

RATIONALE: On Praying for a Movement of the Spirit to Engage Presbyterian Congregations in Nation-Wide Action to Prevent Gun Violence (Overture to the 223rd General Assembly, PCUSA)

Fifty Years: What has Happened 1968 - 2018?

In 1968, the 108th General Assembly took its first position for the regulation of the sale of firearms. In 1972, in response to the shooting deaths of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Medger Evers, Malcolm X and the attempted assassination of George Wallace, the Assembly recognized “that the instruments of assassination need not be so readily available.” In 1976 the GA called for the control of concealed handguns, followed by more actions in 1981, 1985, 1988 and the action in 1989 to call for a “ban... on private ownership of the class of destructive weapons such as AK 47 assault rifles, machine guns and all paramilitary weapons.” That courageous action has been re-enforced by many other Assemblies, including 1990, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2008, 2010 and the landmark General Assembly document in 2014, ***Gun Violence and Gospel Values*** by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. The Presbyterian General Assembly has never taken a position against hunting or guns typically used in hunting or sports shooting.

During this 50 years of national Presbyterian witness, over 1,600,000 Americans have died at the barrels of guns.¹ That is more than the battlefield deaths of all servicemen and women in all of our nation’s wars since 1775.² Millions more have suffered physically and emotionally with countless families shattered by this uniquely American gun pandemic. While some gun deaths are law enforcement-related, this vast level of violence comes from suicide, accident, murder, family violence and mass shootings— Americans killing themselves and others. Recent FBI estimates suggest there are 350 million guns in the United States, with gun deaths reaching an average of 36,000 per year in each of the last four years. If current trends of gun manufacture and imports continue, there will be half a billion guns in America by 2020.³

Why is this Issue Stalled in the United States?

National Presbyterian witness has reflected fidelity to the nonviolent Christ. It also reflects public opinion on this issue and the expertise of law enforcement. Few issues in America command as much public consensus as the need for universal background checks on all guns sold. Recent polling indicates 90% of the American people, including a majority of gun owners and NRA members, support such action.⁴

With this consensus to prevent gun violence, why are guns and gun violence proliferating in our society? In the 1970s, alongside urbanization trends, hunting gun sales started a decline in popularity. During that same period, the gun and ammunition industry moved to take over the National Rifle Association, which had previously been a sportsmen’s and hunting organization, and to deploy it on behalf of gun and ammunition promotion. The new focus was on handgun sales, followed by assault rifles and high capacity ammunition clips and other devices to render guns more lethal to human beings. Today, the NRA has evolved into an election-impacting vehicle for the \$6 billion gun and ammunition industry.⁵

The NRA’s approach has been zero tolerance for any step to curb gun violence, with no willingness to discuss compromise on controlling the sale of the most dangerous weapons to the most dangerous people. If a member of Congress leans toward such a compromise, the NRA then threatens to fund a candidate to run against them, often in their own party’s primary. Over time, the NRA has locked up the U.S. Congress and many state governments on this issue, in spite of continued public consensus for sensible compromise that balances gun ownership with the need for public safety.

Missing Ingredient: The Witness and Work of Congregations in Local Communities

While the national agencies of the church have endeavored to ---and will continue to--- faithfully communicate the gun violence policies of the General Assembly to elected officials, our churches at the local level have been reticent to engage the issue of gun violence. The subject is taboo in many local communities, families and the church. It is described as a “political issue” —and it is. But protecting the public from gun violence is akin to the Good Samaritan stopping to intervene in the certain death of a violated person. That was a very political action in its time, as Jesus well knew when he asked “Who was the neighbor?” Our neighbor is everyone who is potential victim of gun violence in a culture overflowing

with guns. *Our neighbor is our own children—and all other children.* For Christians, “who is our neighbor?” is both a political and spiritual issue. Gun violence is a very difficult issue for us.

The work of gun violence prevention must be done at all levels, national and local. Fifty years of national Presbyterian action –and prophetic courage by some congregations and presbyteries--- needs to be matched across all the congregations of the Presbyterian family. Is there a single congregation whose members have not been impacted with gun violence? The missing ingredient in reducing gun violence is education, discussion and action at the local community level --in churches, in families, communities --- one difficult, honest conversation at a time. One church study group at a time. One community viewing of the film “Trigger” at a time. One “Offering of Letters” at a time. It calls for careful, respectful and determined focus at the local level. The search for a sensible compromise on gun safety cannot come from the elected officials who count on campaign contributions from the NRA. It must come from overwhelming public demand for change and courage –the courage to stand up to the NRA.

God has already provided that a Presbyterian congregation is planted in or near every single one of the 435 districts that elect the U.S. Congress. We live, worship, act and vote at the local level. The Presbyterian Church is not a partisan organization. Our concern is to bring change on this issue through transforming the actions of elected officials, regardless of political party. The Presbyterian Church General Assembly has been courageous and correct on the issue for 50 years. The only question is: when are we local Presbyterians going to do anything about the proliferation of guns of conventional and mass destruction in our nation? When will we work to actually reduce the mass killings, the sorrow of suicide, and the fear that each American child feels every day when they simply go to school? Are we at a Kairos moment when the spirit calls forth from the bedrock of our nation a movement for sensible gun regulation? Have we had enough gun violence?

A Denomination Turning to Prayer for God’s Intervention and Help

The purpose of this overture is to ask for God to help us engage the issue of gun violence at the key place where a difference can be made: at the local community level. It is a difficult issue for America. We Presbyterians need divine courage to study, pray and act in every congregation. And we need every congregation to share this concern in our local communities and to create a place where Americans can finally have a conversation on guns and gun violence without the interference of the gun and ammunition industry. Politicians cannot make this change unless the American public demands that they do so. What can you and your church do? The resources for education and action are available to local churches.... Together, let us pray to God for the courage, love and determination that we lack.

Sources

1 Documenting gun deaths in the United States from murder, suicide, accidents, family violence and mass shootings is complicated by action of the U. S. Congress in recent years to prevent the Centers for Disease Control from doing research into gun deaths. This ban on research was a noted legislative victory of the NRA. Several independent groups now collect data on deaths from law enforcement and other sources. We combine prior CDC reports 1968-2013 with more recent reports.

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Reports: Gun Deaths 1968 – 1980: 377,000

Gun Deaths 1981 - 1998: 620,525 Gun Deaths 1999 - 2013: 464,033

Gun Violence Archive (based on law enforcement reports; these numbers include murders, suicides, accidents, family violence and mass shootings) Gun Deaths 2014: 34,558 Gun Deaths 2015: 35,513

Gun Deaths 2016: 37,089 Gun Deaths 2017: 37,582 <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org>

Total U.S. Gun Violence Deaths 1968-2017: 1,606,300 (About 100,000 are injured each year.)

2 James Atwood, *America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé*, 2012, Cascade Books, p. 227.

3 Adam Weinstein, “The Number of Guns Manufactured in the U.S. has more than Doubled since 2008” (BATF Report), *The Trace*, July 23, 2015.

4 [http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun-/](http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2017/oct/03/chris-abele/do-90-americans-support-background-checks-all-gun/)

5 **\$6 Billion**, estimated revenue generated by the gun and ammunition industry in the U.S., according to research firm Hoovers. <http://www.hoovers.com/industry-facts/gun-ammunition-manufacturing.1200.html>