

G-NS: A Resource for Generous Dialogue about Gun Violence

Sarah E. Logemann

Introduction

Like many other politicized topics, the issue of gun violence has largely been ignored in communities of faith around our nation. After the issue was identified as a top priority for UKirk, the collegiate ministries of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), this resource was created as a tool to begin the conversation among young adults who are wrestling with how to think, talk, and bring reconciliation to this controversial issue. Although designed with college students in mind, it was designed and developed so it can be used with both younger and older participants as well.

Goals: This resource aims to engage participants about the issue of gun violence from a thoughtful and theological perspective. With a major emphasis on open and gracious communication, the curriculum seeks to help participants think and talk about this controversial issue productively and through the lens of the Christian faith.

Structure: The curriculum is divided into four sessions: *Gather*, *Encounter*, *Respond*, and *Send*. Together these make up the four major movements of worship. This framework serves as a reminder that worship is both a gift and a calling. In the rhythm of worship, we understand that the topic of gun violence is more than political debate or sociological research. This format allows us to encounter that which is bigger than ourselves—that which is mysterious. It puts us in a place of humility and eager expectation for an encounter with the living God. Worship reorients us to who we are and

who God is. In each session, the topic of gun violence is approached through the lens of one of these movements of worship.

- **Gather:** Just as worshipers get ready to come close to God in worship with elements such as the call to worship and confession, this first session *prepares* participants to engage with the topic of gun violence.
- **Encounter:** This section of the worship service, which includes the Scripture and the sermon, is often seen as the “meat” of the service. In the second session, participants *face* the issue of gun violence and seek God’s presence within it.
- **Respond:** After those gathered have come close to God through encounter, this section of the worship service allows them to respond. In the third session, participants are able to *react* to what they have learned about gun violence.
- **Send:** The sending elements of a worship service, and this last session, help participants think through how they will continue to *engage with* the topic in real life.

The end of each session includes a portion of a worship service that includes the elements of that particular movement of worship. These may be used as small worship services at the end of the lesson, or put together after all four sessions as a complete service.

Logistics: Each of the four sessions is designed to take approximately an hour and a half but could easily be expanded. Depending on how discussions are structured, a session could take longer or go faster. Each session has a variety of points of engagement, and sections could be left out if time is limited. Depending on the size and dynamics of your group, a variety of responses could be used. Small group discussion, individual journaling, and large group conversations are all possible throughout the sessions. Additionally, the entire curriculum could be done in a retreat or workshop setting. The leader should plan for at least thirty minutes of preparation for each session in order to read through the entire session and make decisions about how to structure discussions and what to leave out if there is limited time.

A Difficult Topic: It is important to acknowledge that this is a difficult topic and to be intentional about making the environment a safe space. It is impossible to assume that any leader or participant would know what everyone in the group believes or has experienced related to the issue of gun violence. Some people may have raw

trauma, many people likely have strong feelings, and the group may have dramatic variations of experience and comfort. Three guidelines for creating a safe space may help frame the conversation with your group.

1. *Participation at will.* Allow participants the assurance that they will never be forced to reveal their feelings or positions aloud if they do not want to. If certain conversations or activities make anyone feel unreasonably uncomfortable or unsafe, they should be granted permission to not participate or to leave the room. For activities where participants are asked to write responses on paper, they should be assured that they do not have to “turn them in” or show anyone, but will be able to keep them for themselves.
2. *Confidentiality.* Set an expectation of respect for participants who share their thoughts and feelings. These conversations should stay in the room.
3. *Listen before responding.* Participants should be reminded to let others share fully before interjecting. It is important to create a culture of true listening rather than simply waiting to respond.

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Session 1

Gathering

In This Session

Purpose: Set the stage for the four sessions. Acknowledge the difficult nature of the topic. Affirm that it is important to discuss it from a faith perspective. Acknowledge that our agenda is theological, not political, and that we seek common ground in a holy place.

Theology: We will discuss the topic in light of the *imago Dei*: our identity as children of God who are created in God's image.

Story: Participants will offer personal reactions to gun violence.

Scripture: Genesis 1:26–31 (creation); Genesis 3 (brokenness); Genesis 4:1–16 (Cain and Abel); Matthew 22:34–40 (the greatest commandment)

Background for the Leader

I grew up in Littleton, Colorado. After moving away, I quickly learned never to say “Littleton” when I met someone new. I would just say I came from a small suburb of Denver. That’s because during my adolescence, the quiet little town became internationally known because of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. Two seniors at the school ambushed their classmates with an arsenal of bombs and guns. Twelve students and one teacher were killed before the shooters turned the guns on themselves. The mayhem played out on live TV over the course of several hours—many police and SWAT teams did not yet have active shooter

protocols (that would come in response to this tragedy), so the response was chaotic and slow.

I learned not to say I was from Littleton because everyone had heard of it. They would gasp and grab my arm and ask if I had gone to Columbine. Some tilted their head in sorrow. Others visibly recoiled as if I was infected with the evil that had come out of my town. Since then, far too many people have learned what it is like to have the name of their town or school become synonymous with a tragedy: Parkland, Las Vegas, Waco, Virginia Tech, Newtown, and the list continues to grow.

I did not go to Columbine High School, but a neighboring high school in the same district. My school was on lockdown that day, just like every other school in the area. Conflicting reports were coming out. Someone said the shooters were in the neighborhood or in a nearby park. Some of my teachers had children who attended Columbine. They ran out of their classrooms, desperate to get in touch with their kids. I remember sitting on sour-smelling mats in the wrestling room, watching the coverage on television. Finally, the administration let us leave in small, supervised groups, directly into the buses or cars we had come in. I had nightmares about that walk to my car for months.

Overnight, bomb threats popped up online for my school. “You’re next!” they taunted. The following morning, we still didn’t know the full extent of what had happened at Columbine. The daughter of my

favorite teacher was missing and would later be confirmed dead. Though we were all shocked and fearful, our principal had sent out a letter urging everyone to come to school. I arrived early to work in the school store for my normal shift before first period. The SWAT team had just completed a bomb sweep and was leaving as I walked in. I felt small and helpless as I watched their huge armored trucks drive away. The empty halls of the school seemed to echo in eerie darkness that morning, and I anxiously hurried to my post in the store. Each time the door opened, I felt an overwhelming urge to dive under the counter and hide. I was terrified.

Unfortunately, mine is not a unique story. School shootings, whether far from home or right next door, give many young people anxiety. Threats, especially online, are commonplace. Students and teachers across the nation are now accustomed to lockdown and active shooter drills. As we do for tornados and earthquakes, we prepare students for what seems like an uncontrollable and inevitable risk.

And it is not just schools. Malls, nightclubs, concert venues, churches, movie theaters, and workplaces have all seen horrific mass shootings. These events capture the media's attention because they are so intense and awful. In reality, however, mass shootings such as those at Columbine, the Pulse nightclub, and Las Vegas are incredibly rare. Gun violence is a mammoth issue in the United States of America, but public mass shootings are a surprisingly small fraction of the problem. They devastate and deserve our attention, of course, but they also beg us to widen our perspective to see the larger cultural trends and contributing factors to all kinds of gun violence. Faith is an important part of this conversation.

My faith was deeply impacted by the Columbine shooting. I was desperate to know why God would allow such a horrible thing to happen. I watched in awe as many of the families of victims professed belief in Jesus—even in the midst of their pain. When strangers from across the globe sent cards and posters and teddy bears to my church, I was touched to recognize that this family of faith was larger than just the people right in front of me. For the first time, faith felt like it really mattered. The church was the place I needed to be to process the shooting, ask questions, and find support. My trauma was mild and secondhand—I had been miles

away from the bullets—but it was still a significant marker in my life. The church was a helpful presence.

I fear, however, that many congregations and faith communities aren't always as helpful as my church was. How do we talk about gun violence as Christians? Unfortunately, unless a town is rocked with its own gun violence, it is more typical that the church simply does *not* talk about it.

This session attempts to lay the groundwork for conversation. The topic of gun violence can be extremely difficult to discuss, especially in faith communities. We need to talk about *how* to talk about it before we can truly enter into conversation. After all of my research on the topic of gun violence, I believe that better communication is the single most important factor that could make a difference—not a new law, or a nonprofit advocacy group, or a policy, helpful as each of those might be.

When a community comes together to worship, the first elements of the service are intended to gather the people—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. There is often a call to worship, expressing the purpose of the gathering. In confession, the people acknowledge the things that get in the way of encountering God. We are assured forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and in the spirit of that forgiveness, we are able to speak a word of peace to one another. All of these elements focus attention on the true object of worship and clear the way so that the community can better encounter God in the worship space.

This session follows a similar structure. We identify the purpose of our gathering—to engage in conversation around the problem of gun violence from the perspective of Christian faith. We acknowledge the things that make this topic difficult and confess our biases. We are reminded of our core identity as children of God, made in God's image, fallen, and redeemed by Jesus Christ. Remembering that this is an issue that impacts children of God from all walks of life and personal perspectives, we enter into conversation with a humble spirit and worshipful mind-set.

However you structure your time together, make it an actual safe space for those in your community. Do not assume that you know what everyone in your group believes or has experienced related to guns. Central to this session is a tool called the Gun Rights Spectrum.

The point of the tool is not to assign everyone a number but to recognize that opinions are nuanced and held for various reasons. It is more important for participants to think critically about *why* they are where they are than to try to justify their position. The entire session can be carried out without anyone having to reveal where they see themselves on the spectrum. The questions in that section could be contemplated silently, students could be invited to write their own personal responses, or self-selected partners could discuss certain answers. Depending on the size and trust levels of your group, you may invite volunteers to share their positions, but this should never be forced.

Acknowledge that real trauma around this issue may exist for students—even students you would never suspect. Warn participants ahead of time that you will be discussing this topic, and make yourself available for questions or concerns. Students who are particularly anxious about the topic may benefit from seeing the materials and plans ahead of time.

You may use the following sections as a script, or just as background for yourself as you walk the group through the various sections. Most of them have discussion questions. Be sure to leave plenty of time for conversation that results from these discussion questions, since the purpose of this curriculum is to promote healthy dialogue.

Blessings to you as you embark upon this journey.

The Topic

Let's talk about guns and gun violence.

What happens to you physically when you hear that sentence? Do you notice your body tightening? Do you feel a sense of release? If you noticed a physical reaction, pay attention to that part of your body, and breathe deeply into it. Continue breathing as we pray together:

God of grace, awaken us to your presence in this space. This topic of gun violence that we approach today can be traumatic, controversial, alienating. For some, it may hit too close to home. For others, it may seem irrelevant. We come from a variety of places and experiences, but as your children, we come together nonetheless. Infuse your grace into the tight places of our bodies. Infuse your hope and a spirit of listening into us as a gathered body. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Every year, an average of 33,000 people in the United States die as the result of gun violence. That is about ninety people per day. Approximately two-thirds of those deaths are from suicide, while the rest are from causes such as homicide, accidents, and self-defense. In the next hour, while we are talking, four people will die at the barrel of a gun.

Dynamics of race, mental health, masculinity, politics, domestic abuse, and suicide are all interwoven. Gun violence is not a simple, one-sided problem. But people are crying out, and it is an issue that requires attention.

Stories

You may read these stories aloud, have a participant read them aloud, or print them out for students to read to themselves.

Rachel

It was the first day of classes in Julie's freshman year of college. Her morning class met in a small second-floor classroom in an old brick building. The room was cold and sterile. Rows of individual desks faced a blackboard. The students' backs were to the windows, and they all stared toward the front of the room in silence. The first day had an air of awkwardness about it—students didn't know each other yet, freshmen were nervous, and routines had not yet been formed.

Waiting for the professor to arrive, Julie snuck a peek at her schedule to make sure she was in the right place, then looked around the room at the other students and secretly sized them up. When a young man opened the door and walked in, Julie noticed the woman next to her flinch. As he slid into a seat, the woman took a deep breath. She looks like she might be about to jump out of her skin, Julie thought to herself.

A couple of weeks later, Julie learned that the student sitting next to her had been experiencing more than just first-day jitters. Her name was Rachel, and she was a survivor of a horrific school shooting. Though it hadn't been diagnosed yet, Rachel was experiencing the effects of PTSD. Just a few months earlier, on what started as a normal day of her senior year of high school, Rachel had run for her life as bullets screamed by her and shrapnel embedded itself in her body. Several of her friends were killed that day, and the scars Rachel was left with were more than just physical.

Rachel and Julie became fast friends. Rachel was committed to making the world a better place, and her kindness was contagious. The classroom environment was traumatic, though. Rachel felt trapped in those rooms—with her back to windows and only one possible exit, she felt like a sitting duck. Eventually, Rachel opted to finish her college degree online so that she could avoid the traumatic environment of the classroom. Gun violence dramatically impacted Rachel in a life-limiting way.

Antonia

A different student shared about her experience with guns in a *New York Times* op-ed.¹ Antonia was working full-time and attending graduate classes at night. As a survivor of sexual assault, Antonia felt acutely aware of the risks of walking across an empty campus long after dark.

Desiring to have more control over her safety, Antonia advocated for the campus-carry bill that her state eventually passed. Now she says she feels safer. Holding her pistol gives her a newfound sense of relief. Antonia hopes to never have to use it on campus, but she has peace of mind knowing she can defend herself if she has to. For Antonia, guns feel like a life-giving source of security.

Obstacles

There are a few key reasons why talking about guns and gun violence may be difficult. In order to approach this topic openly, we need to address the potential obstacles and acknowledge them directly.

1. Some of us have personal experience with gun violence. A loved one may have been injured by a gun or killed through murder, suicide, or an accident with a firearm. We ourselves may have witnessed an act of gun violence. Events near or far may have deeply impacted us, even if we were not physically present. The trauma of these experiences can make conversation difficult—especially if we perceive that others in the group do not know about or have respect for our experience.
2. There are polarizing opinions about guns in general. Bringing up the topic at all can raise defenses, put us on edge, and nudge us toward pre-made judgments of those who have opinions different from our own. Antigun and progun sentiments

seem to exist as polar extremes, and it can feel as if no one will ever change their mind. Why discuss a topic if everyone already has a strong opinion?

3. Some people believe that this topic has no place in faith communities. Guns are political. Politics and religion should be kept separate, and discussions on topics like this are inappropriate. We all have the right to let our faith be one thing and our political stance another.

Discuss:

- Are any of these true for you right now?
- What other reasons make this topic difficult?
- Reflecting on your own life, think of some of the experiences you have had with guns. Perhaps they were toy guns, water guns, guns made out of Legos. Perhaps they were real guns, guns that you have fired or seen or owned. Maybe they were guns you haven't seen in person but that had an impact on you—one from a powerful movie scene or from a real-life story that stuck with you. Think of one positive and one negative memory or experience from your own life that involved a gun. Write down a few sentences about each gun, then share them with the group if you are comfortable. Describe the feelings that come up with the memory of each.

Polarizing Opinions

People think of the gun issue as fairly black and white. Either you are “for” guns, or you are “against” guns. It is, of course, much more nuanced than that. Consider the spectrum below. (*Share a copy of the spectrum on page 6, or display it on a screen.*) There are many other factors that contribute to a person's overall opinion on guns, but this is a general starting point that may give conversation a broader foundation. While oversimplified, it distinguishes between several different beliefs about what types of guns should be allowed in our society and who should have access to them.

The term *military-style* is ambiguous and may be problematic for some. Many gun-safety advocates use the term to describe semiautomatic and/or fully automatic assault weapons, but there is wide variance among these types of guns. For some, military-style comes down to firearms that look like military weapons. For others, it has to do with how many bullets are

released each time the trigger is pulled. For the sake of this exercise, I have left the ambiguous term in place and encourage people to define it for themselves. If further distinction is necessary to articulate your place on the spectrum, feel free to elaborate and create your own position between two established points.

Take some time and consider all of the points on this spectrum. Knowing that no number is likely to encompass all of your views about guns, think about where you are most drawn.

Discuss:

- Where do you most identify on this spectrum?
- Think of two events, factors, or beliefs that contribute to your place on the spectrum. What are they?
- Has your position ever changed? If so, when and why?
- Where do most of your family and friends fall on the spectrum? Do you know people at both ends?
- Is there a difference between your “ideal world” scenario and your realistic preference? If so, why does that distinction exist?

These questions are central to this lesson. Deeply contemplating the “why” of personal beliefs will open the door for hearing perspectives that are different. Allow for plenty of time with the Gun Rights Spectrum and for questions. This is an important place for leaders to acknowledge their own biases as well.

After discussion, share the following:

There is more room for common ground than we might initially think. If we all step back far enough, we can see that we have the same common goals and hopes. Political philosopher Gordon Graham identifies four goals that people in every society have: peace, prosperity, freedom, and justice. It is true at the larger level, with countries and tribes and states, and it is true at the local and personal levels as well. We all want a life in which we, our friends, and our families are safe and happy, have all we need, and are living good lives.

Opinions vary dramatically about how we get there, however. For some, peace, prosperity, freedom, and justice are achieved by being at number 1 on the spectrum, and for others, by being at number 7. But it is important to realize that, generally speaking, we have the same goals. We share commonalities across the spectrum.

Even more than that, as Christians we claim a deeper commonality with all of humanity: the *imago Dei*, or image of God. Understanding who we are at the most basic level gives us a framework for responding to the issue of gun violence. So we go all the way back to the beginning.

The *Imago Dei*

This section requires discussion of theological concepts that may be difficult for some participants to grasp. Don't worry if they don't understand all the complexities of the *imago Dei*; just help them understand the importance of being created in God's image to live in community with God and each other.

Read Genesis 1:26–31, then share the following:

The pinnacle of God's creativity was humankind. We were made, Scripture tells us, in the image of God—those of us at number 1 on the Gun Rights Spectrum, those of us at number 7, and everyone in between. Life was breathed into humankind from the very breath of God.

Theologians have long debated what exactly “the image of God” encompasses. Often cited are traits such as freedom, the ability to reason, creativity, and intellect. More prominent, however, is relationality. Just as God is inherently relational in the connected persons of the Trinity, human beings are wired to share in relationship with one another and with the God who created them. Deep in our core, we are relational beings meant to live life in communion.

So who are we? As human beings, we are made in the image of God and wired for relationality—with each other and with God. As image bearers of God, we see that we were given dominion, charged to care for the earth and for the things in it.

This image was distorted with the fall. Chapter 3 of Genesis tells the story of sin entering the world. The effects were far-reaching. It wasn't just that Adam and Eve had done something “bad.” Sin impacted relationships, things, people, systems, and the earth. Even still, as theologian John Calvin claimed, “the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed.” Calvin continued: “There was no part even of the body in which some rays of glory did not shine.”² Even in sin, human beings carry a remnant of God's rays of glory. The corruption of God's initial intent, however, did require renovation in Jesus Christ.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the *imago Dei* was most perfectly realized. Colossians 1:15 names Christ as “the image of the invisible God.” While Christ certainly demonstrated intelligence, freedom, creativity, and good reasoning, his life was more notably marked by loving relationships with humans and God—helping us better understand what the image of God looks like in a human life.

In any controversial conversation, it is important to take a step back and remember where we come from. Our foundational identity is essential. We are children of God, made in God’s image, distorted by sin, and redeemed by Christ. This reminder gives us common ground and helps us to see others through a new lens.

Discuss:

- As you imagine the topic of gun violence, who is it that frustrates you the most? Who is it that you do not understand?
- Who is the “other” for you in discussions about guns? Is it the gun-violence perpetrator? The one who wants to get rid of all guns everywhere? The one who knowingly sells guns illegally? The most outspoken NRA member? The one who uses a gun for suicide? The one who refuses to carry a gun?

Imagine those people before you, those you see as other, whether you have specific faces in mind or just a generic sense of them. Breathe into the reality that they also bear the image of God. Though we have all been distorted by sin, even these people have some rays of God’s glory shining forth. How we relate with one another is of spiritual importance.

Considering the *imago Dei* not only helps us see others more clearly, but it gives us the basis for understanding what our response is to be. It puts us in a mind-set to hear from God.

Politics and Religion

The issue of guns has become very political in our society. Firearms are mentioned in the Constitution, gun rights always play a role in political campaigns, and laws about guns are constantly being written and challenged.

Discuss:

- Why do you think guns are so highly politicized in the United States?

- What role has politics played in churches or other faith communities you have been a part of? Did the pastor or leader bring up “political” issues in a worship context? Was the topic of gun violence ever addressed?
- Why do you think faith communities most often avoid political topics?
- What political issues does the church seem to focus on the most? Why do you think that is?
- What is risked and what might be gained from political conversations in faith contexts?

Some faith communities avoid anything political in nature in order to stay safely within the regulations for religious nonprofits set forth by the Internal Revenue Service. Other congregations avoid politics because they fear alienating members of their community who might not feel welcomed for having a minority opinion. Still others avoid anything controversial because it seems more important to keep everyone happy.

Avoiding difficult topics was not a marker of the life of Jesus Christ or the early church. In the life and work of Jesus, it is clear that he cared about the physical, emotional, and spiritual realities of people. Engaging both the political and religious systems of his time, Jesus modeled a way that embodied the love of God. To this day, the action of the Holy Spirit blurs human-made distinctions between spiritual and secular.

Etymologically, it makes sense. The word *politics* comes from the Greek word meaning “affairs of the cities.” Politics deals with matters of the people as they live together. Political issues are issues of life and relationship. Guns aren’t inherently political. They deal with human issues: life, death, justice, power, safety, and fear.

Scripture makes clear that we are to be concerned about issues like these. Returning to the beginning of Genesis, God establishes this with the first family. In their postfall relocation, Adam and Eve settle east of Eden and have two sons. After some time, Cain kills Abel in jealousy. When God asks Cain to account for Abel, he snarkily retorts, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God’s response insists that, yes, Cain *was* to be a keeper of his sibling. Humanity is to watch out for one another—even in unfair circumstances. Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground, and God responded.

As children of God are unnecessarily injured and killed by guns, their blood also cries out to God. Can we as people of faith look out for these siblings of ours? How can we better listen for the cries of suffering sisters and brothers and become better keepers of them? Questions about guns and gun violence must be addressed in politics, education, and perhaps most importantly, in faith communities.

Discuss:

- Is it possible to discuss political issues without taking sides? Is that desirable?
- Can faith communities involve themselves in political issues and still support the separation of church and state? Should they?

Overview Questions

If you have additional time, you may want to discuss one or more of these questions before concluding.

- What does the reminder of our identity as children made in the image of God do to this conversation?
- Think back to the Gun Rights Spectrum. What questions do you have for people who are at points farthest from where you stand?
- Revisit the stories of Rachel and Antonia from the beginning of this lesson. How might you have responded to each of them in the midst of her experience?
- Do you think of gun violence as a problem that needs attention? Why or why not?

Conclusion

In the presence of God and one another, we gather and consider the issue of gun violence. It is holy ground,

because we are together and God is present. Acknowledging the divine image in all who are gathered and all who are impacted by guns, we remember that we were designed to be in relationship with other people and with God.

We recognize that there are more than 33,000 deaths per year from gun violence in this country—33,000 people made in the image of God. As we sit with this topic, we confess that things get in the way of productive conversation: our own trauma, our prior experiences and biases, our already determined feelings about guns, and our ideas about the appropriateness of political conversations in faith settings. Yet being reminded of who we are—namely, children made in the image of God—we worshipfully approach the topic of gun violence and seek the *imago Dei* in those whom we see as “other.”

Gun violence deals with issues of life and death, freedom, justice, power, hope, and fear. These things are not only central to the human experience—they are profoundly spiritual. Guns have been highly politicized and threaten to divide us, but behind that facade is plenty of room for common ground, faithful conversation, and action.

After having gathered and prepared ourselves, we look forward in our next session to encountering God. Where is God in the midst of gun violence?

Notes

1. Antonia Okafor, “Why I Bring My Gun to School,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2017.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2008), 1.15.3–1.15.4 (106–8).

Worship: Gathering

Close your time together in worship. Ask for volunteers ahead of time to assist with worship.

Call to Worship

ONE: The earth is the Lord's

MANY: **and all that is in it.**

ONE: The world

MANY: **and those who live in it.**

ONE: Gracious God, as we gather today,

MANY: **turn our focus to you.**

ONE: Widen our perspective so that we might see

MANY: **the rays of your glory shining forth.**

ONE: We come to worship you.

Song

"Come and Fill Our Hearts with Your Peace" (Confitemini Domino)

Scripture

Genesis 4:8–10

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

Call to Confession

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We fall short of this kind of love regularly. In everything from selfishness to murder, we fail to love God with our whole being and to love other people as if they were us. Rather than being keepers of our sisters and brothers and neighbors, we have often ignored their cries and have sometimes been the cause of their crying. Especially as we consider the topic of gun

violence, let our voices rise together before God in confession.

Confession

God of grace, have mercy on us, your children. We confess that we drown out the cries of our sisters' and brothers' blood. Sometimes we drown it out with shouts that freedom isn't free. Sometimes we cover our ears because the cries reveal our unbearable trauma. Sometimes we think the blood is less valuable because the skin spilling it is darker than our own. Sometimes we turn away because we feel completely powerless in the face of such a daunting and politicized problem.

We confess that our own biases and experiences and ideas get in the way of productive conversation. Help us to see one another as beings made in your image, God. Forgive us for being so shortsighted and certain. Make us clean through Jesus Christ, so that we will shine with the rays of your glory. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness

There is good news. While we were sinners, Christ died for us.

"Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Passing of the Peace

Good news cannot stay stagnant. As we have been granted forgiveness and peace by Christ, we are called to share forgiveness and peace with one another.

The peace of Christ be with you,

And also with you.

Being forgiven and sharing peace do not mean that we rest back in our old ways. As we continue to explore the topic of gun violence in this community, let us be willing to invest our full selves and remember that we are children of God.

Amen.

¹Taizé Community, G.I.A. Publications (copyright information at https://www.taize.fr/en_article114.html). The community sells the music, and many songs can be found on YouTube.

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Sarah E. Logemann

Session 2

Encountering

In This Session

Purpose: Through the lens of faith, we look at the issue of gun violence and consider where God is. We define gun violence using facts and statistics, but stories too. We address the big questions this topic brings up, sensitively but directly.

Theology: Theodicy; sin is in all of us.

Stories: Rob Schenck (“Even I could be capable of this”) and Colin Goddard (“Who was God looking out for?”)

Scripture: Romans 7:15–20 (I do not understand what I do); Amos 5:24 (Let justice roll down); Genesis 4:10 (Your brother’s blood is crying to me!)

Background

The Sunday after the Columbine shooting, I attended a public memorial service in a sprawling shopping center parking lot near the school. Over 70,000 people braved the threatening gray skies to gather together. We watched doves being released as the names of the victims were read; heard words of encouragement from Vice President Al Gore, evangelical leader Franklin Graham, and Columbine principal Frank DeAngelis; and chanted as one community, “We are Columbine!” The thing that I remember the most, however, was singer Amy Grant performing “Somewhere down the Road.” The chorus included the line “Why, why, why does it go this way?” That chorus stuck in my head and seemed to be embedded in the entire community for

months. Why, why, why? People seemed obsessed with that question.

After Columbine, charismatic and evangelical Christians were a substantial presence. Large nondenominational churches took the lead on what was called the Christian response. I remember thinking that they seemed a little different from my mainline Protestant faith community, but I couldn’t quite identify reasons why. In a chain email (the “meme” of 1999) from one of my evangelical friends, I recall getting a cartoon depicting two people standing outside of a school with crime tape around it. One of them asks, “Why didn’t God stop the shooting?” and the other replies, “How could he? He’s not allowed in school anymore.”

The cartoon made me uncomfortable. I felt that God’s presence was with me at school, I’d heard stories of students at Columbine praying, and it seemed like God wasn’t the type to pout outside of a building because of human-made laws protecting the separation of church and state.

These two experiences, Amy Grant’s “why, why, why” and the cartoon about where God was, stand out as emblematic of the post-Columbine experience in Littleton. Both are essentially questions of theodicy. Where is God in the midst of tragedy and evil? Why do bad things happen at all? Is God present within this situation? If so, how? Where was God at the moment the shooting began? Did God cause it? Where is God now?

Encountering the issue of gun violence from a Christian perspective necessarily brings up issues of free will, God's sovereignty, providence, sin, and suffering. In their entirety, these topics extend far beyond the scope of this particular study. It is, however, important to identify and name the larger doctrines and questions as they come up. This resource aims to set the stage for authentic questioning and exploration rather than provide fast (and likely hollow) conclusions.

Following the rhythm of worship, this lesson transitions from gathering to encounter. After congregating and reorienting ourselves, we are better able to listen for God's voice. In worship settings, encounter often includes a prayer for illumination, in which the people ask for God to help them hear and see. Through the reading of Scripture and some sort of sermon, message, study, or prayer, they seek God. This lesson follows a similar pattern. After having cleared the way for conversation in the last session, we gather intentionally to explore the reality of gun violence and to listen for the Word of God within it. What exactly does "gun violence" encompass? What are the facts and trends that are important to consider? What does God have to say about the issue? Where is God in the presence of it?

God of grace, open our eyes that we might see.

The Topic

"Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10)

As children created in the image of God, we are called to care for our sisters and brothers. God hears the cries of those who are impacted by gun violence, and beckons us to listen as well.

Today we come close to the issue of gun violence—exploring what it encompasses, hearing stories, and beginning to ask where God is in the midst of it. Remembering that we are on holy ground, let us pray as we begin:

Sovereign God, illuminate our senses with your presence. As we consider the issue of gun violence, help us to orient our perspective from the foundation of Christ. Give us the desire for truth, the humility to be wrong, and the hope to imagine a way forward. In the name of Christ, Amen.

What Is Gun Violence?

To start, let us consider what *gun violence* really means. It may seem obvious and self-explanatory, but it is helpful to slow down enough to consider the term carefully. In the face of deeply held beliefs and opinions, all words attached to *gun* can get blurry and comingled. Gun violence is about more than guns. Gun violence is not necessarily about gun control. Gun violence does not include all violence. While these things are interwoven with gun violence, they do not define it. Defensive anxiety from a variety of perspectives can lead people to use terms interchangeably and loosely, but gun violence is more specific.

Discuss:

- When you hear the term *gun violence*, what immediately comes to your mind?
- How is it different from terms like *gun control*, *violence*, and *guns*?
- Is it possible to separate the issues of gun violence, guns, gun control, and all violence? If so, *should* they be separated in conversation?
- Why do you think this particular type of violence has gotten so much attention?

In short, gun violence encompasses any act of violence committed with a gun. Regardless of **intention, result, legality, or motivation**, incidents in which people are injured or killed by a gun are counted as gun violence. Included are:

1. homicides
2. accidental shootings
3. suicides
4. legal interventions
5. self-defense shootings
6. attempts of these things that cause injury

Most statistics around the issue of gun violence deal exclusively with private citizens and not military members or events. Additionally, statistics do not typically include incidents of violence in which a gun was present (and perhaps used for intimidation) but not fired. Also not typically included are incidents in which the discharge of a gun damages or destroys property but does not directly impact humans.

What Is Unique about Gun Violence?

People have been killing each other since the very beginning of their existence. Scripture acknowledges this

problem early on with the story of Cain killing Abel in Genesis. Human beings, in our broken state, have been killing one another by a variety of horrific methods for thousands of years. Lynching, poisoning, stabbing, burning at the stake, and even crucifying. So why make a big deal about guns? Isn't it just another method (and some might argue, a faster and more humane method) of displaying our broken and violent selves?

Brainstorm with each other this question: What makes gun violence unique? Why should we talk about it separately from other forms of violence?

Some answers to that question include the following:

1. Guns are more lethal than most other methods/ types of violence.
2. The amount of time between decision and impact is incredibly fast with a gun. Unlike many other types of violence, the amount of time from consideration or intent to death or injury is minuscule.
3. Accessibility and usability are both high. In this country, there are many ways to acquire guns, and it is possible to operate a gun without any kind of training or demonstration.

Some real-life examples of the uniqueness of gun violence include the following:

- A college-age daughter sneaking into the house to surprise her parents with a visit can be mistaken for an intruder and accidentally killed.
- A teenager who has just been bullied on social media can be overcome with emotion and turn to his father's loaded gun for escape within a matter of two minutes.
- A two-year-old can accidentally kill his grandmother from the backseat of her car.
- Road rage can escalate quickly, and with an angered reach into the glove compartment, a minor traffic frustration can turn deadly.

In short, the power, immediacy, and accessibility of guns make gun violence unique among forms of violence. Of course, death is possible in a variety of other ways. Suicides, homicides, and accidents can occur without firearms. It is certainly worth discussing violence in general, but the uniqueness of gun violence makes it beneficial to discuss it separately.

So let's get our minds around what it is we are really talking about.

Facts and Stats

Statistics, in the Internet age especially, rarely change our minds. In a time of abundant "fake news" stories, facts can be difficult to discern. You can find "facts" for almost any opinion you have (no matter how ridiculous). Broccoli is bad for you, President Obama was born in Kenya, puppies are evil, coffee causes cancer, coffee cures cancer, and $2 + 2 = 5$.

Discuss:

- When was the last time a list of statistics or facts seriously influenced you or changed your mind about something? How did you know the statistics were trustworthy?
- If statistics don't often change our minds, what *does* influence our thinking?

Facts and statistics really can change behavior and teach people things. Take Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), for example. Research recognized a high correlation between the deadly syndrome and infants sleeping on their stomachs. As a result, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended putting babies to sleep on their backs. Successful campaigns promoted this practice, and since 1994, the number of SIDS deaths has decreased by 50 percent.¹ Doctors are still working to learn more about SIDS, and back sleeping is not a guarantee against it, but the numbers are convincing and encouraging. As with SIDS, research has led to new learning in many areas of life. As a result, political policies are enacted, campaigns are designed to educate, and information is distributed. It is not always easy to know what is trustworthy, however, and research must always be revisited.

Facts and statistics gain credibility when they are arrived at comprehensively by trusted professionals who are engaged in a peer-review process. While it is impossible to remove all bias from any intellectual endeavor, good statistics come from people and groups who are as nonpartisan as possible, who identify their own biases, and who are open to refining their work as a result of information from other sources.

Unfortunately, facts and statistics related to gun violence have often fallen short of these standards. Simple Google searches related to gun violence statistics reveal dramatically different numbers, sources that are clearly politically motivated, and a vast absence of some types of information.

Much of this stems from a piece of legislation called the Dickey Amendment. In 1996, the National Rifle Association (NRA) accused the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of promoting gun control. (Through “critical science” the CDC works “to protect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S.”² The organization studies everything from infectious diseases to automobile safety and makes recommendations to control and prevent disease, injury, and disability.) Fearful that the CDC’s research was leading to antigun recommendations, the Republican-majority Congress (encouraged by lobbying from the NRA) mandated that the CDC not do research leading to the advocacy of gun control. While not technically preventing the research, this amendment limited what the CDC would be able to say about its findings. The same spending bill took away the \$2.6 million the CDC had been using for gun violence research and earmarked it for something else. Though President Obama signed an executive order to “end the freeze on gun violence research” in 2013, programs have since been allowed to expire, and designated monies have not been granted through Congress.³ Research on a broad, national level remains effectively frozen.

Jay Dickey, the Arkansas congressman who introduced the amendment, expressed a changed mind on this subject in a 2012 editorial. Partnering with a former opponent from the CDC, Dickey said, “We are in strong agreement now that scientific research should be conducted. . . . The same evidence-based approach that is saving millions of lives from motor-vehicle crashes, as well as from smoking, cancer and HIV/AIDS, can help reduce the toll of deaths and injuries from gun violence. We must learn what we can do to save lives.”⁴

Despite these restrictions on research, some groups have done good work in the area of gun violence research. Some are politically motivated, but they acknowledge their goals and methods. Other agenda-driven “studies” are so biased that their findings do not advance the conversation at all. Many studies are outdated but can still help us see revealing trends.

The main sources of research are gun safety groups, universities, other nonprofits, churches, gun advocacy groups (such as the NRA), and news sources.

Explore some of the following resources related to gun violence from different types of sources. This is far too much to fully read and digest, but skim and then underline things that stand out. Afterward, ask the following:

- What statistics stand out?
- Did you find any conflicting information?
- How does the source impact your interpretation of the information?

The following websites provide statistics and data from various groups and viewpoints. You may want to summarize some of this information, print off portions of the web pages for students to look over, or show some of these websites on a screen. You may also use the handout, “Statistics on Gun Violence,” at the end of this session.

Gun Statistic Sources

Brady Campaign

- About gun violence—<https://www.bradycampaign.org/about-gun-violence>
- Key gun violence statistics—<https://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics>

Everytown for Gun Safety

- Gun violence by the numbers—<https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers>
- Explore each issue—<https://everytownresearch.org>

Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

- Statistics—<http://lawcenter.giffords.org/facts/statistics>

Research Universities

- Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health—https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/resources/health_and_crime_data_sources
- UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program, studies including all types of violence, with partnership of Dr. Garen Wintemute—http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/vprp/research/research_learn_more.html
- “A Few Myths and Facts about Firearm Violence”—<http://www.ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/vprp/pdf-other/2016Firearmsmythsandfacts.pdf>

Other Nonprofit Groups

- Presbyterian Peace Fellowship—<http://presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence#.WgXbcjYfeRS>
- Gun Violence Archive—<http://www.gunviolencearchive.org>
- Small Arms Survey—<http://www.smallarmsurvey.org/home.html>
- The Trace (reports and news on gun violence issues)—<https://www.thetrace.org>

The NRA

- NRA Institute for Legislative Action gun safety statistics—<https://www.nraila.org/get-the-facts/gun-safety/>

News Articles with Statistics

- “Five Myths about Gun Violence” (*Washington Post*)—https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/five-myths/five-myths-about-gun-violence/2017/10/06/c4536e44-a9ed-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38_story.html?utm_term=.c37b80a410f2
- “It’s Easier to Get a Gun than a Puppy” (CNN)—<https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/16/health/getting-gun-ease-trnd/index.html>
- “Mass Shootings in 9 Charts” (CNN)—<https://www.cnn.com/2016/06/13/health/mass-shootings-in-america-in-charts-and-graphs-trnd/index.html>
- “What Explains U. S. Mass Shootings?” (*New York Times*)—<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/world/americas/mass-shootings-us-international.html>

After reviewing this information together, reflect as a group on what the statistics revealed. Statistics are far from perfect. They often conflict and their use is sometimes motivated by an agenda. Still, it is important to orient ourselves in order that we might have a starting place and recognize what some of the driving realities of gun violence are.

Revisit these questions as a group:

- What statistics stood out?
- Did you find any conflicting information?
- How does the source impact your interpretation of the information?

Some reflections on the statistics to share with the group:

- Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), lives by the motto “Reformed and always

reforming.” We worship the living God; thus, we need to constantly reevaluate what God is saying and how we might respond. We will never arrive at a perfect faith—as individuals or as a church. We get it wrong a lot. The same attitude must be taken for our interaction with issues and statistics of all kinds. We need to keep coming back, correcting ourselves, taking in opinions from other sources, and adjusting our approach.

- Being open to learning through facts and statistics is risky. It is important to acknowledge that this openness is difficult and somewhat antithetical to the normal human preference for the safety of the known, as described by Clay Routledge:

Fear pushes people to adopt a defensive posture. When people feel anxious, they’re less open to diverse ideas and opinions, and less forgiving and tolerant of those they disagree with. When people are afraid, they cling to the certainty of the world they know and avoid taking physical, emotional and intellectual risks. In short, fear causes people to privilege psychological security over liberty.⁵

- Statistics reveal that gun violence is a huge issue, with many important and intertwined subcategories. It may be a hard topic to make progress on because of this. We don’t know where to begin: with mental health, or background checks, or police brutality against people of color, or poverty, or locking mechanisms. It would be impossible to explore all of these factors in this short study, but note elements of gun violence as they come up and consider further study on subtopics that are important to you and your community.
- It is important to remember that guns are a source of life and protection for some people. This includes those who hunt to feed themselves and their families, those who live in unsafe neighborhoods who feel a need to own weapons for safety, and women who carry a weapon to protect themselves. Each of these reasons could lead to an entire discussion in itself, but for our purposes here, it’s important just to acknowledge these realities.

Statistics make a difference. They can change minds. More often, however, facts and statistics are given credibility when they are accompanied by personal stories, relationships, experiences, and encounters. Often our minds are not changed until we experience something ourselves or hear stories from people who have. Stories mean encountering other people's experiences. Encountering people means encountering God. Through their stories we can attach a face to the numbers, and we can begin to explore the question of theodicy. Where is God in the midst of these stories and statistics?

Stories

Rob Schenck

The 2016 documentary *The Armor of Light* offers a unique and moving perspective on the issue of gun violence from a Christian point of view. The film follows Rev. Rob Schenck, an "anti-abortion activist and fixture on the political far right, who breaks with orthodoxy by questioning whether being pro-gun is consistent with being pro-life."⁶ Schenck spent much of the 1990s organizing prolife demonstrations. In 1998, Dr. Barnett Slepian, who performed abortions at a Buffalo women's clinic where Schenck had organized protests, was shot and killed. The murderer was not directly connected with Schenck, but he was motivated by the same prolife belief system. Schenck reflected on that event as a turning point in his understanding of guns, life, and humanity:

When that shooting occurred, I was more than shocked. I was stunned. In fact, the widow of Dr. Slepian blamed me in part. She felt that I had contributed, in my language, in inciting violence against her family. That was very, very hard to hear. I thought no one in our world would ever perpetrate such a thing. I was naive. And then to see that they would . . . left me in doubt. Our own people are capable of this. People under my spiritual care are capable of this! That probably means that I am capable of it.

Colin Goddard

Colin sits on a pew in a church. Leaning forward and bowing his head, he says, 'I'm not very religious.' But he comes here and closes his eyes. I wonder what it is about this space that draws him in. A nostalgic comfort

from childhood? Peace and quiet? A space big enough to contain the questions he is left with?

Colin Goddard was in French class at Virginia Tech on the day of the mass shooting. "There were 17 people in that room that day, and I am one of only 7 people who are still alive. Some people say I am here because God was looking out for me that day. I appreciate the kind words, but I would only hope that God was looking out for everybody that day. There were some wonderful people there who were killed. I did nothing different. I just got lucky."⁷

Story Reflections

Together, Schenck's and Goddard's stories bring questions to the surface about the interaction of God and people when it comes to the issue of gun violence.

Schenck's revelation brought the condition of humanity into focus. Realizing that the people who believe the things he believes could shoot and kill someone, he acknowledged that he himself might also be capable of it. Schenck saw that the capacity for evil is in all of us—and he did not let himself off the hook. From the Reformed perspective, this realization is central. Sin is pervasive and far-reaching. In a fallen world, could it be that we are all capable of doing such harm?

Some shootings are committed by individuals who have a recognizable antisocial personality disorder. Commonly referred to as psychopaths or sociopaths, these people lack empathy, engage in manipulation, are unpredictable, and display no remorse. Treatment of these personality disorders is incredibly difficult in the adult years, but many mental health professionals have been studying different factors that may lead to antisocial personality disorders and are attempting to intervene with younger people.⁸ This disorder is scored on a spectrum and can be difficult to diagnose with certainty, as acknowledged in an online *Psychology Today* article: "Brain anatomy, genetics, and a person's environment may all contribute to the development of psychopathic traits."⁹ Additionally, having psychopathic traits does not mean a person will act on them—or will do so in a destructive or criminal way. In a society that believes people are innocent until proven guilty, it is essential to keep this in mind and focus attention on spotting early signs and reaching out with care.

It is easy to dismiss many an incident of gun violence as the "act of a psychopath." We imagine that we could

never possibly do the things these people have done. Indeed, some of the mass murders that get the most attention appear to be committed by people who would fit the psychopathic profile to the letter. It is hard for most of us to imagine looking into the face of an innocent child and intentionally shooting that child. As a result, we understandably distance ourselves from these shooters.

Many other instances of gun violence, however, are committed by people who do not fit the mold of a psychopath. Their motivations are passion, revenge, pain, jealousy, fear, protection, religious belief, and so on. It is important for us to realize that under the right conditions, any of us could become capable of committing gun violence. To rush to an “us” versus “them” understanding of gun violence perpetrators misses the point. No “them” is monolithic. From our “us” perspective, we think all “thems” are the same, but that is simply not true. If we each acknowledge our own capacity to do harm, we might become more aware of ways to lift one another up in the human community. Though we might not be able to relate to a psychopathic shooter, under certain circumstances of trauma, neglect, brain development, abuse, bullying, and so on, it is impossible to know what each of us could be capable of.

Rob Schenck reminds us that the distinction between “the good guys” and “the bad guys” is harder to define than we would like to think. Having an obvious enemy is always appealing. Unfortunately, when it comes to humanity, the line between good and bad gets blurry quickly. For Schenck, the “why, why, why” of gun violence drew him back to an understanding of his own feeble humanity and his need for God’s grace and forgiveness—even though he was not the shooter! As Paul says in the letter to the Romans,

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15–20)

Schenck realized that being prolife in an antiabortion sense meant that he also had to consider what it meant to be prolife after birth. Suddenly, gun violence was part of the prolife equation for him. As a self-proclaimed far right evangelical leader to politicians in Washington, DC, Schenck found himself in an awkward position. Political figures, fellow ministers, and friends met his new questions and ideas with angry contempt. Schenck challenged the notion that conservative Christianity and advocacy for gun rights were synonymous. Today Schenck teaches and preaches and advocates for gun safety. He asks hard questions to his conservative friends. He gets death threats. He doesn’t know all the answers. But he has been confronted with his own humanity and sinfulness, and he is responding in a way that he feels is faithful.

Since the shooting at Virginia Tech, Colin Goddard has dedicated his life and work to the issue of gun safety. He worked with the Brady Campaign for a few years and currently serves as senior policy advocate for Everytown for Gun Safety. He does not feel comfortable with the notion that he was saved for a reason, and he does not know why he survived and some really great people did not.

Nevertheless, he is using his story of survival to advocate for change. He is finding purpose for his lucky life in light of the tragedy. Colin does not know where God is or was—he is not even sure he believes in a God—but he offers an example of hope coming out of the questions. Perhaps God works in a similar way—not willing or causing tragedy, but holding the whole story together—showing up in the midst of it and offering glimpses of redemption here on earth.

What Does God Say about Gun Violence?

The first recorded use of a firearm was in 1364—some twelve hundred years after the last book of the Bible was written. So there wasn’t much for God to say in the Bible about gun violence, right? Even if there was a verse directly mentioning firearms, the Bible is not meant to be used as a reference book where individual questions and problems can be looked up, picked out, and applied directly to today’s context. It is in the entire arc of Scripture that we come to know who God is and who we are as people, in light of who God is. This doesn’t mean that individual verses are not impor-

tant. It does not mean that Scripture never speaks of specific issues that apply to us today. It does not mean we should avoid the Bible as we think about the issue of gun violence—quite the opposite. It means that it will serve us well to take a wide view of Scripture as we seek the presence of God in this particular issue.

Christians at both extremes of the spectrum (and all the points in between) use Scripture to support their positions. Those at the lower numbered positions on the Gun Rights Spectrum cite the following:

- Matthew 5:9, 38–48—Blessed are the peacemakers, turn the other cheek, love your enemies.
- Matthew 26:52—At the arrest of Jesus, a disciple strikes the servant of the high priest with a sword, and Jesus tells him to put it away. All who take the sword will perish by it.
- Romans 12:14–21—Live peaceably, never avenge yourselves, leave room for the wrath of God, overcome evil with good.
- Isaiah 2:4—Nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. They shall learn war no longer.
- Exodus 20:13—Sixth Commandment: You shall not murder.

Those at the higher numbered positions on the Gun Rights Spectrum cite these passages:

- 1 Timothy 5:8—Anyone who does not provide for the household is worse than an unbeliever.
- Luke 22:35–38—Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper to take purses and bags, and to sell their cloaks to get swords.
- Matthew 10:34—Jesus says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”
- Exodus 22:2—If a thief is found breaking in at night and is beaten to death, no bloodguilt is incurred.
- Genesis 9:5–6—God will demand an accounting for lifeblood. Whoever sheds human blood, by humans their blood shall be shed, for in the image of God they were made.

In addition to these verses, people of various opinions on guns cite justice as part of the biblical justification for their position. Justice, of course, is a major theme of Scripture. Amos 5:24 says, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Micah 6:8 claims, “What does the LORD

require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Discuss:

- Which Scripture passages do we choose to help illuminate this issue for us?
- Does the Bible differentiate between kinds of justice?
- Does justice mean guns or no guns?

These are difficult questions. A wise pastor once said, “Where Scripture seems to contradict itself, always look to the person of Jesus Christ.” Jesus Christ is the living Word of God, the truest reflection of the *imago Dei* that humanity has known. And Jesus Christ not only points us to God but is God.

So let us look to Jesus, the one known as the Prince of Peace. Let us consider the miracle of his incarnate birth, his life, the stories he told, the way he interacted with people and with God, his death and resurrection, and his continuing guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Notice that Jesus entered into suffering—unjust suffering. This has to be the starting place for us to understand theodicy.

Theodicy

Theodicy, briefly described, is the question of how we understand evil in the world in light of a loving God. Right after a gun violence incident, it is helpful to ask the “why” question without necessarily trying to answer it. It is important to acknowledge the big questions these events bring up. With a little distance from shooting events, we can engage in a deeper exploration of theodicy and the question of why.

Some of the initial questions of theodicy address God’s agency when bad things happen. Read through the list and consider each.

Did God . . .

- cause this?
- ordain this?
- allow this?
- suffer while watching this?
- know about this?

1. How would you describe the differences between these options?
2. What are the implications for each of these options?

3. What does it mean for your view of God if any of these are true?
4. Are there any other options you might add to this list?
5. Are these options mutually exclusive? For example, could God both ordain suffering and suffer while watching it?

The location of God in the midst of suffering is a second question of theodicy. Consider the following.

Is God . . .

- with the helpers (the Mr. Rogers philosophy)?
- with the suffering?
- watching from a distance?
- with all of us?
- there at all?

1. How might someone's perspective on the location of God in suffering affect their outlook?
2. How are these options related to the previous list addressing God's agency?

Another question of theodicy deals with the existence of evil in general. While related to God's agency, these options are often more broad. Consider these.

Does evil happen because of . . .

- science?
- karma?
- God's punishment?
- God's plan for soul-making?
- misuse of human freedom?
- sin?

1. How might different perspectives on this question lead to confusion or conflict?
2. Are these mutually exclusive options?
3. Are there other options you would add to this list?

Ask and take these questions seriously. What have you been taught? What do you believe? What does your experience point to?

In the Reformed tradition, we rest on the sovereignty of God. God holds all of human existence and experience. We also affirm that evil opposes the will of God. God, being good, does not will or pull the strings like a puppeteer causing evil. Yet in a fallen world, evil is all around. It is a tension we hold, and it is okay that it is uncomfortable.

As Shirley Guthrie says, "God's power is so great that it can make good come out of evil. God's providential care works both through and despite free human action."¹⁰ This is not about making everything okay again, but starting something new. We can expect that God's presence will show up in the midst of evil and suffering. We hold on to the hope and promise that evil and suffering do not have the last word. The cross of Jesus Christ demonstrates this in the most profound way.

The only one who can say, "This is God's will," is God.

Discussion Questions

- What satisfying and unsatisfying answers have you heard to the question of theodicy?
- If we can never know the mind of God, is it worth asking the question and wrestling with theodicy?
- Is there a difference between how people generally understand natural tragedies (such as earthquakes and cancer) as opposed to tragedies that come from human action (such as gun violence)? If so, how would you describe the difference?
- It is a paradox both to trust in the sovereignty of God and to acknowledge that evil is real. What other paradoxes are present within the Christian faith?

Overview Questions

If you have additional time, you may want to discuss one or more of these questions before concluding:

- What statistics or stories stand out to you the most from this lesson?
- How do you think it is best to help traumatized people process the "why, why, why" right after a gun violence tragedy?
- Where do you hear God's voice on this issue? What makes you believe it is God's voice?

Conclusion

Having prepared the way, we come close to the issue of gun violence and consider God's presence within it. To engage with the question of why gun violence happens, it is important first to be clear about what we mean by the term *gun violence* and to think about the uniqueness of violence committed with guns. Stepping back and slowing down enough to define the

topic helps us find common ground for a conversational starting place.

Facts and statistics on the topic of gun violence span a wide variety of sources and agendas. Sorting out what is actually happening in America can be difficult, and it requires an intentional and critical look at the various sources. Despite these challenges, good information can be found, and it calls us to think deeply about the magnitude of the problem of gun violence. We have seen that facts sometimes influence thoughts and behavior but that it is often personal stories that capture our attention and make the issue come alive.

Rob Schenck's story brings to light the broken state of humanity and calls us to recognize that "good guys" and "bad guys" are not always clearly delineated. Through his own experience with gun violence, Colin Goddard's story invites us to consider the issue of theodicy, the question of how we reconcile both the existence of evil and a loving God. Scripture has been used to support a wide variety of stances on the issue of guns, so we are reminded to look most significantly at the example of Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh. Having examined the issue of gun violence through the lens of faith and asked big questions about God's presence within it, we can now prepare ourselves to respond.

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Worship: Encountering

Song

“The Kingdom of God”*

The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your kingdom.**

Prayer for Illumination

God of all understanding,
sometimes we walk through life looking, but not seeing;
doing, but not being;
hearing, but not understanding.
It is only through the gift of your Holy Spirit that we might truly be opened up
to your presence in this world.
Grant us your light now,
so that we might see.
Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture

Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Silence.

Scripture

Luke 10:25–37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you

read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’

“Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Silence.

Closing Prayer

Good and Great God,

increase our awareness of the justice and peace of your kingdom as we leave this place. Grant us the courage to be neighbors who listen and care.

We thank you for your presence before us and beside us.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Taizé Community, G.I.A. Publications (copyright information https://www.taize.fr/en_article114.html). The community sells the music, and many songs can be found on YouTube.

**Taizé chants are meant to be sung in repetition by the faith community. Have a leader begin and others join in as they feel comfortable. Brothers from the Taizé community explain the purpose of this type of worship: “Short songs, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character. Using just a few words they express a basic reality of faith, quickly grasped by the mind. As the words are sung over many times, this reality gradually penetrates the whole being. Meditative singing thus becomes a way of listening to God. It allows everyone to take part in a time of prayer together and to remain together in attentive waiting on God, without having to fix the length of time too exactly” (https://www.taize.fr/en_article338.html).

Statistics on Gun Violence

- Every day in America, an average of 80 people are killed with guns.¹
- In the United States, nearly two thirds of firearms deaths are from suicide.²
- Among gun owners, 40 percent keep their weapons near ammunition and loaded and unlocked at all times.¹
- Having a gun in the home for self-defense dramatically increases the risks that the gun will be used in a homicide, suicide, or accidental shooting.²
- African Americans are the group most dramatically affected by gun violence, and they are ten times more likely than white Americans to die by gun violence. For example, 57 percent of African American adults said they knew someone who had been shot, compared to 43 percent of whites and 42 percent of Hispanics.^{2,3}
- The presence of a gun in a house with domestic violence increases by five times the risk the woman will be shot and killed.²
- Background checks have blocked nearly 3 million gun sales to prohibited people.⁴
- Americans own an estimated 393 million guns (not including those used by the military and law enforcement). This is nearly half of all civilian-owned guns in the world.⁵
- Out of all Americans, 97 percent support requiring universal background checks, including for private sales and sales at gun shows; 67 percent support banning assault-style weapons; and 83 percent support a mandatory waiting period on all gun purchases. Overall support for stricter gun laws moved up from 47 percent in 2015 to 66 percent in 2018.⁶

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G-NS: A Resource for Generous Dialogue about Gun Violence

Sarah E. Logemann

Session 3

Responding

In This Session

Purpose: We remind ourselves who we are in light of who God is and what we have come to know about gun violence. We look to the example of lament to show us a way forward in response. We acknowledge that we aren't powerless, and that we are in fact called to respond to what we have heard and seen.

Theology: Lament: honesty, petition, praise; people of God living in community; remembering and story; Jesus' descent into hell

Stories: Mothers of victims of gun violence

Scripture: Psalms of lament; Psalm 13

Background for the Leader

Clement Park is next to Columbine High School. It became the place after the shooting. Kids went there to gather, to mourn, to share their stories with each other and with reporters. It was the place where the community brought flowers and teddy bears and balloons for a makeshift memorial. It was where crosses went up, and many years later, a permanent memorial was built. Rebel Hill stands in the middle of the sprawling park, and from the top of the hill you can see the school.

I remember going to Clement Park a few days after the shooting to visit the memorial. Every national news network had a truck in the parking lot, and reporters stood with their backs to the piles of flowers and signs, reporting on the newest information about the shooting.

Every emerging detail was scrutinized by the media: who had bought what gun where, how parents were reacting, what kind of security footage might exist.

My friend and I walked through the noise and lights of the media circus, past deflating balloons and mud-died teddy bears, and moved toward Rebel Hill. It was quiet there—windy but quiet. The extension cords for video cameras and lights couldn't reach that far.

We climbed up Rebel Hill and stared at the school building with a dozen or so other mourners. You could see the shattered windows of the library—the place where most of the students had been killed. There was the window that student Patrick Ireland had stumbled out of after having been shot. It had been boarded up. Though we were not students here, we'd seen this school many times before. But it was eerie to look at it now—especially after having the images of it from news helicopters burned so vividly into our brains. My friend and I reflected as we stood in the mud on Rebel Hill, staring, crying, and hugging.

Several months later, someone told me that after the shooting, some Columbine kids would stand on that hill and scream. It happened several times—late at night—probably after a few beers. They would yell to the school, to the wind, to God, to the trauma that tormented them—to anyone, or anything, that might listen. I didn't know what they were yelling, or if their shouts were just wordless screams, but it didn't really matter. It sounded so satisfying. I couldn't think of many spaces in my life where I could scream at the top

of my lungs and not have someone run to see what was wrong. Rebel Hill provided a physical space to scream and groan for those who were dramatically impacted by the shooting.

I had never thought about what a gift it was to have space to yell—not just physical space but also emotional permission to yell, and perhaps even spiritual examples of yelling.

Not long after Columbine, someone in my congregation introduced me to a part of the Bible that I did not know was there: the psalms of lament. These hidden treasures revealed something I did not think existed in Scripture—an expression of disappointment and anger directed at God. The psalms of lament were scary and freeing and helpful. It was like finding space to yell at God. In these psalms, I found a place where faith and doubt could exist together. They spoke feelings I could not have articulated myself, and gave me assurance that church was an appropriate place to wrestle with difficult things.

After having addressed the issue of gun violence in the last session, we turn our attention to response now. Part of response is reminding ourselves who we are in light of who God is and what is happening all around us. In a worship context, these moments include affirmations of faith, creeds, sacraments, and offerings. Response requires something of us, because we cannot help but be changed by what has been revealed. In worship, we promise things, give our money, offer our praises, and take the physical elements of bread and wine into ourselves. Each of these widens our perspective beyond our own reality to those around us and to God. It is an opportunity to live into our relational identity as people created in the image of God who have encountered God's Word.

Coming close to the reality of gun violence should shake us to the core. This lesson provides a physical, emotional, and spiritual space to address the shaking and make a path forward. Psalms of lament show us the way.

Loving God, hear our yells, and help us navigate in the darkness.

The Topic

You may want to begin by asking participants to think back to the previous session. Ask them to discuss these questions:

- What are some of the statistics or stories that have stuck with you around the issue of gun violence?
- Which of those is most upsetting or unsettling to you?

Today we move from encountering the topic of gun violence to making space to respond to it. Response, by its very nature, is active. Whether it is a debate, a worship service, or a phone conversation, response is the place where we are forced to take what we have learned and to acknowledge our thoughts and feelings about it. Response requires something of us in the face of our widened perspective from an encounter. How do we respond to the issue of gun violence as people of faith within faith communities? Let us pray:

God of love and mercy, we have come close to the issue of gun violence. Now we have the gift of space where we can find a way forward. Help us to respond with all of our hearts, minds, and spirits. Let us be aware of you and honest before you as we respond. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Lament

Read the following psalm passages to the group:

- “O LORD, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 88:14)¹
- “Help, O LORD, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind.” (Psalm 12:1)
- “Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.” (Psalm 71:4)
- “For the enemy has pursued me, crushing my life to the ground, making me sit in darkness like those long dead. Therefore my spirit faints within me; my heart within me is appalled.” (Psalm 143:3–4)

These honest lines come from a category of psalms in the Bible called lament. They express disappointment in God, acknowledge real suffering and evil, cry out in desperation, and describe darkness. Dispersed throughout the book of Psalms, these expressions of lament are intermixed with songs of praise and thanksgiving. Just as our lives are often marked with extreme hills and valleys, the poets of Psalms reflect life and relationship with God at all of its extremes.

Lament is a picture of how the people of God who came long before us dealt with chaos, trauma, and suffering. They have harsh words for God and are not afraid to express them. Even Jesus laments on the cross, quoting Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Through this act, Jesus demonstrates the acceptability of this kind of expression before God.

Psalm 13 offers a short but powerful example of a psalm of lament. Take some time to read it, first silently and then out loud as a group.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;

my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,

because he has dealt bountifully with me.

After reading the psalm, discuss the following questions:

- What stands out for you about this psalm?
- Can you identify different movements or themes in this psalm? How might you describe them? What seems the most honest? Why?
- What situation do you imagine the author of this psalm might have been in? Could it apply to someone suffering as a result of gun violence?

We do not know the specific situation or circumstance in which this psalm was written. Like many psalms, writes Patrick Miller, it is “set forth in generalized, stylized, and metaphorical ways that have served to loosen these prayers from whatever original setting they may have had and made them more broadly applicable in the life of the community over long periods and for different situations.”² Psalms of lament, and all types of psalms for that matter, have resonated with people across the centuries and become prayers for a variety of people in many different circumstances.

Lament is a response to the wrestling with theodicy discussed in the last session. It is the vocalization of “Why, why, why?” directed at God. In this light, the psalms of lament can help us in our response to the issue of gun violence. Not only can these psalms offer freedom to yell at God, but their structure can help us find a path forward when it comes to gun violence.

Often identified in psalms of lament are three main movements: wailing to God, pleading for God’s action, and praise. Though not every psalm of lament follows this pattern, the general movements are common. With the issue of gun violence in mind, let us use lament as an entry point into response. Lament can show us the way to wail honestly before God, plead for a different end to the story, and imagine a future.

Part 1: Honest Wailing

Read aloud to the group or have someone else read Psalm 13:1–2:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul,

and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

In this movement, suffering is acknowledged truthfully. How long, O Lord? This is the place to tell stories of our hurt and our feelings of that suffering before God and others. The lament may be personal or on behalf of another person or community.

Psalms of lament are brutally honest. Writer Anne Lamott says, “My belief is that when you’re telling the truth, you’re close to God. If you say to God, ‘I am exhausted and depressed beyond words, and I don’t like You at all right now, and I recoil from most people who believe in You,’ that might be the most honest thing you’ve ever said.”³ Many psalms of lament resound with this kind of honesty. It is significant that they are included in our Holy Scriptures. This demonstrates that the faith of the Christian community is about more than obedience and politeness before a perfect God. It is something to which we can bring our true selves. And God meets us in those places of realness. Honesty is freeing.

Look at a few other psalms of lament, and see if you can identify a movement that could be considered honest wailing. Examples include Psalms 3, 12, and 143.

Discuss whether any of the words from these psalms apply to those who suffer as a result of gun violence.

Take a moment to write your own honest wails to God around the topic of gun violence. Allow yourself to react truthfully to what we have learned so far and what you have experienced and heard about. If you would like, use any of the following questions to guide you:

- When you consider the issue of gun violence, what truths do you wish to bring before God?
- What stories do you want others to hear?
- What is happening in your heart, soul, and mind when you think of these things?
- How would you describe the relationship between honesty and fear?

Part 2: Pleading

Read aloud to the group or have someone else read Psalm 13:3–4:

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
and my enemy will say, “I have prevailed”;
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

In this second part of lament, a plea comes before God. Consider! Answer! Give light to my eyes! The psalmist is asking for a different end to the story that was recounted in part 1. This movement indicates that we do not want things to stay as they are.

Deborah Hunsinger calls lament “faith’s alternative to despair,” and she explains, “The prayer of lament does not avoid but rather enters into this tension between the experience of evil and faith’s affirmation of the goodness of God. Lament takes this tension right to the breaking point.”⁴ Additionally, this movement calls God to action. It cries out to God to remember God’s own identity and promises.⁵ With the issue of gun violence, this might be where we identify what we wish the world looked like, how we would like God to act, how other people might be a part of the solution.

Discuss:

- What are the authors of the following psalms of lament—Psalms 10, 44, and 141—pleading for?
- How might these things apply to those suffering

as a result of gun violence?

- When it comes to the issue of gun violence, what is it that you would like to happen? Write your own pleas before God and others about this topic. Consider these questions:
 - What should some actions be to help with the issue?
 - Why are those things important?
 - Who is responsible? How might God be involved? Other people?

Part 3: Imagining the Future

Read aloud to the group or have someone else read Psalm 13:5–6:

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

In the last movement of lament, the psalmist’s imagination is opened to a possible future. There is a sense of remembering God’s presence from the past, and praise is offered. My heart shall rejoice! I will sing!

This section of a lament psalm can sometimes feel sudden or contrived. How does the author move so quickly from despair to hope and praise? First, it is important to note that these psalms do not always end in praise. An example is Psalm 88, often called “the Darkest Psalm,” which remains gloomy and hopeless throughout. This psalm offers further assurance that we do not need to manufacture hope for the sake of form—even in Holy Scripture. It is okay if we do not see the hope quite yet.

Where praise does come in a psalm of lament, it often is tied to God’s action in the past. Remembering is central to this shift. As part of encountering God in situations of trauma and in questions of theodicy, we can look to the past to see how God has been present in times of crisis and chaos before. The people of God and the church can help show us the way. All the way back to Israel in the Old Testament, we have accounts of God shepherding God’s people through danger, out of the wilderness, and into new life.

When we are suffering, it is tempting to think only of the present, and maybe to worry about the future. But going back as a community of faith, even way back, can be helpful. It is important that this remembering isn’t

for the sake of learning a lesson or tying up the trauma in a neat package. Rather, it is to tell the story and to seek God’s presence in the past. As Eugene Peterson writes, “History is necessary, not to explain, but to anchor.”⁶

Look for movements of imagining the future in the following psalms of lament: Psalm 36, 59, and 85.

Discuss:

- What does the author imagine, and how does he/she seem to get there?
- Could any of these imagined futures apply to those suffering from gun violence?

Write your own fantasy of the future for the issue of gun violence. Use these questions to guide you if they are helpful:

- What would you like the future to look like as it relates to gun violence?
- How might God’s action in the past offer assurance for the future?
- Why is God worthy of praise in this process?
- How do you hope to be involved in the making of this imagined future?

Put the three parts of your personal lament together, and read it as a genuine offering of prayer. You may choose to read this aloud to the group or silently to yourself.

In lament, past, present, and future are woven together. The author remembers God’s action in the past, is honest about current suffering, and holds out hope for an imagined future.

- When it comes to gun violence, where do we need to focus our attention: past, present, or future?
- Does one tend to get emphasized over the others? How might a balance help us respond?

Lament is individual and communal. Both forms occur in Psalms for different occasions. It is important to acknowledge, however, that even individual laments have a communal aspect. They assume a listener—in God, and in other people. Additionally, they are in concert with other psalms in a corpus of praises in Scripture. No one psalm is meant to convey everything.

- How does the communal aspect of lament play into the issue of gun violence?

- Where is it important to have individual voices, and where do we need communities joining together?
- In a community of faith, how might we help one another get from part 2 of a lament to part 3 (like the movement in Psalm 13 from verse 4 to verse 5)?

Story

Read the following brief stories about mothers who have lost sons to gun violence. Choose one story to write a lament about. This lament might take the form of a prayer, a poem, a song, or a narrative. In your lament, think about all three movements and their central elements (though do not feel pressure to include all three).

Part 1: Honest Wailing

Acknowledge suffering.

Tell elements of the story.

Share feelings around those elements.

Part 2: Pleading

Ask for a different end to the story.

Part 3: Imagining the Future

Explore what might be.

Remember God’s action in the past.

Offer praise rooted in hope.

Lucy McBath’s black teenage son, Jordan Edwards, was shot to death in Florida after a white man “felt threatened” because Jordan was playing music in his car loudly. Years after his death, Lucy still fights for reasonable resolutions to the problem of gun violence and was one of the speakers at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. She said:

You don’t stop being a parent when your child dies. I am still Jordan Davis’s mother. His life ended the day he was shot and killed for playing loud music. But my job as his mother didn’t. I still wake up every day thinking about how to parent him. How to protect him and his legacy. How to ensure his death doesn’t overshadow his life. I lived in fear my son would die like this. I even warned him that because he was a young, black man, he would meet people who didn’t value his life. That is a conversation no parent should ever have to have.⁷

Sybrina Fulton is the mother of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old African American who was shot to death after walking in the neighborhood

where he was staying with relatives. Sybrina joined a group of mothers who have been impacted by gun violence. She also spoke at the Democratic Convention. She said, “I am an unwilling participant in this movement. I would not have signed up for this. None of us would have. But I am here today for my son, Trayvon Martin, who is in heaven. And for my other son, Jahvaris, who is still here on earth. I didn’t want this spotlight. But I will do everything I can to focus some of that light on a path out of this darkness.”⁸

Kadiatou Diallo is the mother of Amadou Diallo. Amadou died while standing by his apartment in the Bronx. Four police officers mistook his wallet for a gun, shot at Diallo forty-one times, and hit him with nineteen bullets. A grand jury indicted the four officers, but they were cleared of all charges by a jury at trial. Discussing her advocacy for the Black Lives Matter movement and gun safety, Kadiatou said this:

I was determined to lend my voice to the movement because I know that the night my son was killed, [the police] didn’t know who he was. My son was gunned down, but he had never even been in a fight before. It could have happened to any young black man that night.

A mother cannot give life back to her dead child, but the one thing she can do is to give her child back his or her story. It has been my mission to talk about my son, to give him back his story. When he was killed, his story was totally twisted. He was turned into this insignificant man who met his destiny on the tough streets of New York.⁹

Respond to one or more of these stories using what we have learned about lament.

Theology

One of the most universal affirmations of the Christian faith is the Apostles’ Creed. Though not written by the “original” apostles, tradition holds that this creed comes out of early apostolic understandings. As the early Christian church responded to various controversies, the creed was tweaked over the years, and its final form was set in the eighth century.

Partway through the creed, a four-word statement often gets overlooked (and sometimes even gets left out): “He descended into hell.” Speaking of Jesus, this line references verses of Scripture indicating that after

dying on the cross, Jesus went to the depths. Though this seems small and somewhat confusing, many have found these words to be a great source of hope.

After the traumatic experience of gun violence, it can feel like we are in the dark belly of the earth. It may be a comfort that Jesus was here. No place is off-limits for God—even hell. When we can’t even see a pinprick of light, God is there. It may encourage us to look for evidence of Christ’s presence. If he was here, perhaps there is a lingering sense of him somewhere—a fingerprint, a scent, a thread from his robes. Even in this place of total darkness and hell and despair, we can know that Christ sees us now. He knows the terrain. Perhaps he can help us find a way out.

As the psalmist says,

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,”

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:7–12)

For those of us who are not fully engulfed in the trauma-induced darkness of hell, we can sit with our sisters and brothers in their darkness. And we can point to the light. The very next line of the Apostles’ Creed reads, “The third day he rose again from the dead.” Life came from what seemed dark, dead, and impossible. It was in weakness that victory was gained. As Deborah Hunsinger says, “The Bible is very largely a story of hope emerging from hopelessness, of new beginnings arising from bitter endings. With the resurrection of Christ as the interpretive key, Scripture testifies that God comes to those who have lost all hope.”¹⁰

Through lament, we can respond to what we have learned and experienced related to gun violence. In community, we can bring stories, honest cries, petitions, memories, and hopeful praises before God. Lament keeps us open in the face of suffering and helps us imagine a way forward. After responding to all that we

have encountered and learned, we prepare ourselves to be sent out into the world as agents of hope and change.

Overview Questions

If you have additional time, you may want to discuss one or more of these questions before concluding:

- What can lament offer us when dealing with issues like gun violence?
- Which part of lament is the most difficult when it comes to this topic—honestly wail before God, plead for a different end to the story, or imagine a future?
- Is there any other work that needs to be done in response to the issue of gun violence before we are sent out into the world?

Conclusion

In the previous two sessions, we prepared ourselves and encountered the issue of gun violence. With this session, we finally make space to respond. Taking what we have learned, we now do the work of engaging with it. Response is active, and in the setting of a faith community, it is communal.

Using lament as a model for response, we can see authentic cries before God that express both faith and doubt. Several psalms of lament in Scripture follow a pattern of wailing to God, pleading for God's action, and praise. Together these movements give freedom for truth telling, remembering, and imagining the future. The laments found in Scripture and those we compose on our own can show us a way forward in response. We are reminded that we are not powerless in the face of the issue of gun violence, and that we are called to respond

to what we have heard and seen. After responding in this way, we prepare ourselves to be sent out into the world as agents of hope.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.
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3. Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 6–7.
4. Deborah Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 145.
5. *Ibid.*, 141.
6. Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 114, 125, 126, as quoted in Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 149.
7. Quoted in Will Drabold, “Read What the Mothers of the Movement Said at the Democratic Convention,” *Time*, July 27, 2016, <http://time.com/4424704/dnc-mothers-movement-transcript-speech-video>.
8. *Ibid.*
9. “We Know What It Is to Bury a Child: The Black Mothers Turning Mourning into a Movement,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/22/mothers-of-the-movement-trayvon-martin-sandra-bland-eric-garner-amadou-diallo-sean-bell>.
10. Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing*, 140.

Worship: Responding

Scripture

Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of
death,
and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Song

"Wait for the Lord"

Affirmation of Faith

Having come close to the word of God, we are called to respond. We are reminded that we are part of a community of believers that is much bigger than just those of us in this space today but that exists across time and space. Together let us affirm what we believe.

We believe there is no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus;
for we know that all things work together for good
for those who love God,
who are called according to God's purpose.
We are convinced that neither death, nor life,
nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
he descended into hell;
the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father
Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and
the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Offering

Consider collecting an offering and donating it to an organization such as Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, Everytown for Gun Safety, or the Brady Center.

Reading

Share personal laments and/or laments written for the mothers from the stories of this lesson.

Eucharist

If your community shares the Lord's Supper together, consider partaking this week. In this expression of solidarity and empathy with our Christian siblings from north, south, east, and west, we come together as one and enter more fully into covenant relationship with the living God.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God,
Thank you for hearing our cries and our memories
and our hopes.
Help us to recognize the ways we are unified as
your body and to support one another as we
respond to the issue of gun violence.
Go with us as we leave this place, and empower us
to be agents of your love.
In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Taizé Community, G.I.A. Publications (copyright information https://www.taize.fr/en_article114.html). The community sells the music, and many songs can be found on YouTube.

G-NS: A Resource for Generous Dialogue about Gun Violence

Sarah E. Logemann

Session 4

Sending

In This Session

Purpose: See the hope and feel support in moving forward with this new knowledge and calling. Go out as an empowered individual, rooted in Christian community, to respond in the ways that you are passionate about to the things that matter most to you.

Theology: The church, hope, storytelling

Story: Columbine Red Cross; our own stories

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:14–26 (the body of Christ); Luke 10:25–37 (the Good Samaritan and storytelling from Jesus)

Background for the Leader

In his book *Columbine*, Dave Cullen describes a small and insignificant-seeming personal moment that had a lasting impact on him. Cullen was a reporter covering the Columbine shooting back in 1999. As soon as he had heard that there was a situation at the school, he drove there and began working. Understandably, it was a long and traumatic day. He ended up at Clement Park interviewing students and parents all day. Feeling numbed from the tears and blood and trauma, Cullen worked and worked, gathering stories and seeking information. The stories he was hearing were terrible.

As the afternoon progressed and turned into evening, the Red Cross came. More and more students, parents, and community members were gathering at Clement Park. The Red Cross volunteers began handing

out bottles of water at the park. Dave Cullen had been there all day. He hadn't eaten or had anything to drink or stopped for a break. As the Red Cross person yelled, "Water!" Dave instinctively held out his hand to grab a bottle. It sounded so good, and he was parched and weary.

As soon as he began to reach, he sheepishly snatched his hand back and said to the Red Cross volunteer, "Oh, I'm sorry. Those are probably for the students. I am a reporter."

The Red Cross volunteer looked at him sincerely and said, "Are you thirsty?"

Dave said, "Yes."

The volunteer said, "Then this is for you," and handed him the water.

That small gesture stood out to Dave, and he wrote about it more than ten years later.¹ It had been a traumatic day. Reporters are often seen as the bad guys at a scene like that. He was not the neediest person there. He was not the most traumatized. But he was thirsty. And he was given water.

Red Cross workers must learn to triage—to assess the biggest needs and to direct those with life-threatening conditions to the help they need. At the same time, they are there to be a presence for everyone, to "provide compassionate care to those in need . . . preventing and relieving suffering."² They help everyone, without discrimination, regardless of their situation or assumptions about how they got into that situation.

For Dave, their simple addressing of his thirst was a sign of compassionate care.

In this last session, we take all that we have learned and experienced and seek to do something about it. Like Red Cross volunteers, we will need to learn how to triage—how to identify the greatest needs and respond accordingly. But we will also need to consider how to be a hopeful presence for everybody—how to give to all who thirst.

We turn now and prepare to engage in the world with this new sense of God’s presence and our calling related to the issue of gun violence. The sending portion of a worship service is short but important. Sometimes individuals are commissioned or blessed for work both inside and outside of the church—to teach Sunday school, go on a mission trip, or plant a new church.

In the most consistent movement of “sending,” the whole congregation receives a benediction. They hear a call to enact discipleship in their everyday lives, enlivened and supported by their communal experience and encounter with God. With this blessing, the people leave the worship space and enter into the world. It is about more than dismissal from worship. Instead, it is an inspired call to action—the receiving of a mission.

Throughout this study, we have prepared the way to come close to the issue of gun violence. We have encountered the issue itself and considered God’s presence within it, and we have used lament as a model for responding and finding a way forward. Now we acknowledge that this response is more than internal. We prepare to be commissioned and blessed, knowing we aren’t alone, and knowing that we are called to be active and engaged agents of God’s hope. Let us prepare to go out into the world in this hope.

God of grace, inspire us to find a way forward.
Send us to be agents of your hope. Amen.

The Topic

In this last session, we seek to do something about all that we have talked about and learned about and reacted to so far. Lament is an important part of responding to the issue of gun violence, but it is not the end. Through lament, we opened ourselves up to stories of suffering and an imagined future. Now, seeking guidance from

God’s Spirit, we seek to help bring that future about in the world.

Think back to some of the imagined futures from your writings on lament.

- What are some things that you included?
- Do you already see God at work in any of those things? Where is there hope?
- How might you (individually or as a community) help bring about some of those hoped-for futures?

The Church

The church does not exist for itself. It is not meant to be a membership club where like-minded people gather for social or even moral reasons alone. In its constitution, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is very clear about what the purpose of the church is. Read over these words from the PC(USA) constitution, and underline anything that stands out:

In Christ, the Church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.

Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God’s mission.

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to be the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.³

Though this is not a comprehensive list of what the church is meant to be, it gives us a strong foundation with many things to consider. Discuss:

- What captured your attention, surprised you, confused you, or inspired you?
- How do you see this mission relate to the issue of gun violence?

The church can be a launching pad for going out and engaging with the issue of gun violence. It is a

communal sending, but our individuality matters as well. In 1 Corinthians 12:14–26, Paul speaks of the people of the church as members of the body:

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Within our Christian community, we are one, yet we are sent out in our uniqueness, and our outputs are going to be different. The way we react to and respond to the issue of gun violence is going to reflect our particular “part of the body.” There is no one right way to respond; your personal experiences and context and passions will all inform how you engage with the issue of gun violence. For your response to be faithful, it will have to be honest, and you will have to own it. Perhaps it will be connected to a story that matters most to you. Perhaps it will be a response to what is happening in your own neighborhood. Perhaps it will be an expression of your personal gifts and talents.

Discuss:

- What components of gun violence seem the most serious or closely connected to you right now?

- How have you already engaged these things in conversation, activism, or any other way?
- Do you have any ideas about how to be an agent of hope around the issue of gun violence?

Words Matter

Read aloud and ask participants to listen carefully to the following passage:

A comprehensive study on the issue of gun violence is extremely difficult. The scope of this study is limited, and the aim more focused. We have attempted to identify triggers for trauma, provide resources, and shoot for clear communication. Within your own context, our hope is that you will make adjustments to the caliber and focus. In your own life, you call the shots. It is a difficult topic, but with prayer, we have confidence that you will exhibit grace under fire. Our aim is to make this resource as accessible as possible, so you can trust that you will get as much bang for your buck as possible. We hope it is on target!

It may be obvious by now, but this is a sort of sophisticated word search. How many terms do you remember that had some relation to guns or violence? Go back through and look. Think of how easily just half of those terms could have snuck in before you would have even realized it.

A comprehensive study on the issue of gun violence is extremely difficult. The **scope** of this study is limited, and the **aim** more focused. We have attempted to identify **triggers** for trauma, provide resources, and **shoot** for clear communication. Within your own context, our hope is that you will make adjustments to the **caliber** and **focus**. In your own life, you **call the shots**. It is a difficult topic, but with prayer, we have confidence that you will exhibit grace **under fire**. Our **aim** is to make this resource as accessible as possible, so you can trust that you will get as much **bang for your buck** as possible. We hope it is **on target!**

Brainstorm other phrases having to do with guns and violence that have become part of normal conversation in our society.⁴

- How might these seemingly innocuous things impact someone with a traumatic experience of gun violence?
- Take note of these words and phrases in your speech this week, and consider making other choices.

Words make a difference in perception and attitude. An intentional shift has been made in the last several years to promoting the phrase *gun safety* rather than *gun control*. Advocates want to highlight the public safety impact of guns and to lessen anxieties that come from the word *control*. Nobody wants to be controlled, but it is difficult to argue against safety. Brian Wren speaks of both the power and limits of language’s role in influencing action.

Language change is not *all-important*: if it were, then changing language would be all that was needed to change the world. Nor is it *unimportant*: if it were, we could concentrate on doing love and justice, and quit worrying about how we speak of God. To separate language from action is false. Language change is an *essential part of action*. . . . [By changing language] I commit myself more deeply than before, even if I can’t completely live out my commitment. Language is a public medium. If I use, or abandon, racist or sexist language, or begin to name God anew, I shall open myself to comment and criticism and shall have to explain and defend my usage. It may then be easier than before to act on what I have said. Language, like tobacco, is habit forming. Some patterns of writing and speaking are addictive and may damage both the user and others who breathe the same linguistic atmosphere. If we see the damage being done and decide to kick the habit, we may get withdrawal symptoms and hostility or derision from other smokers. But in the end, we shall enjoy breathing fresh air.⁵

The bottom line is that words matter. Be aware, and seek to sow seeds of peace with your words.

Four Ways to Engage the World: Art, Politics, Story, and Community

We now will look at four broad categories of responses to the issue of gun violence: art, politics, story, and community. These are not meant to be all-inclusive or the

only ways to respond, but they are meant to help inspire a response that is personal and honest. Throughout the following discussion, think of other types of engagement that appeal to you and that address your particular concerns.

Art

The arts have always been one way to respond to many kinds of social issues. Poetry, dance, music, film, and drama are just some of these arts. Another popular art has been given the name *craftivism*. This term refers to using creative expressions as attention-getters or a means of protest. Such artistic contributions wake people up in the midst of their ordinary surroundings, raise awareness, and stimulate engagement with an issue through all of the senses. A few examples include:

- **Pussyhats**—These pink knit hats swarmed the Women’s March in January 2017. Across the country, women wore them as an act of solidarity. The Pussyhat Project has expanded beyond pink hats and is now “a social movement focused on raising awareness about women’s issues and advancing human rights.”⁶
- **Ghost Bikes**—Bicycles are spray-painted white and installed as a form of artwork in places where a cyclist was hit by car. The hope is that these white bikes attract attention and make drivers more aware of sharing the road with bikes.
- **Fence Flowers**—Huge, crocheted flowers are tied to chain-link fences in economically disadvantaged areas of New York City. Their bright colors communicate hope and joy and demonstrate that these places, which so many call home, matter.
- **St. Anna’s Episcopal Church Murder Board**—After seeing so many young people become victims of violence in their city, members of this New Orleans church formed a ministry to remember the victims of violence and to pray for all those impacted by urban violence, including perpetrators, victims, families, officials, and police officers. The form of remembering was to list the names of each victim on a public tableau on the church wall. “It serves to remind us of the human cost of urban violence without judgment of the individual,” one church member said. Their work reminds us, as Daniel Berrigan, SJ, taught, that it is not so much

the outcome that is the charisma of social justice but rather the act of doing social justice that is transformative.

- 331 T-shirts—The cover of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Toolkit shows a picture of a Philadelphia church that paid tribute to gun violence victims. In the yard in front of the church, 331 T-shirts were placed on wooden crosses. Each cross represented a victim of gun violence in Philadelphia from one year, many of whom died by illegal guns. The churchyard also featured a sign urging the mayor to take action against gun violence.⁷
- The Scroll—First United Church of Oak Park, just west of Chicago, has a long paper scroll in the sanctuary. On the scroll are names of those who have been murdered, and about 90 percent of those died by gun violence. Different groups from the church add the names each month, and on the first Sunday of every month, the names are read as part of the congregation's Communion service. The community has come to know that this church cares about victims and families.⁸
- Can you think of other types of artistic activism, around the issue of gun violence or in general?
- What are some positives and negatives about this kind of engagement?

Politics

Politics has long been a means for responding to social issues. Gun violence is no exception. Here are some examples.

Marches and Rallies

After the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018, student-led marches and rallies took place across the country. Through the leadership of these brave high school students, people of all ages urged lawmakers to be accountable to the issue of gun violence. Students used signs, speeches, and walkouts to communicate that they do not feel safe in schools and that laws must change.

Calling Representatives

Though federal policy gets a lot of attention, it is local and state gun-safety measures that have the power to gain the most momentum. Phone calls to these representatives can communicate fears and desires for the community that will hopefully translate into actions.

Letter Campaigns

Like calling, letters can ask representatives to consider various gun violence issues and take action through policies and laws. Both calling and letter writing can be done communally—with multiple signatures or with people working on their own letters from various templates.

Engagement with Politically Active Christian Groups

Heeding God's Call is one example. This faith-based advocacy group works specifically on the issue of gun violence. Its mission is to connect churches and equip them to do advocacy work. Heeding God's Call focuses on legislation, identifies problem gun shops, organizes protests, and encourages local churches to speak in their own communities.⁹

A variety of secular groups are deeply invested in political change around gun violence as well. Donations and involvement with these kinds of groups is another possible political response. Here are a few examples:

- The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence—<http://www.bradiycampaign.org>
- Everytown for Gun Safety—<https://everytown.org>
- Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America—<https://momsdemandaction.org>
- Giffords: Courage to Fight Gun Violence—<https://giffords.org>

When we think of activism in response to gun violence, political engagement is often the first thing that comes to mind. Many people believe that the answers are rooted in policy change. It is the area most people rush to, especially after dramatic public shooting events. Political engagement really is important. But we have to recognize its limitations as well. Political issues are difficult because of other surrounding issues: the crime, drug violence, and systemic racism that create unsafe inner-city neighborhoods, and the market that drives gun manufacturers to produce more and more. While legal regulations around guns have been proven to help reduce incidents of gun violence, they cannot be the only solution. It is wise to remember that laws and policies move back and forth as political parties and populations change.

- Are there other limitations to political engagement you can think of? Other benefits?
- What other forms of political engagement might be helpful in the gun violence discussion?

Story

Just as stories of our faith remind us who we are and what our calling is, we are sent to take stories out into the world. Storytelling is foundational to our faith. Jesus used parables to teach; they are how our brains are wired and how we make sense of the world. In story we encounter the other, perhaps gaining a glimpse of God in them, and we are led to a place of empathy and understanding.

Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10. How did Jesus' parable impact those in Scripture who heard it? How does it continue to impact us today?

Tell your own stories about gun violence and those that you have heard. The simple act of sharing your experiences can be incredibly powerful. Many people have been negatively impacted by gun violence, but friends and family close to them do not know. This is not surprising, given the traumatic nature of these events. Research has shown, however, that telling traumatic stories in supportive environments can actually help people heal. Additionally, it is helpful for others to hear about these stories so that their overall awareness can be widened.

Remember that words matter, and be intentional in your everyday speech. Look over the list of gun violence words that was brainstormed. Try to root these words out of your vocabulary; when you forget, tell people your intentions.

Schedule a screening of a documentary dedicated to the issue of gun violence in your church or school or community. Let these stories speak for themselves and spark conversation. Here are two possibilities:

1. *The Armor of Light* is a documentary about "an Evangelical minister trying to find the moral strength to preach about the growing toll of gun violence in America" (<https://www.armoroflightfilm.com>).
2. *Trigger: The Ripple Effect of Gun Violence* examines "the ripple effect that one shooting has on a survivor, family, community, and society" (<http://triggerdoc.com>).

Be mindful of the stories you surround yourself with, in media especially. How are guns viewed and used? Is macho-masculinity lifted up as the only life-giving way to be a man? Recognizing the messages we

receive, even implicitly, helps us to be intentional about what we want from entertainment. This does not mean that you have to eliminate all video games or movies with guns in them, but it's important to notice what you are taking in and to be mindful about it. Consider these words from educational psychologist Anita Woolfolk about the formational power of media:

From ages 6–11, children spend an average of 28 hours a week watching television—more time than any other activity except sleep. With all this viewing, the possible influence of television is a real concern because in the United States, 82% of TV programs have at least some violence. The rate for children's programs is especially high—an average of 32 violent acts per hour. . . . And in more than 70% of the violent scenes, the violence goes unpunished. Does watching violent TV increase aggression? A panel of experts assembled by the U.S. Surgeon General to study media and violence reached a strong and clear conclusion: "Research on violent television and films, video games, and music reveals unequivocal evidence that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts." [They] found that playing violent video games is a causal factor for increased aggressive thoughts, feelings, and actions, along with decreased feelings of empathy. Culture and gender have very little impact on how susceptible players were to the effects of these games. But playing positive video games can increase prosocial behaviors, so it is not that the games themselves are bad. It appears that we learn what we play, but there are few prosocial games and many violent ones.¹⁰

Discuss:

- How else might story be utilized as a response to the issue of gun violence?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of story as a response?

Community

Community is a power tool for any social movement to harness. Here are some suggestions of how community can be used to address the issue of gun violence:

- Create opportunities for conversation and connection in community. Invite people to share a

meal with you. Share some of the things you have been learning about and thinking about, and ask them for their opinions.

- Seek out the stories of those you disagree with. Professor and sociology researcher Brené Brown talks about the spiritual practice of leaning into people we do not agree with:

People are hard to hate close up. Move in. When you are really struggling with someone, and it's someone you're supposed to hate because of ideology or belief, move in, get curious, get closer, ask questions, try to connect. Remind yourself of that spiritual belief of inextricable connection, how am I connected to you in a way that is bigger and more primal than our politics?

Now . . . I'm not going to tolerate abuse or dehumanizing language. I am not going to have a curious and open dialogue with someone whose politics insist on diminishing my humanity. Those are lines. But short of that, I am going to lean in and stay curious.¹¹

- Many argue that social media and other forms of news-sourcing have made our country more divided than ever, allowing us to exist in echo chambers where our own opinions are affirmed over and over. In this world, it may seem difficult to even find people who have opinions different from yours. This, however, is not the case in most college contexts. Take advantage of the diversity of your campus or community, and try to reach out to someone and understand where they are coming from.
- Remembering how we started this curriculum with the Gun Rights Spectrum, begin an open dialogue by trying to learn not just what someone thinks, but why and how they got there. Acknowledge that people have nuanced opinions for reasons. Remember that behind it all, they are humans made in the image of God and that they desire the same things we do.
- You may realize that some of your close friends and family have very different opinions than you do on the issue of gun violence. You may also realize that everyone you know is at about the same

place you are on the spectrum. If that is the case, consider reaching out and making an attempt to get to know someone outside of your normal circles.

In the aftermath of the Las Vegas concert shooting in 2017, country singers provided a great example of this kind of reaching out. Josh Abbott was one of the musicians at the concert where the shooting happened. Afterward, he tweeted about his experience and identified himself as a supporter of guns. Recognizing how he had blindly supported gun rights up until that point, he said, "My biggest regret is that I stubbornly didn't realize it until my brothers on the road and myself were threatened by it." Through Abbott's challenge and others, a call was made to form community and grow in understanding across diverse places on the spectrum.

- How can creating community in which stories and selves can be shared help the issue of gun violence? What are the pitfalls?
- If these forms of community have an "agenda," can they ever be truly authentic?

Overview Questions

If you have additional time, you may want to discuss one or more of the following questions before concluding:

- If you are a college student, consider your major or area of study. How might it overlap with the issue of gun violence? If there is not a direct connection, how could you use the skills you are acquiring to engage with the issue of gun violence?
- Think about the four ways to engage the world: art, politics, story, and community. What sounds the easiest? The hardest? The most appealing? What is something you could commit to right now?
- What do you think of the idea that it is the action of social justice, more than the outcome, that is transformative?

Conclusion

Like a benediction at the end of a worship service, we prepare to end this lesson and go out into the world. We do so remembering who we are, having come close to

the issue of gun violence, having opened our eyes and ears for God, and allowing ourselves space to respond. Now we seek to take what we have learned and heard and put it into practice, allowing God's Spirit to guide us in the work.

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Worship: Sending

Song

“The Kingdom of God”

The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in
the Holy Spirit.

Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your
kingdom.

Benediction

We worship a God who brings good news to the
oppressed.

Who binds up the brokenhearted,
and who comforts all who mourn.

As we go out from this place and into the world,
may we be agents of hope speaking into the issue of
gun violence
through art and politics and story and community.

And now, may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
rest and abide with you, this day and always.
Amen.

*Taizé Community, G.I.A. Publications (copyright information https://www.taize.fr/en_article114.html). The community sells the music, and many songs can be found on YouTube.