

[The assembly approved this item with amendment. See Minutes, 218th General Assembly (2008) pp. 54, 55; 859-865]

On Addressing the Tragedy of America's Gun Violence—From the Presbytery of National Capital. Item 09-05

The Presbytery of National Capital overtures the 218th General Assembly (2008) to do the following:

1. Pastoral Recommendations for the Entire Church

a. Pray for God's comfort, courage, and peace for the eighty families who lose loved ones every day to guns in America and for the 1,000 families who daily experience death by guns in the developing world.

b. Commend those persons, congregations, organizations, and agencies who work to stop gun violence and dedicate their time, financial resources, talents, energies, and prayers to find viable solutions to this domestic and international plague and to applaud them for their courage in unmasking the idolatries of our time.

c. Encourage pastors and sessions of local churches and their communities to organize interfaith groups that will visit sites where there have been shootings and/or killings and lead brief worship services to demonstrate the concerns and hopes of the faith community in pursuing peace in our neighborhoods.

d. Study and act on the previously approved policies of the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations concerning gun violence and small arms trafficking.

e. Monitor diligently the political processes in cities, states, and the nation for opportunities to work for the passage of laws that control gun access and to seize these opportunities to support legislation that will make our streets, schools, and places of worship free from gun violence.

f. Work with legislators to take the following actions that will increase the safety and well-being of our nation and communities:

(1) To ensure that all persons buying guns at gun shows undergo a background check, close the gun show loophole in the thirty-five states where it remains open. (The U.S. Department of Justice Statistics, "Background Checks for Firearm Transfers," 2005, reveals since the Brady law was enacted in 1994, 1.4 million gun purchases were denied by background checks from licensed dealers for convicted felons, those who have serious mental illness, terrorists, minors, domestic abusers and other prohibited parties.)"

(2) Ban the sale and possession of large ammunition magazines and assault weapons that have no redeemable social purpose, and cannot legitimately be termed "sporting guns."

(3) Support the introduction of new technologies, such as micro-stamping [in which identifying information from a gun is transferred onto bullet cartridges], which allow law enforcement to more easily trace guns and solve crimes.

(4) Affirm and support the work of the PC(USA) through the Presbyterian United Nations Office and other appropriate offices to stop illegal arms sales by the United States and others.

2. Programmatic Recommendations for National Church Agencies

a. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in consultation with [the Office of Theology and Worship,] the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, the Presbyterian United Nations Office, and the Presbyterian Washington Office, to prepare for the larger church a comprehensive study on the concerns raised in this overture. The study should articulate a Reformed Theology of proactive, constructive nonviolence way of life and tactical method for bringing God's justice and peace to our communities and around the world; assess the social and economic costs of gun violence; explore how gun violence fits into a larger national culture of violence, and identify ways that the church can effectively address gun violence issues domestically and internationally, and to report these findings along with proposed action items to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

b. Direct the national offices to provide annually to our pastors, educators, and members educational and worship resources to encourage and equip the whole church to engage fully in the struggle to reduce gun violence.

(This is similar to Recommendation 3. of Overture 00-95. On Gun Violence From the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, Minutes, 2000, Part I, p. 482.)

c. Direct the Washington Office and the Peacemaking Unit to make gun violence one of its highest priorities; and to direct the Peacemaking Unit to make an annual progress report to subsequent General Assemblies until this issue is resolved. (This is similar to a recommendation from the 1989 Resolution on Assault Weapons, Minutes, 1989, Part I, p. 430, paragraph 35.118.)

d. Direct the Stated Clerk to distribute this resolution to all members of Congress; to the present and future president of the United States, to appropriate members of the Cabinet, and to members of state legislatures.

e. Direct the Stated Clerk to specifically call on the U. S. government to enter into negotiations with its international partners in the United Nations to adopt a legally-binding trade treaty to counter the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons, particularly to developing nations.

f. Direct the Stated Clerk to communicate and commend these actions to other ecumenical faith communities, and to invite their active participation in the struggle to reduce gun violence, both domestically and internationally.

[Financial Implications: (2008): \$5,660; (2009): \$24,650; (2010) \$5,240 (Per Capita-GAC)]

Rationale

Emboldened and encouraged by Scripture, we reaffirm our faith that God equips believers to love mercy, to do justice, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). In particular, Jesus empowers us to be peacemakers in the midst of violence; to extend the open hand rather than a clenched fist; to name unjust and oppressive systems; to fight against practices that demean any human being made in the image of God; to wrestle with the principalities and powers in this fallen world; and to work so that “justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

The sixth commandment says, “You shall not kill.” John Calvin argued that this commandment not only forbids killing but carries with it the obligation to prevent harm and to preserve life and build shalom in human society. In the most practical of terms, Jeremiah calls us today as he called the Jews going into exile “[to] seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7).

Our Presbyterian polity reminds us that to be faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ we must be diligent to preach the Gospel for the salvation of humankind, and we must be equally diligent to preserve the truth; promote social righteousness; and exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world (*Book of Order*, G-1.0200).

In obedience to these principles for four decades, the General Assemblies of the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations have proposed responsible measures to confront a unique, annual national tragedy that no other developed nation permits. Some 30,000 Americans die by guns each year in the United States. An average of eighty people are killed by guns every day, including eight children. An American child is twelve times more likely to die by a gun than all the children of twenty-five industrialized nations combined.¹

The church must also note that the exorbitant annual economic cost of gun violence is at least \$100 billion. Medical costs, decimated families, the court system, our jails and prisons, and security measures in airports, schools, and public buildings all contribute to this sum.²

Moreover, gun death rates of our citizens in the United States are exponentially higher than the death rates of our military personnel killed in warfare: 1,490 of our military personnel were killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001–2004.³ In the same time frame, nearly 100,000 Americans were killed in our communities by guns.⁴ Since John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, more Americans have died by gunfire within our own country than perished in all the wars of the 20th century.⁵

The 108th General Assembly (1968) of the PCUS petitioned Congress to enact, without delay, legislation to control the sale and possession of firearms of all kinds (*Minutes*, PCUS, 1968, Part I, p.103). The 201st General Assembly (1989) urged strong legislation to ban the private ownership of destructive automatic weapons such as AK-47 assault rifles, Uzis, and all paramilitary weapons, whether domestic or imported (*Minutes*, 1989, Part I, p. 430). A federal assault weapons ban was

signed into law in 1994, but in September 2004, the U.S. Congress permitted the ban to expire, without a vote, which returned these dangerous weapons to the civilian market.

In each of the seven policy statements made by the respective General Assemblies since 1988, the church was called to diligently study the issue of gun violence. The 201st General Assembly (1989) directed the church to make an “annual progress report ... to subsequent [General] Assemblies until this issue is resolved” (*Minutes*, 1989, Part I, p. 430). The 212th General Assembly (2000) commissioners directed the Congregational Ministries Division to develop, on an annual, continuing basis, “additional curriculum to challenge the thinking of congregations about creative approaches to gun violence in America” (*Minutes*, 2000, Part I, p. 482).

In 1990, in the denomination’s most comprehensive policy statement on gun control, the General Assembly called on the church to begin a respectful and open dialog with all parties in order to solve this ongoing crisis. The church asked that governing bodies and congregations identify and train advocates on this and other public policy issues who will become actively involved in political dialog and the legislative process (*Minutes*, 1990, Part I, p. 606). While our church has made some bold and far-reaching statements and claims strong policies against gun violence, our actions have failed to live up to our words. That, in part, is why this overture begins with a call to repentance for the church.

Regretfully, the measures listed above, which reflect the hopes and dreams of a strong majority of the American people, including gun owners,⁶ have fallen on deaf ears in most state and national legislatures and, to our shame, even in our churches.

We therefore strongly call the church to read and affirm this entire resolution in a spirit of repentance. We do not ask that we hang our heads or beat our breasts, but that we move forward into the future actively seeking the justice and peace our Lord calls us to pursue and put in place.

Trusting in God’s grace and forgiveness, we must acknowledge that our support of the sensible measures listed above to stop the killing has been less than we intended. Neither have we shown the respect due to the victims and families of those who are being killed and maimed every day by guns. The silence of pulpits and classrooms in addressing this ongoing tragedy is deafening. We would remind the church that to address this issue only by mourning those who have been killed and/or praying for comfort for their families and friends is not sufficient. Neither is it enough to only pray for a change of heart for the perpetrators of violence. God calls us to be persistent advocates for sensible legislation that will prevent this annual slaughter of children, women, and men.

While a strong majority of our citizens, including gun owners and sportsmen, support responsible gun control measures, the church, rather than being a light to the world, has mirrored our society and permitted a small minority of strident, well-funded persons to control the debate on the place of guns in our democratic society.

The unacceptable level of violence we experience in America because of weak gun laws is due in part to a culture of sound-bytes and unexamined public policy. Every American knows the familiar slogans: “Guns are the foundation of America’s freedoms”; “Guns save lives”; “Freedom First”; “The Second Amendment guarantees all the other amendments.” “We don’t need the government to make new laws, but to enforce the thousands of laws that are now on the books” etc. But, the most egregious slogan yet, was that used by counter-protestors at vigils where families and friends mourned the thirty-two persons who died in the massacre at Virginia Tech: “Here lie disarmed victims.”

The church must bear responsibility for permitting these and other simplistic slogans and catchy sound bytes to become what is erroneously perceived by many in the media, our legislatures, and our churches, as the authentic voice of the American public. IT IS NOT! We must not acquiesce or fail to speak the truth on this matter, and we must begin in earnest, comprehensive and compassionate education about gun violence, so we can distinguish fact from fiction.

We call on the church to regain its courage and its voice, to bring its moral authority to the table, and to lead honest and full discussions on the role and utility of guns in our democratic society. If the church of Jesus Christ is not part of the solution, then our silence is part of the problem. We acknowledge that this will not be an easy task. The strident, vocal, and well-funded minority that opposes all gun regulation will be there to cry “foul” and contend that the Church of Jesus Christ is not the venue to have this conversation. On the other hand, we believe that the church is the very place where this discussion needs to take place, for we are called by God to be healers and to bring peace where there is perpetual violence. Like Jeremiah, we dare not treat the wounds of God’s “people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14).

The consequence of avoiding the discomfort associated with this necessary and honest dialog within our fellowship is that we will continue to endure the equivalent of a 9/11 massacre every eighteen months. These deaths are too high a price to pay to maintain the embarrassing status quo, which the gun lobby often contends is “the price of freedom.”

Let it not be said of our generation of Christians that what we have learned from history is only that we do not learn from history. If nothing is done domestically, our lax federal and/or state regulations on the buying and selling of lethal weapons guarantee that incidents like Columbine and Virginia Tech will occur again and again. There will be the same tears, the same decimation of families, the same cries of pain, the same lasting physical and mental scars, the same escalation of fear, and the same lame speeches of nervous leaders who will tell the world how much they grieve for the victims and how they will remember their families in their prayers. Then, these speeches will be followed by a hasty retreat from the scene and an avoidance of discussing the real questions of the day: “Why do we permit this?” and “What can we do now, so that this will never happen again?”

Because violence in America is a major spiritual concern, we must listen to the warning that the 202nd General Assembly (1990) gave the church: “The religious community must also take seriously the risk of idolatry that could result from an unwarranted fascination with guns which overlooks or ignores the social consequences of their misuse” (*Minutes*, 1990, Part I, p. 605, paragraph 40.105). It is past time to take this warning to heart and dedicate our best minds to the study of America’s trust in violence and in the instruments of violence.

Because God has made us citizens of the world and brothers and sisters to the entire human family, we must not only seek freedom from gun violence in our own cities and communities, but in the cities and communities of the developing world, which is today suffering from the sale of guns from U. S. manufacturers. The United States has surpassed Russia and France as the world’s leading exporter of small arms and light weapons, especially to developing nations with one billion dollars in sales per year. Even more shamefully many of these sales are illegal.⁷ The General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in 1981 called the church’s attention to an increasing number of private gun sales that were made to Northern Ireland (*Minutes*, UPCUSA, 1981, Part I, p. 85).

If the rule of law is to be honored, and if justice is to be sought, the church must come to terms with recent revelations from the Congressional Research Service, which documents the burgeoning trend of the U. S. in supplying military assistance and weaponry to countries that pledge their allegiance to us in our “global war on terror even though the state department has judged many of these countries to be unstable, lacking in democratic principles, and having a history of human rights abuses.”⁸ One thousand people die each day in the developing world from small arms.⁹

As part of God’s one human family, we must be vigilant in recognizing the linkage between the gun violence we experience in America and the violence we purposefully export by supplying others with the tools of violence. It is certain that as guns and small arms are placed in the hands of vindictive militias and child soldiers, even if they should side with us in “our global war on terror,” the already high death rates of women and children in those regions will escalate even further. And as these guns make their way to the black market, an old AK-47 can be purchased for as little as \$100.¹⁰ In reality, our nation is distributing weapons of mass destruction. Faithfulness to God demands that we challenge our government’s questionable actions and examine our nation’s trust in these weapons to produce international security and peace.

For additional information on how to be more involved in this issue, see www.csgv.org.

Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *WISQARS Injury Mortality Reports, 2004*; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Rates of Homicide, Suicide and Firearms-Related Death Among Children—26 Industrialized Countries, Morbidity and Mortality Report*, vol. 46, no.5 p. 103 2/7/97 Atlanta.
2. Philip Cook and Jens Ludwig, *Gun Violence: The Real Costs*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. Washington Post.com, *Faces of the Fallen; U.S. service members who died in Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001–2004*.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *WISQARS Injury Mortality Reports, 2001–2004*.
5. *The Economist*, “America’s Tragedy,” April 19, 2007.
6. ABC News Poll on April 22, 2007, 6 percent of respondents favored stricter gun control laws in the country; 67 percent favored a ban on assault weapons. A CBS poll on the same day found that 66 percent of respondents favored stricter measures.
7. *Setting the Record Straight: The UN and Small Arms*, New York, June 26–July 7, 2006.
8. Congressional Research Service, *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1999–2006*, September 26, 2007.
9. *Setting the Record Straight: The UN and Small Arms*, New York, June 26–July 7, 2006.
10. William Hartung and Rachel Stohl, *Hired Guns*, Foreign Policy, May/June 2004.