

# Gun Violence 101 Cheat Sheet

## Responding to the Call to Prevent Gun Violence

Written and Edited by

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**CHURCH & SOCIETY**

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Living **FAITH** Seeking **JUSTICE** Pursuing **PEACE**

# Why talk about this?

Days after the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, the American Medical Association officially adopted a policy calling gun violence a “health crisis” and requiring a comprehensive public health response and solution. Approximately 30,000 people die each year from gun violence, including children.<sup>1</sup> This number does not include the number injured. On average, over 100,000 people are shot in one year in the United States in murders, assaults, suicides and suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, or by police intervention.<sup>2</sup> This epidemic encompasses homicides and suicides, rural and urban, adults and children. We are facing a crisis, and the church cannot stay silent about it.

In fact, the 2016 General Conference of The United Methodist Church passed a resolution called, “Our Call to End Gun Violence.”<sup>3</sup> It states, “As followers of Jesus, called to live into the reality of God’s dream of shalom as described by Micah [Micah 4:1-4], we must address the epidemic of gun violence so, “that he may teach us his ways that we may walk in God’s path.” The Church recognizes gun violence as a serious social issue and therefore declares, “we call upon United Methodists to address gun violence in their local context.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ama-assn.org/ama-calls-gun-violence-public-health-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bradycampaign.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/social-principles-and-resolutions/our-call-to-end-gun-violence-3428>

## Some General Suggestions as You Get Started

Our large and diverse denomination can present challenges in responding to this call. The following are tips for a variety of congregations.

**If you are a pastor in a situation where you feel isolated in your understanding of gun violence prevention as a critical justice issue, use these tips to get started:**

1. Find a group of like-minded people to chat with regularly outside of your church. Go online or work with a state or national group that is working on gun violence prevention.
2. Practice self-care. This is hard work; you have to pay attention to your own mental health and care for yourself.
3. Remember, no one sermon or talk or conversation is likely to change someone's mind, but we can start doing basic things that begin a path toward cultural change. This is a marathon, not a sprint.
4. Exegete your congregation. Understand what they believe and why by having one on one conversations, listening to conversations over meals, etc. Find common ground. We all want to reduce violence; no one wants guns in the hands of someone who may do harm. Your congregation may surprise you.
5. Meet your congregation where they are. Understanding what your congregation can handle makes you a good leader. Being prophetic looks different in every congregation. Know your congregation and move them towards change in a way that lets them hear you.

## Consider Your Congregation and Plan Your Approach

**Scenario 1: “My church believes that gun control is contrary to the gospel and violates basic American rights afforded us by the second amendment.”**

1. Change the narrative:

Watch for language and sermons that use “safety” as an idol. The dominant narrative right now is that “guns keep us safe.” Of course, our call as leaders is to create as safe a space as we possibly can for all people in our congregations, but statistically, guns do not keep us safer. Research published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that living in a home where there are guns increased risk of homicide by 40 to 170% and the risk of suicide by 90 to 460%.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <http://smartgunlaws.org/guns-in-the-homesafe-storage-statistics/>

The idea that we should police our sanctuaries with guns is contrary to the gospel. Our ultimate hope for salvation is in Christ, not in guns. As the pastor, you can change the narrative around “safety.”<sup>5</sup>

Plan a screening and discussion of “The Armor of Light,” a 2015 documentary that follows an evangelical minister and the mother of a teenage shooting victim who asks, “Is it possible to be both pro-gun and pro-life?” The film is a courageous look at our fractured political culture and begins to cast light on the explosive intersection of religion, racism, and pro-gun politics. It offers that it is indeed possible for people to come together across deep party lines to find common ground.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Avoid trigger words

Be careful with language. Instead of saying, “gun control,” say “gun violence prevention.”

**Lift up in prayer the families who have lost loved ones to violence.**

There are very few people who would claim they are “pro-violence.” Pay attention to the words you use. Lead with values, such as the understanding that with freedom comes responsibility. Demonstrate the effectiveness of laws, such as background checks which have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people, like people convicted of felonies or domestic abuse and people with severe mental illness.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. Pay attention to the news.

Lift up in prayer the families who have lost loved ones to violence, whether self-inflicted or otherwise. Explicitly use the word “violence.” Start the conversation in your church here. While gun violence can very quickly become framed a partisan issue of policy, at its core everyday are hurt people and harmed communities suffering great physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual trauma. We cannot forget this. Focus on people who are impacted in your community.

## 4. Involve gun owners.

If possible, invite a gun owner who believes in common sense gun laws to give a presentation at your church about being faithful and responsible with guns. Challenge the belief that being a gun owner means being against any gun regulations.

<sup>5</sup> <https://sojo.net/articles/worshipping-idol-safety> (See this helpful Sojourner article about the idol of safety. It does not explicitly mention guns, but is helpful in understanding our gospel call vs. the narrative of “keeping ourselves safe.”)

<sup>6</sup> The film is available on Netflix. Also see [www.armoroflightfilm.com](http://www.armoroflightfilm.com).

5. Bring gun safety into the conversation.

If you are in a church with many gun owners, set up an educational opportunity focusing on gun safety. Invite someone from the local police department to talk about gun safety and keeping kids and families safe when there is a gun in the home.

**Scenario 2: “My church is horribly split on gun control. Some are for it and some are against it and it’s better not to say anything in order to keep the peace.”**

1. Find a group of people that are interested in learning about this issue in a small group setting and do a Bible Study with them, such as the Church and Society Bible study Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities. Download it at: [www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention](http://www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention) *Printed copies are available for purchase.*
2. Encourage small groups of people to begin to talk with their families and friends in the congregation. This might support a conversation in a more organic way, rather than from the pulpit.
3. More likely than not, congregations remaining “neutral” on this issue are not actively affected by it every day. Begin a relationship with a clergy person, congregation, or community that is dealing with gun violence as a daily reality. Some examples: churches in rural North Carolina partnering with the local campus ministry after a rash of gun suicides on campus, or a church in a relatively safe urban area partnering with a church in an area vulnerable to gun violence. This helps a congregation understand the immediacy of this conversation in a way that is better shown than told. This also, through relationship, builds the kingdom of God. Read how a partnership between two Washington, D.C. congregations leads to a communal approach to preventing gun violence: [www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/when-gun-violence-spawns-a-church-partnership-446](http://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/when-gun-violence-spawns-a-church-partnership-446)
4. Consider Adam Hamilton’s advice if you are thinking about doing a sermon or leading discussion. Here is a link to an article in which he discusses influencing people when a subject is controversial: “Addressing Tough Topics: Best practices for church leaders to touch the hot topics” at [www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/addressing-tough-topics-445](http://www.umcjustice.org/news-and-stories/addressing-tough-topics-445)

**Begin a relationship with a clergy person, congregation, or community that is dealing with gun violence as a daily reality.**

**Scenario 3: “My church is generally in agreement with gun violence prevention, but doesn’t see why our church should be involved in legislation. After all, we believe in the separation of church and state.”**

1. Have a conversation challenging the idea that it is possible to be “apolitical.” A good resource for this is our United Methodist Social Principles. They state that our faith calls us to works of justice and compassion. Use the Church and Society Faith and Facts card on Gun Violence Prevention, which can be accessed online.<sup>7</sup> As a church, we are not to be partisan, but we are to be political. Like Jesus, we must speak truth to power.
2. Invite someone who has experienced gun violence firsthand to come and speak, preferably someone who is in your community. This might be a pulpit exchange, or asking someone from a local gun violence prevention organization.
3. Come up with a couple of easy ways for your church to get involved in legislation (print out form letters for them to sign, email witness slips for important legislative action, and so forth. GBCS can be a helpful resource for this as well as local gun violence prevention activists). Often when people see that you can be involved in legislation beyond protesting they are more willing to get involved.
4. For those in your congregation that are ready to do something, make yourself available for actions such as protests, rallies, calling and visiting your Congressional representatives, and more, and offer an invitation. It’s much easier to go with someone than by yourself.

**Scenario 4: “My church is actively involved in gun violence prevention legislation and is always asking what more they can do. It’s a little intimidating, I’m not a community organizer or a politician.”**

1. Connect them with organizers at the General Board of Church and Society. They will love the enthusiasm and energy and will put it to good use!
2. Meet with the group of people who are most involved and learn what their interests are. Do they want to plan a speaker forum or a movie screening to encourage education and action? Would they like to plan Sunday school or have a moment in worship to connect the issue to our faith values? Would they like the church to participate in a national gun violence prevention witness event, such as the Concert Across America to End Gun Violence, or to connect with a national group such as Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence? Work together to come up with some plans that will work best for your congregation. The General Board of Church and Society can help! Visit [www.umcjustice.org](http://www.umcjustice.org).

<sup>7</sup> [www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention](http://www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention)

3. Encourage those interested in advocacy to connect with the local, state, or national gun violence prevention groups to work with them. They will be able to receive updates and action alerts.
4. Encourage leaders to maintain a contact list of interested members who may want to take action at significant times. Have someone from the group pass along updates and important information.
5. Encourage members to reach out to other congregations, United Methodist and other, for connections to others who are working on gun violence prevention.
6. Encourage a partnership with local law enforcement so that your church can learn about more ways to get involved.
7. Support efforts for community-based intervention programs. Strategies like Gun Violence Intervention, Cure Violence, and Hospital-based Violence Intervention are effective and by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, several cities have adopted a comprehensive approach that combines various elements from each model into an effective, holistic response to gun violence. See an example of such an approach at: <http://smartgunlaws.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Healing-Communities-in-Crisis-4-3.pdf>

## **Conclusion**

We understand that pastors are in unique settings that require varied responses to gun violence prevention. We understand the challenges that may arise as you address this issue. We also know that faith-based dialogue is critical, so we can all work together to reduce gun violence in our country. It is an epidemic and needs our attention. We hope and pray that you will join us in the call to prevent gun violence.

## **About the Authors**

Rev. Lindsey Long Joyce is pastor and member of Urban Strategy Network of the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church. She lives and works in Chicago, IL, where she is engaged in local and state gun violence prevention efforts.

The General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church is engaged in gun violence prevention advocacy at local, national, and international levels. Visit [www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention](http://www.umcjustice.org/what-we-care-about/peace-with-justice/gun-violence-prevention) to learn more, stay informed, and take action. For more information, contact Jeania Ree Moore, Director of Civil and Human Rights, at [jmoore@umcjustice.org](mailto:jmoore@umcjustice.org).

# Resources

## *Gun violence and suicide*

Report, Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, “The Truth About Suicide and Guns,” <http://www.bradycampaign.org/the-truth-about-suicide-guns>

## *Gun violence and domestic violence*

Fact Sheet, Everytown for Gun Safety, “Guns and Domestic Violence,” <https://everytownresearch.org/guns-domestic-violence/>

Webpage, National Domestic Violence Hotline, “Firearms and Domestic Violence,” <http://www.thehotline.org/resources/firearms-dv/>

Toolkit, National Domestic Violence Hotline and Americans for Responsible Solutions, “Saving Women’s Lives: Endings Firearms Violence Against Intimate Partners,” [http://www.thehotline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ARS\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.thehotline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ARS_Toolkit.pdf)

## *Gun violence and criminal justice reform*

Organization, Community Justice Reform Coalition, <http://communityjusticerc.org/>

## *Gun violence and unintentional deaths*

Report, Everytown for Gun Safety, “Innocents Lost,” [https://everytownresearch.org/reports/innocents\\_lost/](https://everytownresearch.org/reports/innocents_lost/)

## *Federal and State (U.S.) gun laws*

The Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, <http://smartgunlaws.org/>

## *Background checks*

Webpage, Everytown for Gun Safety, “<https://everytownresearch.org/infographic-background-checks-save-lives/>”

## *Gun Trafficking*

Report, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, “Trace the Guns,” <http://tracetheguns.org/report.pdf>

Report, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, “A Blueprint for Federal Action on Illegal Guns: Regulation, Enforcement, and Best Practices to Combat Illegal Gun Trafficking,” <https://everytownresearch.org/reports/a-blueprint-for-federal-action-on-illegal-guns/>

## *Mass Shootings*

Report, Everytown for Gun Safety, “Mass Shootings in the United States: 2009-2016,” <https://everytownresearch.org/reports/mass-shootings-analysis/>

*\*Several organizations listed here—Everytown for Gun Safety, The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, and The Law Center for Gun Violence—have many more reports, fact sheets, and other resources in addition to what is listed here. Explore their offerings for more information.*