

Gun Violence

A Faithful, Grassroots Answer to Aggression

BY KATIE DAY

wept over Jerusalem, so, too, were we weeping for our city and for our country.

The Scope of Gun Violence

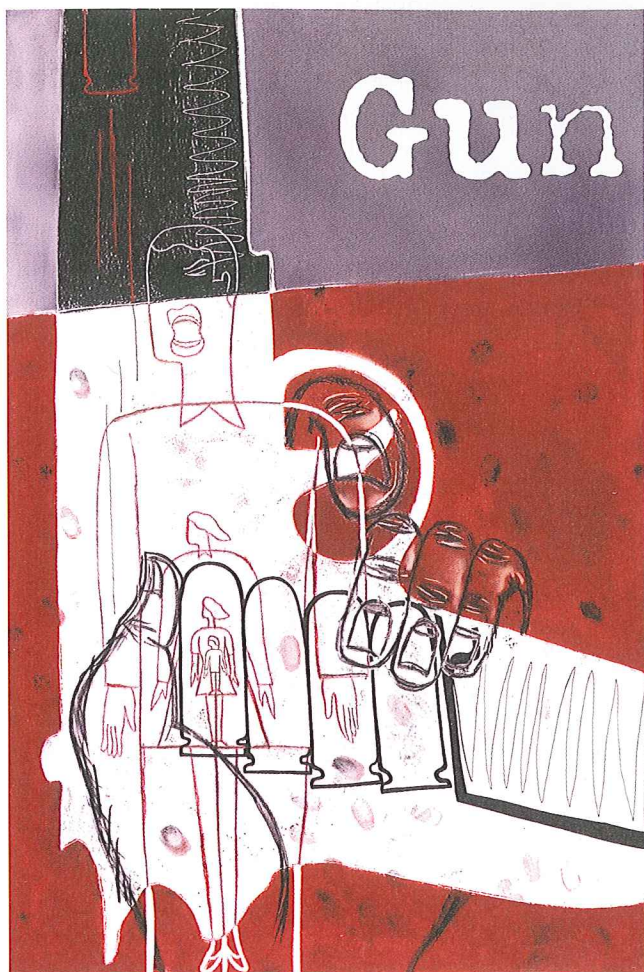
We were sad that day, but not surprised. Philadelphia has had a violent year, averaging close to one gun death *per day*.¹ The “City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection” might lead the big cities in the raw numbers of gun deaths right now, but we are part of a country that has come to accept what should be unacceptable levels of gun violence. Many gun tragedies, from Columbine to Tucson², have sparked national debate about gun laws. But despite the debate, the United States consistently averages 30,000 gun deaths per year (including suicides, police actions and accidents).³ Some 70,000 survive gun wounds but, like Gabrielle Giffords, their lives and those of their family are forever changed.

To put the American situation in a wider context, consider the levels of gun murders in other democratic countries. In 2008, Canada (with a population of 33.3 million) had 200 gun homicides; Germany (population 82.2 million) had fewer—171; in the United Kingdom (population 61.3 million) there were 32 homicides with guns. In the United States, 9,484 people were murdered by guns in 2008. Even our larger population (304.5 million) cannot account for the much higher rate of homicide by gun.⁴

Last year, Philadelphia (with a population of 1.5 million) suffered 266 gun murders.⁵ Every day 31 people in our country die in this tragic way—the same number as were killed by a mentally ill student at Virginia Tech in 2007.⁶

Engaging Whole Selves and the Whole Church

While statistics are numbing and leave us feeling powerless, the PC(USA) and its predecessor bodies have not been silent about the tragic reality the numbers represent. Over the last 30 years, nine General Assemblies have addressed national gun violence. We are not alone



Taking Lives, Anson Liaw

On a dreary Sunday afternoon in March, in front of a modest row house—so typical of northeast Philadelphia—people were gathering slowly. Finally, about 50 people clustered together, representing a variety of faith groups, ages and communities in and around Philadelphia. We were Presbyterians, Catholics, Methodists, Quakers and Jews, university students and retirees, folks from the block and from South Philly, Chestnut Hill, Center City and Bryn Mawr.

None of us wanted to be there, yet we would not be anywhere else: we were gathered to pray at the site where a young man recently had been shot. He was shot by his neighbor in the middle of the day after asking the neighbor to please clean up after his dog. A dispute over dog poop ended a life, widowed a young wife and took an infant's father.

We read a psalm, heard a poem, we prayed together, took a collection for the widow, then blinked back our tears as a woman who lived down the street belted out a heartfelt rendition of “Amazing Grace.” As Jesus had

in our advocacy—we are part of a chorus of voices. Our brothers and sisters in the United Methodist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran and Roman Catholic communions have issued strong statements on the issue. Despite the passionate pleas we have made for changes in gun laws, the same high rate of gun violence persists.

At the 219th General Assembly (2010), a carefully prepared report was submitted, which took a new tack. As well as advocating for some common-sense changes in gun laws, supported by public opinion, it called on the whole church “to awaken members and communities to the faith dimensions of our ongoing tragedy.”⁷ Sixteen specific recommendations were included in the resolution. They focused on raising individual and community awareness of gun violence, incorporating that awareness into worship life, being a presence with those who are suffering and urging people to get involved at all levels of the church.

Drawing on our biblical and theological tradition, the call is clear:

We must keep our “eyes on the prize,” of preventing gun violence and the unnecessary deaths and injuries that result. Enough blood has been spilled. We affirm that through good organizational effort, animated

by the passion for justice that comes to the people of God through the Holy Spirit, gun violence may be dramatically reduced. May our Church re-dedicate itself to this crucial task.⁸

A kind of miracle happened for this Presbyterian body, which is not shy about wrestling with difficult issues, but sometimes finds itself divided by those issues. *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call* passed unanimously! A few months later, “GV2” hit the press and was made available to congregations for study.

Reform One Neighborhood at a Time

Cindy Jarvis and Nancy Muth, senior pastors of Presbyterian churches in northwest Philadelphia (Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill and First Presbyterian of Germantown, respectively), took up the challenge. Neither congregation had a history of working on the issue of gun violence, yet both affirmed that something had to change. Those who follow the Prince of Peace could not sit idly by while so many in our city were being gunned down.

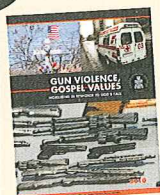
They reached out to Heeding God’s Call, a gun violence prevention organization that is

described in GV2 as a model of faith-based organizing. A core group from their congregation started meeting regularly to educate themselves on this complex issue. They invited other clergy and congregations to join them. After several months of growth and discernment, they had a service to kick off a new organization, Neighborhood Partners to End Gun Violence (NPEG), which would be a chapter of Heeding God’s Call. Presbyterians, together with other people of faith, in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Tucson also have been organizing chapters during the two years since GV2 was passed.

Since advocates in the gun violence prevention movement have not been able to significantly impact gun laws, Heeding God’s Call takes a different, more grassroots approach. Most crimes committed with guns involve weapons that have been acquired illegally through a practice called “straw purchasing.” This means that someone who cannot pass a background check pays another person (often a young woman) to buy the guns. After the straw purchaser is paid, the gun trafficker sells the weapons on the street to those who would not otherwise



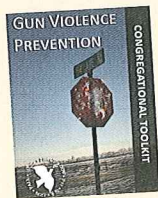
Resources



Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call

[www.pcusa.org/
resource/gun-
violence-gospel-
values-mobilizing-response-god](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gun-violence-gospel-values-mobilizing-response-god)

A report, approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010), that outlines a strategy on ending gun violence from a faith perspective



Gun Violence Prevention: Congregational Toolkit

[www.pcusa.org/
resource/gun-
violence-](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gun-violence-)

[prevention-congregational-toolkit](http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gun-violence-prevention-congregational-toolkit)

A resource with gun violence prevention educational materials, Bible study, worship resources and advocacy guide



Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence

This documentary, produced by Presbyterian Disaster Assistance with Interfaith Broadcasting

Commission, will air on NBC affiliate stations November 11, 2012–May 11, 2013. Watch local listings or contact your local station if not yet scheduled. Learn more at www.pcusa.org/pda.

be able to buy them legally. If a gun used in a crime is then traced to the buyer, she/he can simply say that the gun was lost or stolen, and the trail goes cold.

Simple, voluntary efforts by gun retailers—such as installing a video camera, conducting regular inventory checks and having visible signage about illegal sales—can stop straw purchases and save lives. Appealing to gun shops to apply these practices is at the foundation of this approach to gun violence prevention.⁹

Hands and Hearts at Work

The NPEG group in Philadelphia of which I am a member has focused for the last year and a half on encouraging Delia's Gun Shop to apply these standards. We first met with owner Fred Delia and asked him to consider signing the code. He would not, so we have had regular vigils outside his shop ever since. Twice a month—through rain, snow and heat waves—we have gathered outside his shop with signs that urge him to “do the right thing,” “sign the code,” because “illegal guns kill cops and kids.”

As few as two people and as many as 90 have encouraged drivers on the busy street to “honk if you're against illegal guns.” In a city where gun violence touches everyone in some way, there are hundreds of honks. After each of our 32 vigils, we have prayed for God's presence to be with the owner, his customers and the community. Although initially he was hostile to us and vowed never to change, we have developed a relationship with him over time, exchanging letters and conversation. Recently, he took the first step and installed a video camera.

Now there are three Heeding God's Call groups in Philadelphia,

each engaging different gun shops, and a fourth group is forming. We get together twice a year for larger witnesses. On the Day of Prayer for Peace last September 21, we gathered at the site of a gun murder, as we do throughout the year at sites of gun murders. But on that day, we marched to City Hall carrying t-shirts for each of the victims from the previous year. At our annual Good Friday service, we put the names of victims on small crosses and (literally) lift them up in prayer. It is for these dear children of God that we gather.

Perhaps this seems like a grim or depressing ministry. What is much more depressing is the silent despair of knowing that gun violence does not reflect our Gospel values and feeling that there is nothing we can do to stop it. GV2 speaks of a “spiritual malaise” that has taken hold in our culture; our passivity toward gun violence has had a cost to our souls. But in carrying a sign, talking to a gun shop owner, assuring traumatized neighbors that they are not alone, praying with our hearts and on our feet, we have been changed. We are *living into* the hope that we affirm through the Risen Christ, and

working to end preventable deaths and injuries. 

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Notes

1. On June 19, 2012, murders in Philadelphia numbered 173, according to the Philadelphia Police Department, up 24 percent over this time a year ago. In 2011, over 80 percent of Philadelphia homicides were by gun. The national average, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is around 67 percent.
2. Refers to the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado in which 12 students and a teacher were killed, and the 2011 shooting at a public meeting near Tucson, Arizona, in which 6 people were killed and 13 wounded, including U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords.
3. “Firearm Injury in the U.S.,” Firearm and Injury Center, University of Pennsylvania, 2005, 2009.
4. Population figures are drawn from “2008 World Population Data Sheet,” Population Reference Bureau, Washington, DC; gun death statistics are from Sydney School of Public Health, *Gun Policy Facts* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2012), www.gunpolicy.org; accessed June 19, 2012.
5. “Two Cities, One Deadly Year,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 18, 2012, A08.
6. *Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel*, Commonwealth of Virginia, April 16, 2007, vii.
7. *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call*, report approved by the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (2010), 1; accessible at www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf.
8. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
9. This code of conduct was developed by Mayors Against Illegal Guns and has been adopted by Wal-Mart, the biggest gun seller in the United States. See www.mayorsagainstillegalguns.org/html/partnership/partnership.shtml.



Members of an interfaith group opposed to gun violence protest outside Colosimo's Gun Center in Philadelphia, May 2009.

AP Photo/Matt Rourke