

## *A Policy Statement for the Promotion of Gun Safety and the Prevention of Gun Violence*

### **I. Our Charge as Disciples**

As followers of Jesus, we participate in his ministry of peace and justice. Who can deny that central to our Christian witness is the idea that every human life is sacred because it bears the image of God? That is why the Hebrew prophets, in their efforts to heed God's call, looked forward to the day when weapons would be turned into farming implements.

Jesus of Nazareth was a peacemaker, who spoke passionately for loving God and neighbor. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives peace do I give it to you," he said. Jesus' gift of peace requires hard work. It requires sacrifice, unselfishness, compassion, forgiveness, understanding, forbearance – none of them easy, all of them demanding strength, compelling us to persevere courageously for the sake of justice.

### **II. Statement of the Problem**

Every day in the U.S. 85 people die from guns and 191 are injured. Over the course of a typical year, about 30,000 will be killed through gun-related murder, suicide, accident or police intervention. Approximately 70,000 will survive gun injuries, only to have their lives and those of their families forever changed. Most tragically, almost 21,000 of the victims are American children and teens (ages 0-19). Over 3,000 kids killed—that's 9 children a day--and 2,225 of these children were murdered. Almost 800 children pick up guns and end their own young lives each year.<sup>1</sup> Statistics can make our eyes glaze over, but understanding the pain involved for each of these families can only lead us, to grieve like Rachel,

A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
She refuses to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are not.

Jeremiah 31:15

### **III. Our Context of Ministry**

Second amendment rights of citizens are supported by recent Supreme Court decisions. Those decisions also affirm that reasonable constraints to prevent irresponsible ownership and practices are not forbidden.

2014 data from the Center for Disease Control ranks Kentucky 17<sup>th</sup> among the states in overall firearm deaths. Data from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence confirms that states with the least deaths from firearms are states with more restrictive gun ownership laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Data derived from statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Web-based Statistics Query and Reporting System, (2016 data)

Kentucky statutes currently do not:

- Require a background check prior to the transfer of a firearm between private parties
- Prohibit the transfer or possession of assault weapons, 50 caliber rifles or large capacity ammunition magazines
- License firearm owners
- Require the registration of firearms
- Limit the number of firearms that may be purchased at one time
- Impose a waiting period on firearm purchases
- Require firearm owners to report lost or stolen firearms to law enforcement
- Significantly regulate ammunition sales

It is time to correct these deficits for the safety of Kentucky's families. Therefore, we call upon federal, state, and city governments actively to pursue ways to keep guns away from persons who are a threat to themselves or others, or perpetrators of domestic violence, or criminals.

#### **IV. Recommendations**

Many denominations have long been concerned about gun violence, and have consistently spoken out about it for three decades, as have our sisters and brothers in virtually every other faith tradition. (Cf. Kentucky Council of Churches Statements, "Policy Statement on Assault Weapons", 1989, and "Statement on Violence in Society", 1996) Yet it is clear that our voices have not been persuasive in themselves and our actions too limited to stem the tide of gun violence. There are too many places in America where it is difficult to hear the gospel over the persistent retort of gun fire. We continue to be convinced that God calls us to protect the lives of all within the human community, as each is loved by our Creator. In order to be faithful to our vocation to seek God's shalom, we need to seek new and active ways of effectively bringing life-saving change. We can no longer tolerate such a preventable exile from God's peaceable kingdom or reign. It is time to discuss these deadly social outcomes in our congregations. We believe there is much common ground within society for both responsible gun ownership and for reduction of gun violence. We also know that the dangers of accidents, the prevalence of suicide by gun, and the high rates of homicide in the U.S., are in direct relationship to the accessibility and possession of guns.

What are we to do as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ?

#### **A. Congregations**

To awaken members to the faith dimensions of our on-going tragedy:

1. 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,
2. to provide pastoral care for victims of gun violence
3. to seek a spiritual response of grief and repentance, grace and courage to resist that violence and celebrate the Lord and Giver of Life
4. to get involved with community organization(s) already working on some aspect of gun violence prevention

5. to develop and use liturgies that not only call for periodic preaching on gun violence but also contain prayers for the victims and perpetrators of gun violence and confession of our own complicity in the perpetuation and toleration of violence in all its forms in the culture.
6. that councils of the church seek to partner with other faith institutions to create and sustain a national, activist faith-based social movement to save thousands of lives yearly.

## **B. Communities**

To assist congregations and members in supporting focused local and state initiatives we recommend

1. that the church encourage citizens, hunters, and law-enforcement officials who regularly handle weapons properly to be wise examples in reducing risks and teaching how to prevent the misuse of deadly force
2. that the church take responsibility to build public awareness of gun violence and the epidemic of preventable gun-related deaths and injuries
3. that, to embody its spiritual awakening in response to this tragic devaluing of life, the church work to build a movement of urban-suburban ecumenical and interfaith partnerships in order to better understand the problem of gun violence and take more effective action
4. that local congregations lead or join in ecumenical and interfaith gatherings for public prayer at sites where gun violence has occurred and to support, or assist with, appropriate law-enforcement guidance
5. that the church, particularly in its congregations, work with local law-enforcement agencies and community groups to identify gun shops that engage in retail practices designed to circumvent laws on gun sales and ownership, encourage full legal compliance, and support higher marketing standards
6. due to the recent expanded provisions in concealed carry laws that now allow guns to be carried openly, including into houses of worship, we recommend that churches and other entities prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property.

## **C. Government**

That the church support and advocate for policies that correct the deficits cited above in Kentucky statutes to:

1. limit legal personal gun acquisition to one handgun a month
2. require licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks, and cooling-off periods, for all guns sold
3. close the —gun show loophole by requiring background checks for all gun buyers
4. ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor piercing handgun ammunition, and .50 caliber sniper rifles
5. advocate for new technologies to aid law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety
6. raise the age for handgun ownership to the age of twenty-one

7. 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.

## **V. Conclusion**

In fidelity to our charge as Christ's disciples to be peacemakers, this resolution draws on public health and community policing perspectives to focus on the spread of illegal weapons. It proposes recommendations for proactive, constructive policies and actions that honor the value of human life, that recognize institutional and personal responsibility in the proliferation of violence, and that encourage a renewal of social solidarity to overcome the distrust and disconnection that violence exploits.