

On Gun Violence Prevention

Adopted by the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In response to *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call*, which calls us to “encourage the church at every level—from individual member to congregation, presbytery, synod, and national church—to become informed and active in preventing gun violence” and urges that “the church take responsibility to build public awareness of gun violence and the epidemic of preventable gun-related deaths” (*Minutes*, 2010, Part I, pp. 830ff, electronic version), the Presbytery of Hudson River, Synod of the Northeast, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), respectfully overtures the 221st General Assembly (2014) to do the following:

1. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency to
 - a. provide models for congregational and local ecumenical forums to explore the dynamics of gun violence in their areas, and to select appropriate initiatives for witness and action in their communities, and
 - b. assist in the formation of support, healing, and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence in their families.
2. Encourage synods, presbyteries, and seminaries to develop educational programs that include
 - a. the theological and pastoral care issues raised by murder, suicide, domestic violence, and wounding by gun violence,
 - b. a means of public acknowledgement of grief and repentance in worship and in communal events, and
 - c. links between those who have suffered from gun violence and existing support, healing, and advocacy groups.
3. Commend Presbyterian Mission Agency for the development and dissemination of the film *Trigger: The Ripple Effects of Gun Violence*, and the inclusion of mass shootings among the disasters addressed by PDA disaster response teams; and encourage the continuation of these important efforts.
4. Direct the PC(USA) and its constituent parts to recommit itself to work with federal, state, and local legislators to:
 - a. oppose legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers from legal liability and/or financial accountability for the medical and security costs of predictable gun misuse and availability to criminals, the unstable, and the self-destructive;
 - b. support the disclosure of funds spent by gun manufacturers on lobbying, campaign contributions, and other legislative strategies that serve to undermine the protection of U.S. citizens from the highest rates of gun violence in the world;
 - c. oppose “stand your ground” and other legislation that may entitle gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures (such as relying on law enforcement and/or other de-escalation techniques) in perceived defense of persons or property;
 - d. oppose legislation designed to permit and encourage the carrying of weapons in all areas of life, including houses of worship, noting that those in possession of guns are four times more likely to experience gun violence;
 - e. support legislation to require licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks, and cooling-off periods;
 - f. support legislation to close the ‘gun show loophole’ by requiring background checks for all gun buyers;
 - g. support legislation to ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor piercing handgun ammunition, and .50 caliber sniper rifles;
 - h. support legislation to advocate for new technologies to aid law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety;
 - i. support legislation to raise the age for handgun ownership to the age of twenty-one;
 - j. following the recommendation of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, support laws to ‘require judges and law enforcement to remove guns from situations of domestic violence, as well as from people whose adjudicated mental illness, drug use, or previous criminal record suggests the possibility of violence,’ and to increase police training in nonviolent proactive intervention;
 - k. advocate that federal and state governments enact legislation to regulate ammunition, guided by *Gun Violence Gospel Values*, as approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010);
 - l. Support the development, promotion, and use of ‘smart gun’ and ‘smart ammunition’ technologies that will help to prevent unintended and accidental shootings and aid law enforcement in reducing gun violence.
5. Consistent with *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call*, Recommendation 9 (page 2; see also *Minutes*, 2010, Part I, p. 831, electronic version), which reads “we recommend that churches and other entities prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property,” we strongly encourage
 - a. the session of each PC(USA) congregation to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones by voting to adopt the following (or similar) policy and recording it in their minutes: “Individuals (other than active law-enforcement officers) are prohibited from carrying guns onto this property,” and to publicize this policy by prominently displaying appropriate signage, such as one of the samples attached (Appendix A, ovt038-appA&B.pdf), which can be downloaded from a website such as the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, etc.;
 - b. all PC(USA) entities that own property (including but not limited to the Office of the General Assembly (OGA), synods, presbyteries, camps and conference centers, educational institutions, etc.) to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones by adopting the following or a similar policy as indicated by official vote and recorded in the minutes: “Individuals (other than active law-enforcement officers) are prohibited from carrying guns onto this property,” and to publicize this policy by prominently displaying appropriate signage, such as one of the samples

attached (Appendix A, ovt038-appA&B.pdf), which can be downloaded from a website such as Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, etc.;

c. individual Presbyterians to bear witness to the gospel value of peacemaking and to build safer and more secure communities by advocating for similar gun-free zone policies in their workplaces, schools, neighborhood businesses, and gathering places. Free downloadable signage for general use (see attached, Appendix B, ovt038-appA&B.pdf) is available at www.gunfreespaces.org.

Rationale

This rationale reaffirms the two basic arguments for church involvement in the matter of gun violence: the scale of this ongoing tragedy and the biblical and theological bases for engagement by Presbyterians.

The Scale of the Ongoing Tragedy

The scale of gun violence in the United States includes, annually, the deaths of at least 3,000 children (often underreported) and 25,000 adults (with suicides underreported), with more than 100,000 wounded, often seriously. Beyond the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s booklet, *Gun Violence: Gospel Values*¹, extensive data and detailed policy considerations can be found in the recent book, *Reducing Gun Violence in America*².

Biblical Basis

Christian opposition to gun violence begins with Jesus' teaching and example: that we should love our neighbors, love our enemies; that all who take the sword will perish by the sword; that peacemakers are blessed and will be called children of God. These (and other) statements are echoed in the New Testament letters: that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit; that we should be holy in all our conduct; that we should love righteousness and hate wickedness; and leave vengeance to the Lord. Further, the prophetic tradition identifies the need for broader social change: that we should turn our swords (guns) into plowshares and our spears (rocket launchers) into pruning hooks and learn war no more. Overall, through the Spirit, we hear the blood of those senselessly slain crying out from the ground for us to act and not be weary.

The first letter of John challenges us not to love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. We must struggle with how to implement the vision, a challenge that was taken up by John Calvin as well. At the very core of his theology was an understanding that the intentions of God should be implemented on earth.

Theological Basis

The theological position that guns are idols in our society is put forward most directly by former PC(USA) missionary, Jim Atwood, a hunter and gun owner himself, in *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose*³. Atwood and others seek to explain why it has been so difficult to pass responsible legislation, despite public opinion polls showing large majorities in favor. This theological explanation does not claim that all gun owners are idolatrous, but that economic and ideological (and politically polarized) explanations are not enough, and that gun violence must be put under the sovereignty of the Lord of life. It is not necessary, of course, to subscribe to any particular theological account to seek to reduce gun violence in the U.S. and in the world.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been concerned about the frightening gun violence phenomenon, and has consistently spoken out about it for three decades, as have our sisters and brothers in virtually every other faith tradition. This overture expands upon the existing policy of the General Assembly by providing specific ways for individuals and congregations to have a voice and take action in confronting the gun violence crisis. As stated in the last paragraph of *Gun Violence, Gospel Values*, "The Call to Action" (pp 19–20; see also *Minutes*, 2010, Part I, p. 842, electronic version),

God has provided us with the elements to be agents of change in the world. The change needs to be comprehensive: we need to address the idolatry of guns, the violence that permeates our culture, our obsessions with personal rights over public responsibility, the practices of widespread and indiscriminate sale of military style weapons, as well as the legislation necessary to regulate the accessibility and sale of military weapons disguised as "sporting guns." We must keep our "eyes on the prize," of preventing gun violence and the unnecessary deaths and injuries that result. Enough blood has been spilled. We affirm that through good organizational effort, animated by the passion for justice that comes to the people of God through the Holy Spirit, gun violence can be dramatically reduced.

So far, our denomination's efforts to affect change have been largely focused outside the church walls on advocacy efforts toward gun-shop owners and legislative change. Sadly, in 2013, we have seen how unwilling our legislators are to carry out the will of the American public regarding background checks and other laws that would restrict the ownership of assault weapons and ammunition. We believe that we need to provide a stronger witness in the world by living out our commitment to nonviolence within our buildings and equipping our members with resources to effect change in their local communities.

Recent expanded provisions in concealed carry laws in many states now allow guns to be carried into places never before considered appropriate, including into houses of worship. It is important that our churches, at the grassroots level, stand firm against the deception that more guns in more places makes us somehow safer and more secure. Gun manufacturers and guns rights advocates routinely claim that more guns in the hands of "good guys" will make the world safer. However, statistics actually show that where there are more guns, there is more violence.⁴ It is time for the faith community to have its say.

Gun violence can be a difficult subject to talk about in any context, but it finds particular resistance within the walls of the church, where many people believe "political" issues should not be discussed. (Jim Atwood's *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose*, Chapter 2, "Closing the Door on Discussion," discusses the particular difficulty of talking about gun violence as a spiritual rather than political issue.) As a result, very little meaningful discussion is happening in the church or elsewhere. We are hopeful that

this overture will boldly stimulate healthy and helpful conversation, as well as create "constructive, nonviolent tension" as encouraged by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

You may well ask: "Why direct action?... Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. (http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

In recent months an advocacy group called "Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America" started an on-line campaign asking Starbucks to prohibit guns in their stores. It only took a short time for the company to change its policy. This demonstrates the power of average citizens to claim their right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Encouraging individual Presbyterians to build safer and more secure communities by advocating for similar gun-free zone policies in their workplaces, schools, neighborhood businesses, and gathering places, allows them to bear witness to the gospel value of peacemaking with concrete action.

Similarly, in *A Social Creed for the 21st Century*, the 218th General Assembly (2008) approved the following, which also shows a strong commitment to working together for peace in our country:

We—individual Christians and churches—commit ourselves to a culture of peace and freedom that embraces non-violence, nurtures character, treasures the environment, and builds community, rooted in a spirituality of inner growth with outward action. We make this commitment together—as members of Christ's body, led by the one Spirit — trusting in the God who makes all things new. (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 925)

Endnotes

1. <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gun-violence-gospel-values-mobilizing-response-god/>.
2. <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781421411118>), edited by researchers at the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.
3. For a review and purchase information, see <http://justiceunbound.org/action-alerts/action-news/america-held-hostage-by-gun-violence/>.
4. See www.policefoundation.org/pdf/gunsinamerica.pdf and the FBI's 2008 Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States by State, Table 5, http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2008/data/table_05.html

(Vote: 484 affirming, 87 opposed, or 85% approval)

Action was item 09-07

and can be found here: <http://pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=4627>