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## Study guide

# Strive for justice and peace

By Robert C. Blezard

Lamentably, violence permeates much of our culture and poisons the well-being of too many individuals, families and communities. Of course, violence is a problem worldwide, but it's especially sorrowful here in the United States, one of the planet's wealthiest nations, steeped in religious values and a leader in global peacemaking. As Jesus' followers, called to be salt of the earth and light to the world, we can make a difference by sharing God's love and forgiveness.

### Exercise 1: Your experience

- How have you or your community experienced violence?
- What happened and why?
- Who was harmed? Who else was affected?
- What were the short-term effects?
- What are the longer-term effects?
- What was your or the community's response? What have you learned?
- How has the violence changed you or the community?

### Exercise 2: What is violence?

Violence is all around, but what exactly is it? As a study group, come up with a working definition of violence. The following list will help you explore:

- Describe the many ways that violence does its damage. What is the role of fear? Oppression? Domination? Control?
- List the ways that physical violence is present in your community, our country, our world.
- What other manifestations of violence are there besides physical? Describe specific examples of sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual violence? Can you think of other types?
- Describe specific examples of violence against individuals.
- In addition to harming our physical bodies, how else does violence damage an individual? Emotionally? Mentally? Spiritually? How and why do the effects of violence affect an individual long after the bruises, broken bones, cuts or gunshots have healed?
- Describe specific examples of violence against families.



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- How does violence damage a family? Emotionally? Mentally? Spiritually? How and why do the effects of violence affect a family long after the bruises, broken bones, cuts or gunshots have healed?
- How does violence damage a community? Emotionally? Mentally? Spiritually? How and why do the effects of violence affect a community long after the bruises, broken bones, cuts or gunshots have healed?
- Describe specific examples of violence against communities.
- Describe specific examples of violence against property. Why is stealing a form of violence? Graffiti? Vandalism? Neglect?
- Describe specific examples of violence against thought, well-being, freedom, liberty, speech.

### Exercise 3: The peacemakers

Jesus declares in his Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). Explore what this means for us as 21st-century Christians. (It would be helpful first to look at the previous exercise on violence.) As a study group, use the following questions to help you come up with a definition or description of peace.

- In what ways is peace experienced? Come up with specific examples for peace in these areas: physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, individually, in families, in community, in our nation, in God's world.
- If there is violence in any form, can there be peace? Why or why not?
- Violence precludes peace, but explain how and why the mere absence of violence is not the same thing as peace.
- What are some specific situations where violence is absent but there is still no peace? When have you witnessed or heard about this condition experienced by individuals, families and communities?
- In what ways can fear be a form of violence? What are its short and long-term effects?
- Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, but how do we "make" peace? What kind of actions helps ensure peace?
- Thinking about the peacemaking efforts of Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi and other advocates of nonviolence, how is active peacemaking necessarily bold, courageous, risky, calculating, savvy and grounded in faith?
- To what lengths will you go to be a peacemaker in your life? In your home? Your congregation? Your community? Our nation? God's world?

### Exercise 4: Violent culture?

The causes of violence are complex, but they don't arise out of nowhere. For



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a violent individual, contributing factors may include mental health, family upbringing, community values, choice of friends and whether the person has been a victim of violence. Underlying all of this is our cultural attitudes toward violence as seen in speech, thought, media and public policy.

- How would you describe our culture's attitudes toward violence? Do you agree or disagree with those who say our culture encourages violence? Explain.
- Is violence always bad? Explain.
- Is violence carried out by criminals and bad guys always destructive? Explain.
- Is violence carried out by good guys always productive and helpful? Explain.
- What is the connection between hate/hate speech and violence? Do hate and hate speech always carry undertones of violence? Why or why not?
- Is there an increase in hate and hate speech in our culture? Explain.
- Certainly there are violent groups that traffic in hate speech, but some observers have commented that hate speech has gone mainstream. Where have you heard hate speech from prominent citizens, mainstream groups or government leaders?
- As Christians who are called to be peacemakers, how should we handle our culture's tendencies toward violence and hate? As individuals? As congregational leaders? As the ELCA?

### Exercise 5: Redemptive violence?

Author and theologian Walter Wink (d. 2012) coined the phrase "the myth of redemptive violence" to describe the false yet pervasive idea that violence is necessary to achieve positive outcomes. He describes the myth in his many books, including "The Powers Trilogy" (*Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers* and *Engaging the Powers*, all Fortress Press). The myth is reinforced throughout history and popular culture, and even through children's programming. Below Wink describes how the myth of redemptive violence is seen in Popeye cartoons:

"In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye's girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats his diminutive opponent to a pulp, while Olive Oyl helplessly wrings her hands. At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor, and Bluto is trying, in effect, to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved. The format never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. They never sit down and discuss their differences. Repeated defeats do not teach Bluto to honor Olive Oyl's humanity, and repeated pummelings do not teach Popeye to swallow his spinach before the fight" (*The Bible in TransMission*, Spring 1999, page 7).

Think of action movies or crime dramas you've seen. The typical plot involves a thoroughly evil and violent villain who is pursued by one or more "good guys."



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In these dramas, what is the most common fate of the villain? Rank the following outcomes as most likely, less likely and least likely:

- The villain is arrested and brought to justice. He will spend the rest of his existence as a bitter and evil person in the unrelenting misery of prison.
- The villain is arrested. Through the criminal justice process he finally understands the harmful nature of his evil conduct, expresses remorse, repents, makes up for his misdeeds and is restored as a human being (even if in prison for life).
- In a final confrontation, the villain is violently killed by the hero.

Discuss:

- Which ending is most likely and why?
- Which ending is less likely and why?
- Which ending is least likely and why?
- What do the rankings say about our cultural embrace of the myth of redemptive violence?
- How is the “myth of redemptive violence” evident in national politics? In our governmental budgets—national, state and local? In our public discussion of divisive social issues? In our public characterizations of people with whom we disagree? In our military policies? In our foreign policies? In the criminal justice system? In our understanding of right and wrong?
- How do Jesus’ teachings contrast to the myth of redemptive violence?
- As Jesus’ followers, how can we find better alternatives? (For exploration, see Wink’s book *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*; Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

### **Exercise 6: “Let justice roll down like waters”**

Many think of “justice” only in terms of a country’s law-enforcement, criminal and legal systems. But God’s concern for justice—social, economic and moral—is woven throughout all of Scripture. Read Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:6-8, then discuss.

- What do both passages have in common?
- Each passage talks of the “usual ways” that people approach God and live out their faith. What are those? How do those usual ways relate to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian? What is God’s attitude toward those usual ways?
- Instead of the “usual ways,” what do both Amos and Micah prescribe as behavior pleasing to God? What does it mean for us as God’s people? Should we then stop going to church? Stop worshiping God with song and prayer? Stop putting our offerings in the church plate? Why or why not?
- What do Amos and Micah mean by justice and, by extension, what is the

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kind of justice that God wants us to bring into our communities?

- Looking to Amos, what does it mean that we live in such a way that justice should roll down like waters? Or considering Micah, that we “do justice”?
- How can we not just agree that Micah and Amos have good points, but also live with justice? What would we have to change about our lives?
- How do Amos’ and Micah’s teachings guide and inform our response toward violence and those who commit violence?

### **Exercise 7: For action**

Gun violence has become an especially disturbing problem in our country. With distressing regularity we hear the news reports of multiple people murdered by a troubled person with a gun. In addition to widely publicized mass shootings, there are thousands of individual cases of people killed by guns every year.

The ELCA has prepared a free resource of prayer, Scripture and stories to help everyone explore the issues as people of faith. Through daily observances, *A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a Culture of Gun Violence* calls us to work toward the prevention of gun violence as people of God who strive for justice and peace in all the world. The daily resources started on June 16, but you can start your journey anytime by simply adjusting the dates. Find the resource at [elca.org/60days](http://elca.org/60days).

Covenant as a study group to take the 60-day journey. Meeting weekly, check in with one another on your experiences and observations.

If you’re not part of a study group, begin the journey as an individual. Better yet, find at least one other person to join you. Meet regularly to discuss your progress and observations.

Publicize the resource in your congregation. Invite people to take the journey alone or by gathering in small groups.

### **Exercise 8: Message on Community Violence**

The ELCA Church Council’s “Community Violence” message speaks prophetically to a situation that only seems to have gotten worse in the more than 25 years since it was written. Because its theological and social insights still speak to our condition today, the message is worth studying. It is brilliantly written in accessible language and only six pages. To access a copy, go to [elca.org/socialmessages](http://elca.org/socialmessages). The best approach to explore the statement would be to take a few weeks for your study group to read and digest the message’s observations and its implications for us today.

To whet your appetite for diving deep, below are excerpts from the statement. Read them and discuss:

- What does it say?
- What does it mean?

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- How does it apply to our own life, congregation, community and country?
- What do we do now?

“People who are poor, who are of color, or who live in inner cities are typically the most pervasively and deeply affected by violence. However, disintegrating social structures and values have occasioned turbulence that affects people of every class, color, and locality.”

“The collapse of families, economic injustices, breakdown of community institutions, unemployment, inadequate moral formation and guidance, personal irresponsibility, racism and sexism, inability to deal with anger and conflict, homophobia, low self-esteem, psychological problems, biochemical imbalances, and substance abuse—these and other factors lie behind the incidence of violent crime today.”

“Fear, anxiety, and alienation are expressed through readily-available weapons of destruction.”

“Violence breeds more violence. Incidents of violence stir up anger and a craving for vengeance. Fear festers an attitude of ‘we’re not going to take it anymore.’ Increasingly, our national mood has been described as one of ‘getting mad and getting even.’ ”

“Before God, we all are in captivity to sin, and in need of God’s mercy. Some have committed acts of violence. Others have been sinned against through acts of violence. Still others are overwhelmed by fears of violence. In proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ’s forgiveness, healing, and new life, the church addresses the ultimate root of violence.”

“The Holy Spirit works among us to wrench us from violence, hate, greed, and fear, and transforms us into people who are called to trust God and live in community with one another. In doing so, we need to confront the violent tendencies within ourselves and our society, and find ways to cultivate the practice of nonviolence.”

“Christians, as salt of the earth (Mt. 5:13) and light of the world (Mt. 5:14), are called to respond to violent crime in the restorative ways taught by Jesus (Mt. 5:38-39) and shown by his actions (Jn. 8:3-11). Rather than reacting out of fear, or out of a vengeful desire to ‘get even’ with those we consider our ‘enemies’ (Lk. 6:27ff), we realize they are our neighbors. We are empowered to take up the challenge to prevent violence and to attack the complex causes that make violence so pervasive.

# Strive for justice and peace

By Megan Brandsrud

We live in a violent world. While God's call for peace among humans is definitive, stories of sin in the form of violence are easy to find across the history of humanity—from biblical accounts to last night's leading news story.

The effects of violence are far-reaching, and the church isn't immune. Rather, sometimes it's unsettling and deeply personal. On May 31, an ELCA member was killed in a mass shooting in Virginia Beach, Va. And in June 2015, another member shot and killed nine members of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., during a Bible study.

This church acknowledges that it's composed of people who have been victims of violence, who have perpetrated harm and who work to protect against it. While living in this community together no doubt presents myriad challenges, this is the work of the church, as Lutherans are called to strive for justice and peace in all the earth and to live out a gospel message that proclaims forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

In 1994, the ELCA Church Council adopted the social message "Community Violence" ([elca.org/socialmessages](http://elca.org/socialmessages)). Roger Willer, ELCA director for theological ethics, said the church addressed matters of gun violence early in its formation, and that this message grew out of its understanding that focusing only on guns misses the depth and complexity of community violence.

The social message provides a path for the church to address issues of violence together as a community of worship, education and service, advocacy and ongoing deliberation.

Willer said a distinctive component of the social message is the position on restorative justice. "People tend to think about justice as equality and getting fair treatment," he said. "If someone shoots someone, they get thrown in jail. That's punitive. But that's a very shallow measure of justice. There's only true justice and true peace when the

relationship that's shattered by that harm is healed."

Larry Jorgenson, a retired ELCA pastor and drafter of the social message, said this language of restorative justice can be traced back to Luke's Gospel. "This was an attempt to witness on the basis of what the church was all about," he said. "We resist hate; we love the enemy. And it's with recognition that this is often a radical sounding thing."

Willer agreed: "You don't find this message among police or politicians. But the church lifts up this aspect because we have people who are police officers, victims and perpetrators. Because we have all those people, we see the more complex picture."

Just as the issue of community violence itself is complex, so are the many and varied ways the church responds to its roles as peacemakers and justice seekers, guided by the healing power found in relationship together and in Christ.

## Breaking the cycle

Addressing issues of violence as a church includes working with partners in communities, such as social ministry organizations. LSS CHOICES for Victims of Domestic Violence, part of Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio, is the primary domestic violence agency in Franklin County, Ohio.

The agency provides a 24-hour crisis hotline, shelter for families fleeing violence, counseling, transitional housing and assistance navigating the legal process as it relates to reporting domestic violence. It also offers education throughout the community, including training churches how to respond to someone in a domestic violence situation, and advanced programs for nursing and medical students at local universities.

One of the first steps in breaking the cycle of domestic violence and creating social change is to acknowledge that it is a societal concern.

"It is easy for us to think of domestic violence as someone else's problem or a family issue," said Sue

Villilo, interim executive director of LSS CHOICES and assistant vice president of community-based services for LSS. “Given that 1 in 3 women in the U.S. will experience intimate partner violence in their lifetime, it is much more than an individual issue. We have created a societal structure where domestic violence is prevalent and perpetuated. It’s impacting all of us. We have to acknowledge and address it as a systemic issue.”

In January, LSS CHOICES moved into a larger shelter with a capacity for 120 people, and Villilo estimates it will serve around 2,300 people this year.

For the agency, domestic violence is seen as generational and cyclical. “Boys are 10 times more likely to become abusers if they’ve been raised in an abusive household,” she said. “We see it and we hear it from our clients that this is something they experienced growing up themselves. Because of that, they’ve had some normalizing of the violence in their homes. One thing we do in the shelter is work with the children who come in to help them develop some resiliency and learn about healthy relationships.”

Villilo said LSS CHOICES knows that the healing process is integral to helping break the cycle of violence, and it’s a responsibility in which the agency places a lot of focus. It helps children identify feelings, acknowledge that negative emotions are OK and talk about ways to express themselves.

“We have case management and counseling within the shelter,” she said. “We also have a family activities coordinator who helps get kids in school but also helps plan fun, normal activities for the people who are staying at the shelter—things like birthday parties. We do a lot of things to be able to connect with the families and engage them in services and the healing process. It’s so important.”

## Grace abounds

Part of this church’s call to reconciliation includes embracing people who have perpetrated violence. The social message states that laws and their enforcement are necessary while recognizing that these human-made institutions can be corrupted by sin, and that “tough on crime” policies can “blind us to the injustices that breed violence in the first place.”

To build communities of faith inside and outside of U.S. prisons, Ed Nesselhuf, an ELCA pastor who died in 2016, started Prison Congregations of America in the 1980s ([prisoncongregations.org](http://prisoncongregations.org)).

In October 2018, ELCA member Renae Griggs became the executive director of the ministry. Previously, she spent almost 15 years in law enforcement in Florida, where she was the first female SWAT officer and first female homicide detective in

her department. When she was becoming a certified police officer, she spent 11 months working in a men’s jail, which is where she first learned about the depth beyond inmates’ convictions.

“What happened was I was naïve enough to be curious to ask [the inmates] about their stories, and they were gracious enough to share them with me,” Griggs said. “I learned that these crimes of violence don’t happen in a vacuum and everyone has a story.”

Griggs said these stories and the power found in people sharing them is the thread that shaped her career and led her to ministry. After she left law enforcement, she attended college for a master’s degree in forensic psychology. She started working on post-conviction cases of people who’d been convicted of homicide.

“I was considered a criminal behavior expert,” she said. “I understood criminal mindset and the roots of violence, and what I discovered was that no matter what techniques we apply, the one thing that worked every time was when people got a dose of Jesus. Once they learned who they were in Christ and were able to receive the unconditional love of God and grace and mercy, it changed their life.”

During all the time she’s spent inside prisons, Griggs found that the absence of love traces through the many intersections contributing to violence. “Where there is an absence of love, there is an oversupply of fear, and it drives everything,” she said. “People respond from a dark place where love doesn’t exist or where they don’t recognize it.”

Referencing Romans 5:20, Griggs said it’s out of this darkness that she has seen radical transformation, and that she’s never felt the Spirit more strongly than when she’s inside prison.

“People in prison are desperate for God because they’ve lost everything else,” she said. “They think what they’ve done is so bad that God can’t possibly love them. But when they see the blood of Jesus is indiscriminate and the cross really did take it all—no matter what—it changes things.

“And when you get around people who have been so hungry and thirsty for grace, and then they find it, you can’t help but be moved and feel the Holy Spirit in that place. They’re on fire because they didn’t think anyone could love them. The jubilation from the reconciliation can’t be put into words.”

Griggs said her career in law enforcement exposed her to flaws in the criminal justice system and that now her perception of justice is different, which she likens to an element of Lutheran identity. “The Lutheran church is all about both/and, and it’s messy, but that’s life. This middle space is where there is healing. I want healing to take place for the victim and for the person who did it. I define justice by where there

is healing.”

Griggs said forgiveness is the key to that healing, and that it’s the hardest thing to do. “The only way to get there is by looking through the eyes of Christ. Then the other stuff falls away and you begin to see differently and perceive people differently,” she said.

“For people to be part of the healing process, they have to first find out what’s behind their inability to give grace to this person when [they’re] perfectly OK giving grace to this other person. It’s painful to do this. It’s like crawling through jagged glass. But when you’re able to, that’s where healing comes in and that’s where justice takes place.”

## Finding common ground

Yehiel Curry, bishop-elect of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, can trace his path to ministry and the development of the congregation he served, Shekinah Chapel, Riverdale, Ill., to a camp that was started to provide mentorship on constructive, nonviolent leadership skills.

The camp, called SIMBA (Safe In My Brother’s Arms), was started in 1993 by ELCA leaders who saw an opportunity to create a rite-of-passage mentoring program for African American boys to learn about healthy ways to process emotions.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Chicago, began hosting a regular worship service called Shekinah Chapel to provide an opportunity for the Chicagoans involved in SIMBA to gather more frequently than the camp experience. As the chapel evolved into a broader worshipping community, Curry was called to be its lay mission developer and was ordained a few years later.

“My way to the Lutheran church was through SIMBA,” Curry said. “I was never looking for the Lutheran church. I was looking for a mentoring program, and they were already doing this in my neighborhood.”

Curry said he has a lot of gratitude for the church because it introduced him to a way to live out his mission. “You’ve got to be in touch with your story because that’s the only way mission comes alive,” he said. “My dad was murdered in [the 1970s] on the South Side of Chicago. I know what it’s like to be a victim of community violence. I know what it does to a family. I know what it does to children. I’ve lived in the communities that lead the news cycle every night, and I know there is another narrative. I think it’s our job to make sure that other narrative is out there.

“It took me so long to get to this realization, but now I’ve been able to say that this experience—this major moment in my family’s life—was so impactful that I began to dream of another way and then found programs that were doing that work. I felt called to be a part of them, to journey with them.”

SIMBA eventually grew into a separate nonprofit called Rescue, Release and Restore, of which Curry is a leader. It created two new programs—SIMSA (Safe In My Sister’s Arms), which expands the mentoring camp experience to African American girls, and MYLA (Multicultural Youth Leadership Academy), a camp for teens to develop leadership skills for a multicultural world.

Curry said these camps create opportunities for people to listen to each other, engage in dialogue and understand how individuals can share their gifts and receive others—relational practices he believes lead to constructive conflict-resolution skills.

He said the church, as a relational body, is well positioned to lead these practices. “When we listen to one another, we learn some things. The church can be the center of those listening posts,” he added. “We can’t deny, especially in Chicago, it’s a polarizing time. Allowing voices to be heard allows us to realize that we’re more similar than different. And by learning this, people think twice and calculate the costs.”

Curry said a Shekinah parishioner who is a conflict-resolution specialist has spoken at the church about what he has learned about people who have committed acts of violence. “He says, ‘If those people would’ve waited three seconds, they never would’ve done it,’” Curry said. “So that’s our goal. We’re fighting for those three seconds.”

Today, 25 years after its adoption, the “Community Violence” social message is still all too relevant. Everyone is captive to the sin of violence as its reach touches every community, but the gospel messages this church follows point to a way out and call on people of faith to be people of healing.

“Seeking justice and making peace is our avocation,” Willer said. “It’s not our job. It’s a way of life. This social message reminds us that it’s a journey. God is already at work doing this and is beckoning us to join.” 