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Congregations respond to gun violence (page 36)

The Lutheran,
December 2015

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Study guide:

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Congregations respond to gun violence

By Robert C. Blezard

More than 100,000 people are killed or injured by guns each year in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control. What can we do about it? As people who follow Jesus, we can teach, preach, love, care and raise our voices to make a difference, save lives and make our communities and nation safer.

Exercise 1: The peacemakers

- What did Jesus mean when he said in his Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9)? How do you “make” peace? Is it the same thing as being passive in the face of violence? What kind of action helps to 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 home? Congregation? Community? Nation?

Exercise 2: Deadly statistics

- First, without disclosing the figures, discuss: How many gun deaths do you think there were in the U.S. in 2013? How many were homicides? What proportion were suicides? How many people were injured by guns?
- Now consider the figures. Guns killed 33,636 Americans in 2013, the Centers for Disease Control reports, and caused 84,258 nonfatal injuries. Of the deaths, 21,175 were suicides and 11,208 were homicides (the remaining 1,253 were accidental, undetermined or from police action/war). What surprises you about the statistics? Were they higher or lower than you thought?
- Guns kill 92 people per day in the U.S. and injure 230 others. How big a problem is this? Of those killed, 58 are suicides and 30 are homicides. What does this tell you? How concerned should Christians be with these statistics? Why? What can we do about it as individuals, as congregations, as Lutherans?

Exercise 3: Uneven prevalence

In some places gun violence is a devastating problem, but in others, not at all.



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Study guide: **Congregations respond**

continued

What factors contribute to gun violence being a problem in some areas and not others? What is the impact of these factors: an area's population density, average income, state gun laws, education level, poverty rate, unemployment level, social mobility?

Conduct research to identify one place in your state where gun violence is a big problem and one where it is not. Using census data and other demographic statistics, compare each place according to the economic and social factors listed above. (Perhaps your study group could divide into two teams and do their work separately.) Looking at the data side-by-side, what conclusions can you draw?

Exercise 4: Gun laws

- The incidence of gun violence varies according to a number of factors, including state laws governing firearms sales. On the scale of loose to strict, where would you place your state's gun laws? Is that where they should be? Why or why not? If you had the chance, how would you change them?
- Are firearms too easy to buy in our country, too hard or about right? Why? If there are differing opinions in the group, debate the issue.
- Because laws on firearms sales vary widely, police say it's easier for criminals to skirt tough gun laws in one state by traveling elsewhere to buy guns. (Check out the *The New York Times*' Nov. 12 article on this topic at www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/12/us/gun-traffickers-smuggling-state-gun-laws.html.) Should there be a national gun sale law? If so, why, and what should that law look like? If not, why not? What are the reasons why state-by-state laws are better?
- Our nation's gun laws permit civilians to own many guns and accessories that are geared specifically for police or military use. Is this a good idea? What should be done about it?
- Because our nation doesn't have a uniform system of background checks for those who buy guns, there are some instances (for example, private or gun-show sales) where criminal and mental-health background checks aren't mandatory. Discuss the pros and cons of this reality. Discuss the pros and cons of uniform, mandatory background checks for all gun sales.
- Some argue that new laws aren't necessary, but rather better enforcement of existing laws. Is this true? Have a team from your study group research this and report back. If existing laws were vigorously enforced to the letter, what effect would that have? Would it close the loopholes and ability to travel to other states to take advantage of differing gun laws?
- As a Christian, how does your faith in Jesus Christ inform your opinion of gun laws? How does it inform opinions of others in your congregation? What role should the church have in shaping opinion about gun laws, and then the gun laws themselves? How could it do this?



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continued

Exercise 5: Attitudes

- How would you describe your community's general attitude toward guns—their sale, their possession, their use? How does that compare to your state's? What is the connection between the strictness (or looseness) of the gun laws and public attitudes toward guns?
- Is your community's prevailing attitude toward guns too loose, too strict or about right? Why?
- As a Christian, how does your faith in Jesus Christ inform your attitudes toward guns? How does it inform attitudes of others in your congregation? What role should the church have in shaping attitudes about guns? How could it do this?

Exercise 6: Local impact

In what ways has your church been affected by gun violence? Your community? Your state? When was the last time your church or community lost someone to gun violence?

Exercise 7: True killers

It's been said, "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." Do you agree? Is the statement entirely true or entirely false? What is true about the statement? What is untrue? Does the statement clarify or confuse the issue? What is the issue?

Exercise 8: Family access

Adam Lanza, the troubled man who killed his mom and then 20 children, six adults and himself at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in 2012, used three guns that were purchased legally by his mother, with whom he lived and who had a large collection in the house.

- What role might easy access to multiple firearms in his home have played in this tragedy?
- What are the pros and cons of having accessible firearms in the same house as troubled, potentially dangerous individuals?
- What home precautions might have helped?
- What responsibility do gun owners have to keep their firearms away from others, including unstable family members who might do harm?
- Would education and awareness help inspire gun owners to keep their firearms safe and secure? Should training and education be required for gun owners? Should gun storage and security be required by law?



Study guide: **Congregations respond**

continued

Exercise 9: Mental health

Lanza showed clear signs of mental instability, as did Dylann Roof (charged in the 2015 shooting of African-Americans at a church in Charleston, S.C.) and Seung-Hui Cho (the shooter who killed 32 and wounded 17 at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Va., in 2007). In most of the mass shootings our country has witnessed the pattern is clear: A troubled man who exhibits signs of social isolation, anger, strange behavior and an obsession with violence plans and carries out the murder of innocent people. Discuss:

- Are state and federal gun laws sufficiently tough when it comes to keeping guns away from troubled people? (Members of your study group could research this and report back.) What else might be needed?
- Looking at the repeated instances of mass shootings by troubled individuals, some say it's not so much a gun problem as a mental health problem. Do you agree or disagree? How much is it a gun problem and how much a mental health problem?

In a 2014 multipart investigation titled “The Cost of not caring: Nowhere to go—the financial and human toll for neglecting the mentally ill,” *USA Today* reported that states had cut mental health funding by \$5 billion from 2009 to 2012, and the number of psychiatric beds nationwide was reduced by 4,500. Many untreated mentally ill people wind up in prisons, homeless shelters or become dangers in their communities (www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/05/12/mental-health-system-crisis/7746535).

The report said: “Nearly 40% of adults with ‘severe’ mental illness—such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder—received no treatment in the previous year, according to the 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Among adults with any mental illness, 60% were untreated.”

Discuss:

- Should mental health diagnosis and treatment be more of a priority for our country?
- Would you support putting more tax dollars toward treatment for the mentally ill? Would you support shifting tax funding from prisons to mental-health facilities?
- Should health insurance companies be required to cover more mental health treatment? The cost of treating the mentally ill is high, but is the cost of not treating them higher?

Exercise 10: Our response

Congregations across the nation are organizing rallies, protests and educational endeavors to raise awareness about gun violence and to promote peace. As the article in *The Lutheran* points out, the effort at Bethel Lutheran Church, Chicago, and others across the city helped usher in a period of peace. Discuss:

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continued

- Why is it important to push for peace?
- What mandates do we have from the Bible and from our Lutheran teachings?
- What could be done at your congregation?

As a study group, come up with a congregational plan to respond to gun violence using these tools:

- Prayer.
- Education.
- Preaching.
- Bible study.
- Publicity.
- Policy advocacy.
- Demonstration.

Congregations respond to gun violence

By Mark K. Brewer

It seems almost routine. A lone gunman enters a school, mall or movie theater resulting in death, injury and community trauma. In cities, gun violence is a daily occurrence and is getting worse in some areas. While those who wield guns have the potential to control communities with fear, Lutherans are making an impact to bring peace back into their neighborhoods.

Responding in Cedar Rapids

Dan Baldwin, a student at the ELCA's Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, said, "Gun violence stems from a mistrust, hatred or fear of the other person. The gun violence then perpetuates that fear, hatred or mistrust." The effects of gun violence ripple out into the community—people are afraid that violence will visit them someday.

Baldwin recently served as a pastoral intern at First Lutheran in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and was shocked by the casual attitude of the congregation's children regarding gun violence. "I was not OK with kids growing up in a situation

'The love of Christ breaks down boundaries and the love of God crosses inter-religious boundaries.'

where they think gun violence is normal," he said.

Community activism against gun violence in Cedar Rapids, he added, was mostly "small groups doing small things."

Baldwin networked with neighborhood leaders, including the police, the Islamic center, a rabbi, members of the Baha'i community and neighborhood activists, resulting in an interreligious prayer vigil on July 12 to galvanize the community against violence. The event drew 175 people and received heavy media coverage.

As a result of the vigil, Baldwin said, "there's more awareness of gun violence and more of a willingness to respond to it now that it's more widespread than before."

'Faith and Action' in Chicago

In May 2014, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel called for a "Summer of



PHOTO COURTESY BETHANY LUTHERAN, CHICAGO

Lutherans around the country are organizing and holding vigils in response to gun violence in their communities.

Faith and Action" to reduce gun violence and asked the religious community to pray for the city.

Sharei Green, a member of Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago's West Garfield Park neighborhood, latched on to that idea and helped organize a vigil on May 22, 2014. Fifty people gathered in front of the church while dozens of other congregations and organizations held their own events. Green said local pastors offered prayers, the people shared their stories and there was a lot of discussion.

The result of the citywide vigil was that for 36 hours there was no reported gun violence in Chicago.

The event's success at Bethel



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Lutherans, Muslims, Jewish people and members of the Baha'i community came together for the interreligious prayer vigil on violence prevention July 12 in Cedar Rapids.

involved because it affects everyone. Bethel has had a significant number of losses to gun violence—young people, specifically.”

Bethel incorporated nonviolence programming into existing events, such as the monthly community meal and the church picnic. It also partnered with neighborhood organizations to host a back-to-school rally that focused on safety. In addition to fun, food and celebration, Green said it was a time to talk about safety and lift up neighborhood victims of gun violence. They're already planning the next rally in August 2016.

“We’re inspiring the community to take care of itself and to know that Bethel Lutheran Church is a safe haven,” Green said. “If you’re afraid or if you need help, we will stand with you and help them through whatever it is they may need.”

Grieving in Southern Oregon

It’s not just cities that are affected. On the morning of Oct. 1, a gunman shot 18 people, nine of them fatally, at Umpqua Community College in rural Roseburg, Ore.

Faith Lutheran Church in Roseburg responded that evening with

an impromptu prayer vigil.

Jane Baker, pastor, said the shooting “shocked people to the core. They wondered, ‘How could this happen here? What do we do?’ I realized that people may need a place to come to process and pray or whatever they want to do. There are questions here we’ll never have the answers to, most likely. As people of faith we have to be OK with that.”

The vigil included about 25 people. Baker said they read from Scripture, sang hymns and “opened it up to people to share their feelings. We prayed for the families and the victims. We prayed for our community to get through this.”

Baker organized the event “for those who didn’t want to be with thousands of people” at a citywide vigil held later that evening. She said it’s hard to talk in a crowd of thousands, adding, “I wanted to have something where people could express their feelings.”

The love of Christ

For those whose community might benefit from similar nonviolence activities, Green said, “Don’t be afraid. Fear is what’s holding people back from doing anything. God has not given us a spirit of fear. Your community will respond.”

Baldwin also emphasized a whole community response. “The love of Christ breaks down boundaries and the love of God crosses interreligious boundaries,” he said.

“What I saw in Cedar Rapids was a willingness for people to look past boundaries, stereotypes and labels and say that we are going to work together.” □

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 175 people attended a vigil to galvanize the community around preventing gun violence.

inspired the congregation to launch a nonviolence ministry. Monthly activities continue to raise awareness and “inform our community about what’s going on and how to be safe and to persuade people to not be afraid,” Green said.

She said it was important to reach out beyond the walls of the church: “It’s not like Lutherans are the only ones who experience gun violence. We have to get everyone



Author bio:

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