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An aerial view of the Tennessee Capitol is pictured in Nashville, April 11. (OSV News/Reuters/C

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Nashville, Tenn. — April 18, 2023

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The three Catholic bishops of Tennessee — Bishop Mark Spalding of Nashville, Bishop David Talley of Memphis and Bishop Richard Stika of Knoxville — and the Tennessee Catholic Conference have included their names on a letter to Gov. Bill Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly urging passage of gun safety measures.

The letter, signed by faith leaders from across the state, was drafted by Voices for a Safer Tennessee, a newly formed, nonpartisan statewide coalition dedicated to prioritizing gun safety and advocating for common sense gun laws to make communities across Tennessee safer for all.

Written in response to the recent tragedy at The Covenant School March 27, when an assailant shot and killed three students, all age 9, and three adults, the letter supports Lee's "investment in school safety and funding" and urges legislators to take the following steps:

- Allow authorities to temporarily remove guns from those who pose a risk to themselves or others by implementing extreme risk laws, allowing family members and law enforcement to petition a civil court for an "extreme risk protection order" to temporarily remove weapons from such individuals.
- Keep guns away from dangerous people by requiring background checks on all purchases and closing the background check loophole.
- Stop firearms from falling into the wrong hands by requiring gun owners to provide safe storage and report lost and stolen guns.

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"Together, we agree on much more than we disagree and can work together to build a safer Tennessee," the letter concludes. "Offering our collective public support will help us all do the next right thing as we heal together."

Several clergy joined the bishops of Tennessee and the Tennessee Catholic Conference in signing the letter. Educational leaders signed a similar letter.

Since the school shooting, calls for gun control, and just days after the tragedy, hundreds of schoolchildren, teens and parents protested inside the Tennessee Capitol for stricter gun laws as legislators began to consider such measures. On April 11, Lee signed an executive order to strengthen background checks for the purchase of firearms and expressed encouraged lawmakers to pass a "red flag" law that would prohibit dangerous people from owning guns.

Voices for a Safer Tennessee also planned to host a "Linking Arms for Change" event in Nashville and Knoxville April 18.

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Tennessee's three Catholic bishops — Bishops Mark Spalding of Nashville, David Talley of Memphis and Richard Stika of Knoxville — and the Tennessee Catholic Conference signed on to letter to Gov. Bill Lee and the Tennessee General Assembly urging passage of gun safety measures. Voices for a Safer Tennessee, a nonpartisan statewide coalition, drafted the letter it said would be shared directly with Lee and lawmakers April 18. (OSV News file photos/Katie Peterson, Tennessee Register, Rick Musacchio, Tennessee Register, courtesy Diocese of Knoxville)

The Nashville event, from 5:15 to 5:45 p.m. local time, will feature people linking arms along a three-mile route from Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, where the victims of the school shooting were brought, to the Tennessee Capitol. The Knoxville event will be held simultaneously (6:15-6:45 p.m. EDT) and will encircle Market Square in downtown Knoxville.

Supporters will form a "human chain expressing solidarity among the chorus of voices advocating for safer communities across the state through the adoption of common-sense gun safety policies," according to the event press release. Registered participants were being asked to wear red in honor of The Covenant School victims.

"Linking Arms for Change is an opportunity for Tennesseans on both sides of the political aisle to come together to honor the lives lost and impacted by The Covenant School shooting, as well as all lives lost to gun violence in our state," said Carlie Cruse, a founding member of Voices for a Safer Tennessee. "This is not a political issue. It's a public safety issue. By coming together as one, unified voice, we can channel our sorrow into action and advocacy for stronger gun safety measures."