as I am shocked by Bishop Jackson's bravado. He leaves me no choice but to add yet another item to my list of things I should never have to say, especially to another pastor. For Christ's sake, Bishop Jackson leave your gun at home.

The Rev. Kathryn Barlow-Williams is senior pastor of Oak Hills Presbyterian Church.

BELIEF *By the Rev. Kathryn Barlow-Williams*

Spiritual journey absent of real-world obligations

"Eat, Pray, Love": With verbs like that, the book had to be great, or so I thought.

Years ago I tried to fast during Holy Week, but it was an epic failure. My stomach growled so fiercely I could not hear God. Blinded by carnal visions of hamburgers, milk shakes and chocolate, I could not see God, either. My irritation with all humanity increased in direct proportion to my growing hunger pangs. Finally I broke down and ate because no one likes a cranky pastor.

The title "Eat, Pray, Love" suggested I could enjoy food and be spiritual at the same time. However, after reading a few pages, I was annoyed. The autobiography chronicles author Elizabeth Gilbert's spiritual journey. Divorcing her husband and



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quitting her job, she left the comforts of home to travel the world in search of her true self.

Most people loved Gilbert's story. The book quickly became an international bestseller and was made into a movie starring Julia Roberts. Time magazine even named the author one of the top 100 influential people in the world.

Clearly I was one of the few who was more irritated than inspired by her.

To celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the book, the publisher is seeking writers to contribute to a collection of essays called



Courtesy photo

Julia Roberts plays Liz Gilbert in the movie "Eat Pray Love," based on Gilbert's popular memoir.

"Eat Pray Love Made Me Do It."

My submission would most certainly be rejected. "Eat, Pray, Love" didn't make me do anything but wonder how anyone could have so much free time and money. As I read her book, I wondered, "Who couldn't be spiritu-

al if they didn't work, pay a mortgage, nurture a marriage and raise children?" In the movie, Roberts ate mountains of pizza and pasta but never gained an ounce. Nirvana never looked so good.

No doubt Gilbert is brave and inspired. To find her dream, she first

had to leave her husband, work, family and friends. Many of us get stuck in misery because we dread facing the nightmare that comes with change. When the devil we know asks us to dance, we say yes simply because we are terrified to sit alone. Gilbert took a bold, lonely step to fulfill her dreams.

That lonely step enabled her to choose when and where she wanted to go. She didn't have to justify her expenses to a spouse. She didn't listen to children whine, "I'm bored, I'm hungry," or "I'm thirsty." When kids fought for the window seat, left a cellphone on a shuttle bus or picked up head lice, she was not expected to fix it. Gilbert simply got on a plane, buckled her seat belt and flew into the wild blue yonder to live her dream.

Few of us can drop everything to fulfill our heart's desire. To find our spiritual center, we must navigate the traffic of ordinary life, weaving work and mundane tasks such as grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, paying bills, changing diapers, chauffeuring kids and getting the oil changed. We must dig deep to find God who lives within and around us.

We can eat, pray and love while managing a cacophony of tangled needs. When we do that, our eyes can open wide enough to see divine glory hidden in our ordinary, sometimes boring, often frustrating, but always amazing lives.

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