



Dear Lt. Governor, Speaker, and every Member of the Legislature:

I write to you today with a heavy heart as a friend, ally, former colleague and competitor in the electoral arena, a fellow Tennessean, the president of the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a father of three children who attend the Covenant School.

Since March 27, 2023, each of you has taken part in or made public displays of support for the school our family cherishes. In addition, you recently passed school safety legislation by significant bipartisan margins and are currently working to pass a budget that will fund an armed SRO for every public school and provide funding for private schools to become more secure as well. For this work, I am grateful.

In many ways, the horrific events of that day went far beyond the six victims, seven families, school community, and church congregation to a catastrophe that was felt statewide. As leaders for our state, I know you have felt the effects of that day in unique ways. Tennesseans have placed their trust in you to guide and steward our state, particularly in times of tragedy. This is one of those moments.

My view of the respective roles you hold is informed by my Christian faith, which springs forth from this foundation: Every life, without exception, is created with infinite worth in the eyes of our Lord because each one is made in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Further, Jesus instructs us to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39), a command so sweeping it reorients everything about our lives.

Christians believe that holding the office of an elected official is an important calling that is not to be taken lightly. We believe government is an institution ordained by God and given certain responsibilities to ensure an orderly society by protecting the lives and liberties of its citizens, using its authority to be a “terror” to the “bad conduct” of wrongdoers (Rom. 13:3). As one who used to walk the halls of our historic Capitol as a staff member, I believe the Legislature, in particular, plays an integral role in fulfilling the mission set forth for the state by our Creator.

It is because of this weighty responsibility that I write to you today in the wake of what took place at Covenant.

As officials of the state, you have the authority to act in any number of contexts to oppose evil and protect innocent lives. As it relates to schools and the vulnerable lives of children, I would submit you have an obligation to do so. Moreover, you have an opportunity now to respond in a way that is loving, protective of our liberties, and consistent with God’s design for the state.



There are any number of potential policies that could be offered to prevent the atrocities that occurred at Covenant from happening elsewhere in our state. I would like to highlight one in particular: The proposal articulated by Gov. Bill Lee. It would strengthen our state's orders of protection to guard the broader population from those who are a danger to themselves or others. What he outlined is a thoughtful approach to ensure we respect the constitutional rights of citizens while also helping to protect potential victims from dangerous individuals. Allowing law enforcement to work with families in order to initiate action that involves full due process in the judicial system will ensure individuals who could cause great harm are temporarily kept from accessing weapons, protecting them and others from potential tragedy.

This is a sensible proposal worthy of your immediate support. Tennessee Code already envisions a course of action that allows the judicial branch to quickly examine situations and efficiently determine whether a plausible threat of harm exists. Expanding this area of the law, as Gov. Lee proposes, gives families the ability to prevent loved ones from taking their lives or the lives of others, which would be an invaluable amendment to our existing legal framework.

Undoubtedly, there will be some objections or hesitations. Policy-making is never easy, but let me offer some thoughts to quell those concerns so that a path forward may be revealed.

- This proposal is about helping individuals in distress or dealing with mental anguish. By empowering families to signal a loved one is in need, you are giving them the ability to partner with law enforcement to provide direct and focused attention where and when it is needed for the safety of the individual and the broader community.
- This proposal values life, both the life of the person in distress and anyone who may become a target in their anguish. Removing their ability to inflict harm on themselves or others is in line with our state's strong commitment to protecting the sanctity of life.
- This proposal allows a narrow expansion of order of protection laws that, rather than conflict, actually align with our Second Amendment rights, something that is very important to many Tennesseans, and to me personally as a gun owner. By focusing on those in need of help and support, this policy helps prevent the loss of innocent lives without eroding our cherished, fundamental rights. In fact, because this solution is so clearly situated in the mental health arena, by not passing it, you risk undermining support for the Second Amendment.
- This proposal restrains evil. Yes, it is true we live in a world tainted by terrible acts and deeds, but that is never an excuse for inaction. While it may not prevent every instance of this sort of violence, it will prevent some, and thereby save innocent lives. That should be more than enough reason to advance this proposal.



Other voices are saying there is too little time left in this legislative session to consider such a proposal. Little credence should be given to that. As stated above, one of government's purposes is the protection of our essential liberties, especially the right to life. Now is the time to act. Safeguarding the lives of Tennesseans is worth the small effort required to extend the legislative work period and reopen committees if necessary.

Southern Baptists comprise over one-fifth of the population of Tennessee, and our churches dot its landscape. Each year, messengers appointed by such churches come together for our national convention. Last year, Southern Baptists overwhelmingly passed a [resolution](#) that, in part, states the following:

“We earnestly pray for our local, state, and federal leaders to recognize the seriousness of the ongoing threat of mass shootings throughout our society and to take concrete steps, towards solutions that uphold the dignity and value of every human life, especially the most vulnerable among us, and to minimize the threat of gun violence throughout our society.”

That is my prayer for you, our legislative leaders. I beg of you to put down the weapons of partisan warfare in this moment, and instead put on the cloak of serious and thoughtful policymaking that will make a real difference for parents, the public, and those suffering from mental distress.

The Covenant School tragedy was the worst school shooting in our state's history. I am asking that you take steps now to ensure no school in Tennessee ever has to endure our nightmare again.

Respectfully,

F. Brent Leatherwood
President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission
of the Southern Baptist Convention

Cc: Governor Bill Lee