

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

(GA Item 11-06)

219th General Assembly Action: Approve as Amended

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), recognizing the need for a new approach to the plague of gun violence, recommends that the 219th General Assembly (2010) approve the following:

To awaken members and communities to the faith dimensions of our on-going tragedy:

1. Encourage the church at every level—from individual member to congregation, presbytery, synod, and national church—to become informed and active in preventing gun violence, to provide pastoral care for victims of gun violence, and to seek a spiritual response of grief and repentance, grace and courage to resist that violence and celebrate the Lord and Giver of Life. This proposal does not preclude the legal use of personal firearms for hunting or sports-related purposes.

2. That the church take responsibility to build public awareness of gun violence and the epidemic of preventable gun-related deaths, totaling more than 620,000 over the past twenty years, with hundreds of thousands more wounded. Even while taking the focused and urgent efforts below to achieve practical solutions, that the councils and congregations welcome discussion from all viewpoints, and that the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy review and summarize responses for the 220th General Assembly (2012).

3. That congregations address the temptation to gun suicide and murder-suicide among both old and young people, and that pastors especially present practical theologies of peace as alternatives to fantasies of power, idolatries of force, strategies of vengeance, and the gravitational pull of nihilism or depression.

4. That the church liturgies not only call for periodic preaching on gun violence but also contain prayers for the victims and perpetrators of gun violence and confession of our own complicity in the perpetuation and toleration of violence in all its forms in the culture.

To assist congregations and members in supporting focused local and state initiatives:

5. That, to embody its spiritual awakening in response to this tragic devaluing of life, the church work to build a movement of urban-suburban ecumenical partnerships in order to better understand the problem of gun violence and take more effective action.

6. That local congregations lead or join in ecumenical gatherings for public prayer at sites where gun violence has occurred and to support, or assist with, appropriate law-enforcement guidance, “ceasefire,” and other urban gang intervention strategies based on the public health model of addressing the most vulnerable populations.

7. That the church, particularly in its congregations, work with local law-enforcement agencies and community groups to identify gun shops that engage in retail practices designed to circumvent laws on gun sales and ownership, encourage full legal compliance, and support higher marketing standards, and if necessary, take nonviolent action against gun shops and gun shows that are known to sell guns that end up in crime, using the faith-based campaign of *Heeding God's Call*, a group active in Pennsylvania as an example.

8. That the church at presbytery, synod, and General Assembly levels, and in cooperation with colleges, universities, and seminaries, sponsor regular educational and summer conference events on gun violence and its prevention, in order to raise the awareness of the faith community and call it to informed action.

9. Due to the recent expanded provisions in concealed carry laws in many states that now allow guns to be carried openly, including into houses of worship, we recommend that churches and other entities prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property.

10. That the church encourage citizens, hunters, and law-enforcement officials who regularly handle weapons properly to be wise examples in reducing risks and teaching how to prevent the misuse of deadly force.

11. That the church direct and support its Washington office and other advocacy bodies to continue to advocate for the policies previously approved by PC(USA) General Assemblies and that can receive wide public support to

- a. limit legal personal gun acquisition to one handgun a month;**
- b. require licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks, and cooling-off periods, for all guns sold;**
- c. close the “gun show loophole” by requiring background checks for all gun buyers;**
- d. ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor piercing handgun ammunition, and .50 caliber sniper rifles;**
- e. advocate for new technologies to aid law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety;**
- f. raise the age for handgun ownership to the age of twenty-one; and**
- g. eliminate the Tiahrt Amendment to annual appropriations for the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) that impedes local law enforcement agencies in their use of gun traces and requires the Justice Department to destroy within two hours the record of a buyer whose NICS (National Instant Criminal Background Check System) check was approved.**

12. Following the recommendations of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, to support laws to “require judges and law enforcement to remove guns from situations of domestic violence, as well as from people whose adjudicated mental illness, drug use, or previous criminal record suggests the possibility of violence,” and to increase police training in nonviolent proactive intervention.¹

13. To urge the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to develop a corporate engagement strategy for working with corporations in which the church may be invested that are producers or distributors of weapons that do not comply with its policies on gun violence prevention, recommending shareholder proposals and divestment actions appropriate to the integrity and effectiveness the church seeks.

14. That the Compassion, Peace, and Justice and Racial Ethnic Ministries areas include in their ongoing strategic reflection means through which church-wide faithfulness to these commitments can be monitored, supported, encouraged, and resourced, in order to strengthen especially those congregations

most exposed to gun violence, and that appropriate resources continue to be made available to help in worship, pastoral care, and public policy work.

15. That councils of the church seek to partner with other faith institutions to create and sustain a national, activist faith-based social movement to save thousands of lives yearly.

16. That the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly be directed to post this report on-line, distribute it through the social witness CD, and print it in limited quantity for councils, congregations, and other educational and advocacy use.

Executive Summary

This resolution is in response to the following referral: *2008 Referral: Item 09-05. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to Prepare a Comprehensive Study on Gun Violence—From the 218th General Assembly (2008) (Minutes, 2008, Part I, p. 860).*

Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call challenges our society’s fatalism and numbness in accepting the highest gun death rates in the world, reviews previous efforts and positions of the churches, and proposes a new “spiritual awakening” approach: a church-related, community-based strategy inspired by “Heeding God’s Call” in Philadelphia and similar groups in Richmond, Virginia, and central New Jersey. The report looks at our culture of violence-acceptance, with its undercurrents of fear and desperation, including high rates of gun use in male suicide. In the average year, more than 100,000 are shot by guns. In 2006, 30,896 of those victims died. According to statistics compiled by the Brady Campaign, 16,883 of these deaths were suicides, including more than 2,000 young people (ages 10–24²). The report also looks at the gun violence epidemic in our inner cities, drawing on public health and community policing perspectives to focus on the spread of illegal weapons. This response to the request of the 218th General Assembly (2010) for a “Reformed theology of proactive, constructive nonviolence,” honors the value of human life, recognizes institutional interests and sin in the proliferation of urban and suburban violence, and encourages a renewal of social solidarity to overcome the distrust and disconnection that violence exploits. The organizing model both addresses gun violence concretely and rebuilds community, giving a strong place to churches involved, and addresses why previous gun violence prevention efforts have not succeeded, despite high levels of public support for reasonable violence prevention measures.

Endnotes

1. See “Taking a Stand: Reducing Gun Violence in Our Communities,” a report from the International Association of Chiefs of Police 2007 Great Lakes Summit on Gun Violence: p. 6. <http://www.theiacp.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=%2Fs0LiOkJK5Q%3D&tabid=87>.

2. <http://www.bradiycampaign.org/facts/gunviolence/GVsuicide>.

Full Rationale for Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call—From the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy.

Rationale

I. Introduction

This resolution is in response to the following referral: *2008 Referral: Item 09-05. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to Prepare a Comprehensive Study on Gun Violence—From the 218th General Assembly (2008) (Minutes, 2008, Part I, p. 860).*

This directive read as follows:

a. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in consultation with [the Office of Theology and Worship,] the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, the Presbyterian United Nations Office, and the Presbyterian Washington Office, to prepare for the larger church a comprehensive study on the concerns raised in this overture [on gun violence]. The study should articulate a Reformed Theology of proactive, constructive nonviolence way of life and tactical method for bringing God's justice and peace to our communities and around the world; assess the social and economic costs of gun violence; explore how gun violence fits into a larger national culture of violence, and identify ways that the church can effectively address gun violence issues domestically and internationally, and to report these findings along with proposed action items to the 219th General Assembly (2010) (*Minutes*, 2008, Part I, p. 860).

Gun violence in America has escalated to persistently astonishing levels, consistently about 30,000 deaths per year. We are shocked but increasingly not surprised by the tragedies that bleed into the news and into our neighborhoods, towns and cities. “Shoot outs” once associated with the Wild West or romanticized gangsters now occur in spaces long considered safe havens: high school cafeterias, college campuses, malls, community centers, playgrounds, gym clubs, even church sanctuaries and our homes. Time and distance are no longer buffers from gun violence. Everyone is at some risk, and the phenomenon of multiple or mass shootings appears to be growing.³ Currently there are about 270 million privately owned firearms in the United States.⁴ If they were evenly distributed, almost every woman, man and child in the entire population would possess a gun. We are, as a country, armed and dangerous—to ourselves.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been concerned about this frightening phenomenon, and has consistently spoken out about it for three decades, as have our sisters and brothers in virtually every other faith tradition. This report does not advocate more controls than the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has asked for in the past, yet it is clear that our voices have not been persuasive in themselves and our actions too limited to stem the tide of gun violence. There are too many places in America where it is difficult to hear the gospel over the persistent retort of gun fire. We continue to be convinced that God calls us to protect the lives of all within the human community, as each is loved by our Creator. In order to be faithful to our vocation to seek God’s shalom, we need to seek new and active ways of effectively bringing life-saving change. We can no longer tolerate such a preventable exile from God’s peaceable kingdom or reign. It is time to discuss these deadly social outcomes in our congregations. We believe there is much common ground within society for both responsible gun ownership and real reduction of gun violence. Yet we also know the way the dangers of accident, the prevalence of suicide by gun, and the high rates of homicide in the U.S., are in direct relationship to the accessibility to and possession of guns. We need to be willing to ask ourselves whether we should voluntarily limit our ownership of guns so that we may become more faithful stewards of the gospel. Presbyterians are called to be agents of change in the world, to be reconcilers because we ourselves have been reconciled. Therefore, we are calling upon the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to help build an effective spiritual and social awakening that says “No” to the prevalence of gun violence in this country.

What might this look like? At the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, a group of members gathers in the parking lot for prayer before heading from the suburbs into a neighborhood of Philadelphia, where they meet up with a racially diverse and ecumenically mixed group of representatives from local communities of faith. Their focus: a gun shop linked to hundreds of illegal gun sales to “straw purchasers,” that is, people without criminal records who buy weapons to be sold on the underground market. First, they seek to persuade the owner to comply with a code of conduct, a set of business practices designed to diminish “straw purchasing.”⁵ If that fails, they hold peaceful, public protests. Increasingly in Philadelphia, this suburban-urban partnership, based in the churches, is seeing results—gun shops engaging in this illegal practice are being forced to close, and other shops are getting the message and complying. Some of those involved in the protests are hunters themselves (as are several of this study group’s members) and they recognize the alternative to inaction is simply more death. This organization and others like it are not just engaging in legal debates with gun lobbyists. They are putting their bodies where their faith is.

Alongside this locally-based and practically-focused approach, which may bring to mind the local chapters that helped create the “Million Mom March” on Mother’s Day, May 14, 2000, the focus of “Heeding God’s Call” reflects the application of “public health” approaches to the problem of gun violence.⁶ This approach builds on “two of the principles that help define the discipline of public health... (1) preventing damage to humans by

injury and disease is preferable to repairing damage after it has occurred; and (2) prevention is best accomplished by protection that is provided automatically on a population basis and does not require each individual to always act carefully. . . Applying this approach to the area of gun violence, it is considered more effective and therefore preferable to address the design [and marketing] of guns before they get into the hands of millions of people rather than rely upon our ability to control the behaviors of those millions”⁷ Authors Mair, Teret, and Frattaroli recommend design changes in weapons to increase their safety, but acknowledge that approximately 40 percent of guns are sold in the “largely unregulated secondary market,” and that half of guns sold are second hand.⁸ Thus the authors cite data on the willingness (as of 2001) of varying percentages of the 64,000 licensed gun shop owners to sell to “straw” (or proxy) buyers and urge changes in marketing practices, noting areas of higher gun violence risk. Thus the public health approach to “vectors” by which illegal or simply unregulated weapons end up in the hands of dangerous or immature persons.⁹

At the same time, Mair, Teret, and Frattaroli note opposition to regulation in all industries being regulated; auto companies resist seatbelt laws and better mileage requirements, tobacco and alcohol companies resist advertising limits, and strong lobbies are linked to these interests. Thus public education and legislation become the chief areas for change, as enforcement can be weakened by laws that prevent effective data collection and sharing and tort litigation (aimed at product liability) can be blocked by laws that prevent damage claims for individuals or groups.¹⁰ This points to the need for effective community standard-setting on a regional basis, precisely the work of creative ecumenical coalitions. It is such groups that can help society as a whole implement a consensus that is arguably present in current polling data: widespread acceptance of “gun rights” (responsible personal gun ownership as supported by the Supreme Court’s recent decision) combined with high support for common sense violence prevention.¹¹ As this resolution is completed the Supreme Court is seen as likely to extend the application of its decision preventing the outright banning of firearms in Washington, DC (the “Heller” decision); presumably this would still allow for laws regulating the kinds and conditions under which firearms could be sold in states, cities and municipalities.¹²

Christian gospel values challenge gun violence in order to protect human life from unnecessary tragedy. The public health approach, and predominant law enforcement approach focused on individual perpetrators, both need a public consensus rooted in moral conviction, hope, and trust. The spirit-awakening and movement-supporting approach of this resolution builds on previous Presbyterian emphases on legislation and education and is reflected in this report’s recommendations and in the structure of this rationale. Just because a social need is urgent does not mean that the moral climate will easily change. Thus a study of five elements of successful social movements provides a lens for analysis. Our understanding of the fullness of God’s peace is larger than definitions of freedom that focus on the possession of weapons; we affirm a social bond with grassroots movements that is rooted in our identity as Christians. We are already part of the movement of God’s people through history toward the promised realm of peace.

Our church can and should lead the way in the broader faith community to the creation of a broad-based social movement to prevent gun violence, beginning with and led by an opening to the Holy Spirit, and drawing its strength from the grassroots, especially people in the pews. Such a coalition of congregations and other faith communities can take practical direct action on local levels while generating critical change in cultural norms and attitudes toward guns, their possession, distribution and use. In this way our church, the faith community and the movement they can lead, will heed God’s call to protect more of God’s children.

II. Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Study Rationale for a Social Movement Strategy on Gun Violence

A. Introduction.

As Presbyterians, we know God’s call becomes clear to us only when we are paying careful attention. But paying attention becomes more difficult in times and cultures as complex as ours. The cacophony of messages can drown out God’s call on our lives as believers and as a community of faith. Real anxiety about change meets reflexive ideology, then too often slogans replace thought. In this context, the church is called to give steady

support to prevention and protection despite political paralysis and powerful interests. We must pay attention as well to those sources which have always fed our understanding of God's calling—our biblical and theological tradition, the commitments of people of faith and the signs of the times. Together, they create a kairos moment when God's time intersects our time and human history is changed. But first we need to pay attention and respond to the call. We need to heed.

We need to pay attention to the disconnects between what our faith, values and common sense tell us about the realities of gun violence and what groups opposing reasonable public protection would want us to believe. Even after the massacres at Columbine High School, Northern Illinois University and Virginia Tech, pro-gun advocates called for allowing guns on our campuses.¹³ Even though many have died by assault weapons since the ban was allowed to expire in 2004, lobbyists have argued that to restrict access to such military-style weapons is an attack on personal rights.¹⁴ Despite the fact that workplaces which permit employees to carry guns are five to seven times more likely to be the site of workplace homicide, the pro-gun lobby continues to advocate legislation relaxing restrictions to carry guns to work in a number of states.¹⁵ Even though research shows that gun owners are six times more likely to be a victim of gun violence than to use their weapon in self defense, the lobbyists representing the gun industry link gun ownership with increasing personal safety.¹⁶ As people of faith, we need to pay attention to these contradictions between tragic facts and gun advocacy group fictions; we need to allow our consciences to be troubled into a new wave of response.

To state that there is a "gun lobby" of considerable power should not surprise most Americans. The pro-gun organizations and lobbies, preeminently the National Rifle Association (NRA), are legal in our country, and their influence frequently debated. This report does not assume that all members believe all positions of any lobbying group; a recent poll suggests more support within NRA for protective measures than may be expected.¹⁷ Yet organized and focused special interests are a major reason for political immobility on many issues in U.S. politics, and the gun issue illustrates this vividly. The issue here is not between freedom and oppressive government control; it is between common sense laws and resistance to any safeguards from predictable and preventable death.¹⁸

Gun violence as an issue is not new but has been building for decades--and the national church has not been silent about it. The PC(USA) and its predecessor bodies have addressed gun violence through the actions of eight General Assemblies in the last thirty years.¹⁹ Each resolution reflected a sense of moral urgency in response to rising gun violence and the cultural trends that contributed to it. Yet after these thirty years we see the same patterns continuing unabated: a culture which accommodates and even cultivates violence and fear, the proliferation of assault weapons which go beyond the legitimate needs of hunters and gun collectors, the alarming number of preventable gun-related deaths of victims of homicide, suicide and accident, the increasing incidence of child-related gun violence. General Assembly resolutions have called on the church to be involved in education and advocacy at the federal, state and community level to prevent gun violence. These were backed up with strong educational curricula in 1991 and 1996²⁰ as well as comprehensive strategies for advocacy especially at the national level. The General Assembly resolution in 1990 called on the U.S. government to

establish meaningful and effective federal legislation to regulate the importation, manufacture, sale and possession of guns and ammunition by the general public. Such legislation should include provisions for the registration and licensing of gun purchasers and owners, appropriate background investigations and waiting periods prior to gun purchase, and regulation of subsequent sale.²¹

Little change has been seen in the policies enumerated, and these same calls can and should be echoed today.

Presbyterians have a significant but by no means unique witness within the wider church in speaking out against gun violence:

- The United Methodist Church passed similar resolutions in 1976, 1988 and 2000 calling for education and advocacy to reduce the availability of guns and regulating their sale and possession.
- The United Church of Christ passed resolutions in 1969, 1995 and 1999 which specifically called for the denomination to negotiate directly with the National Rifle Association and endorsed policies of one handgun a month, banning assault weapons, and regulation of gun dealers.
- The Episcopal Church passed eight resolutions between 1976 and 2000 advocating for greater regulation of handguns, including banning assault weapons and prohibiting the carrying of concealed weapons.
- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued policy statements in 1995 and most recently in 2005 advocating for the reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons and supporting “measures that control the sale and use of firearms and make them safer... and we reiterate our call for sensible regulation of handguns.”
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America passed a message to the church on Community Violence in 1994, reaffirmed in 2008, which called on the church to “stem the proliferation of guns in our streets, schools and homes,” and to “build strong anti-violence coalitions in our neighborhoods and communities.”
- The National Council of Churches has given voice to the ecumenical community’s appeal through the Interfaith Call to End Gun Violence (2000) which then-General Secretary Robert Edgar reiterated in speaking out against the tragic killings at Virginia Tech University (2007)

Clearly, a diverse national faith community has been clear, outspoken and consistent over the last twenty years about the crisis of gun-related deaths in the U.S. and around the world. Regrettably, beyond general agreement, those who have heeded these calls to study and action are the exception, rather than the norm.

B. Theology and Political Responsibility.

In the 1990 Resolution on Gun Violence the 202nd General Assembly refers to the “peaceable kingdom—a society where God’s justice reigns, where reconciliation replaces anger, where an open hand and a turned cheek replace retaliation, where love of enemies is as important as love of neighbor.” Based on the vision presented in Isa. 65 of “new heavens and a new earth . . . where the wolf and the lamb will feed together,” the idyllic image has become the soft focus sentiment of Christmas cards. It has been robbed of its power. The people of God must continue to hold sacred the visions recorded in Scripture of the Creator’s intentions for humankind. Such visions provide the basis of critique, so that we can see how far, in fact, we have strayed from God’s will for us. Visions also compel us to action, giving us moral clarity and courage. Truly, without vision the people will perish.

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;
For one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth...²²

Here is a radically different vision of human community, where parents do not have to worry about letting their children play in the neighborhood and adults do not have to fear walking down the street at night. Remembering this vision stirs our longing for a different society, built on solidarity and trust, and not on terror. It

is in the context of the community, especially the community of faith, that the full value of human life is honored and celebrated. We therefore constantly seek to remove double standards and differing expectations between God's intentions for those inside and outside the church. Those within the Reformed tradition continue to be instructed by Calvin's sense of the "peace of Christ," which is distinctive in nature and uncompromising in facing evil and its violence.

For Calvin, biblical principles also had direct applicability in the ordering of civil society. So in his commentary on the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not kill," Calvin expressed a theological perspective on the ordering of society which is based on the value each human life as loved and redeemed by God and therefore in need of protection.

The purpose of this commandment is, that since the Lord has bound the whole human race by a kind of unity, the safety of all ought to be considered as entrusted to each. In general, therefore, all violence and injustice, and every kind of harm from which our neighbor's body suffers, is prohibited. Accordingly, we are required faithfully to do what in us lies to defend the life of our neighbor, to promote whatever tends to his tranquility, to be vigilant in warding off harm, and when danger comes, to assist in removing it.²³

It is not only the church which is knit together as a body of interdependent parts (I Cor.12). Our Reformed tradition affirms that indeed the whole human community is meant to reflect the very unity of the triune God who created us. We creatures of the Living God have organized government structures which enable us to provide protection for all members of society. Our governments, then, most closely reflect the image and intentions of the Creator when they "defend the lives of all our neighbors," build community (or "tranquility,") and protect our citizens from harm. When we, instead, allow individuals to arm themselves without regulation at the price of the safety of innocent victims, the good of the whole is threatened.

Thus, in the Reformed Christian approach, we link of value of individual life with the democratic respect for the individual that is the basis of our governmental system. We Presbyterians are also not a lawless people: laws are not simply forms of social control; they can be "guides to the elect," rooted in our trust in God's good purposes and helping structure the bearing of burdens of social life. The two approaches to government can clearly be seen in the public debate around guns—one nurtures fear and one safety. We advocate a government role which protects its citizens and raises the standards for responsible gun ownership, which we support with careful protections for the safety and freedom of all.

The United States Supreme Court ruled for the first time on June 26, 2008 in *District of Columbia v. Heller* that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is not a collective right for a militia, but rather that individuals have a right to possess handguns in their homes for self-defense. Since this five-to-four decision was made, it has been taken as affirmation by those who advocate guns for self-defense, even against the U.S. government. The fear of government tyranny has been clearly voiced and an "open carry" movement has led to a highly visible and sometimes intimidating presence of armed individuals at public meetings, demonstrations and even children's sporting events and worship services. At its extreme points, legal scholars Horwitz and Casey argue that this concern for individual freedoms at the expense of the public good aligns itself with a secessionist or insurrectionist philosophy."²⁴

Such thinking runs counter not only to that of the Framers but to the instruction of Reformed theology on the role of government. John Calvin believed that God worked through established governments to order society and prevent it from devolving into anarchy. He considered civil authorities, including law enforcement officials, to be ordained by God to protect the innocent public against the terror of mob rule or individual rapacity. For Calvin, the public trust of government was the structure through which biblical principles were made real, including the principle of freedom.

For those who subscribe to insurrectionist thinking, “guns are both the symbols and tools of freedom.”²⁵ Wayne LaPierre, the CEO of the National Rifle Association famously declared, “Those with the guns make the rules.” He does not speak for all members of the NRA, but he does reflect a particular view of individual freedom which is gaining a disturbing amount of momentum as we enter the second decade of the new millennium. However, the Scriptures give another perspective on freedom. Peter exhorts his friends to live with respect for human authorities and for all people: “As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Pet. 2:16-17). Freedom, in the biblical sense, is never considered for an individual apart from community, but is linked to the responsibility we have for one another in our life together. Martin Luther defined the Christian as “the most free lord of all, and the most duty bound slave of all” (The Freedom of a Christian).

These conflicting perspectives on freedom do not represent an abstract difference of theological perspective or even political world views, but a clash of commitments that has serious consequences. The National Rifle Association and other gun lobbyists have been working persistently (and successfully) to thwart any limitation on the freedom of individuals to acquire any kind of gun, at any time, and in any quantity. NRA lobbyists are ubiquitous at the United Nations, as well as in the Capital, where they encourage representatives from around the world to include a “Second Amendment provision” in their national constitutions.²⁶ The mantra is that “self-defense, via arms, is a God-given right.” It is the partial result of their efforts that not only our nation but countries around the world see large scale weapons availability for use in conflicts. These matters are addressed more fully in the General Assembly’s 2001 *Resolution on Small Arms* (Minutes, 2001, pp. 274-278).

C. *Cultural Analysis: Behind the trigger: dimensions of violence in our culture.*

The American culture of the 21st century is pervaded with violence. Our language itself reflects how thoroughly, and comfortably, we have accommodated violence as a dominant paradigm: “Stick to your guns!,” “Bite the bullet!,” and “pull the trigger,” are unconscious figures of speech, among literally hundreds of others²⁷ (See Appendix A). Through media, video games and toys our children have been fed a diet of violence so that by young adulthood we are not shocked by violent images, but sometimes numbed and sometimes stimulated by them.²⁸ Bullying sometimes leads to deadly reprisals. Despite our national identity as a peace loving people, violence, and particularly gun violence, is woven deeply into our national identity. Legal scholar Allen Rostron points to the duality in how Americans view guns:

The dual nature of guns is reflected in the very different feelings that people have about them. For many Americans, guns have overwhelmingly positive associations. To them, guns are about families and traditions, about growing up and spending time learning how to shoot and to hunt, and about each generation passing something on to the next. For many other Americans, guns have completely different connotations. For example, to a young person in an inner city, guns may be associated with only bad things, like being scared, having grandparents afraid to go outside, or knowing someone who was shot...²⁹

Some of the violence in U.S. culture is often linked to our national narrative, including the periods of settlement and slavery, or to a regional and ethnic subculture influential on the frontier.³⁰ The justly-fought wars in our nation’s story may also have become distorted into a glorification of violence as a way of resolving conflict. Some theologians maintain that we have incorporated the myth of redemptive violence into our framing of conflict.³¹ Therefore, at times our foreign policy has looked too quickly toward military solutions rather than negotiations or mediation. For too many people, gun power is not a problem, but a solution. Armed force undergirds our civil order but also permeates it, especially where that civil order is most frayed.³²

However, the myth of redemptive violence has not inoculated veterans from depression that can exacerbate or create despair years after their military service. Recent research has shown that suicide in men is more likely among older white veterans in states with higher accessibility to guns. These are predominantly not men who have had a long history of depression, problems with alcohol or suicidal attempts. Similarly, women who end their lives by gun are older, white, married women, also disproportionately veterans, who have not necessarily been on a suicide watch. The profile that emerges is that when despair reaches a critical point, an available gun too often offers a quick and final resolution to psychological pain.³³ It does not make a difference whether the

victims are in crowded cities or sparsely populated rural areas—suffering and isolation become overwhelming. In such cases, when terminal illness or economic devastation reduce life prospects, the gun represents precisely the freedom of exit.

There is a somewhat different dynamic in urban cultures, where guns are woven into the social fabric of many neighborhoods. Religious historian James Noel writes about the ways violence becomes racially coded in urban African-American settings, drawing partly on his years of church involvement in Oakland, California.³⁴

The issue of social trust and community deterioration is not a theoretical concern, though theory helps understand what the statistics underline: an enormous amount of gun violence occurs in inner cities, even though these numbers have gone down from highs in the 1980's (high point, 1993). But the predictably higher percentages of African-American and Hispanic young men involved in gun violence reflect a long-term exposure of these minority communities to physical and structural violence, patterns reinforced by limited opportunities and by the criminal justice system itself... the violence that has become such a dominant feature of the urban poor must be seen as operating consequentially and reciprocally to the violence that structures and permeates the space they are forced to inhabit. In other words, historical and contemporaneous forces and variables conspire to subject the so-called offenders to unrecognized forms of "violation" that are not punished by society because the inner city IS one of its components. Robert Johnson and Paul Leighton make the following observation in their discussion of black on black crime:

In America, at least, poverty rarely kills directly. Few people drop dead in the streets from hunger or exposure to the elements. But poverty does produce a range of physical and psychological stresses, and some reactions to these stresses are expressed in behaviors that destroy life...Members of the victim group may contribute to their own victimization through adaptations to bleak life conditions that include violence directed at self or others (e.g. suicide or homicide) as well as self-destructive lifestyles (notably drugs and alcohol).³⁵

Johnson and Leighton admit that the causal connection between the larger social structures and "social pathology" in the inner city is very hard to demonstrate. "The larger society is quite removed from the grim life circumstances and daily degradations experienced by poor blacks, and hence the average American has little real feeling for the forces that shape their lives." They point out that most of the destruction of black life occurs right within the ghetto itself and therefore—in agreement with Wacquant—they say: "these environments are...the functional equivalent to prison."³⁶

The irony here is that black and other minority communities are those most able to argue historically that they might need weapons to protect themselves from tyranny from the majority population. This study cannot provide a full analysis of the lure of violence in relation to such phenomena as powerlessness or gang life. The public health approach, particularly developed by the Johns Hopkins University gun violence program, addresses cultural factors but is also highly practical in the targeted policies it recommends to reduce the armed conflict in urban areas, many of which are reflected in the recommendations of this report.³⁷

There are signs of hope in urban communities, areas where public health and law enforcement approaches have joined in proactive interventions that have decreased gang violence and increased trust between black communities and largely white police forces. An article on the C.I.R.V. (Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence) describes the approach of David Kennedy: "Ceasefire, as Kennedy's program is sometimes known, begins with the fact, commonly recognized by criminologists, that a small number of hardened criminals commit hugely disproportionate numbers of serious violent crimes. Often, much of the violence is caused by gang dynamics: score settling, vendettas, and turf issues...Arresting the shooters doesn't generally stop the killing; nor does threatening them with long prison sentences. But one thing does work, Kennedy had discovered: telling them to stop."³⁸ By using the public health approach to focus on social networks (or transmission), and adding to the criminal justice skills of the police alternative modes of deterrence (observation and inoculation), gang members would be gathered in a social space and given a forthright moral appeal, often by ex-gang members and church and community leaders. Survivors of shootings would sometimes show their wounds and discuss their hardships at these "call outs." The results: "homicides in Cincinnati in 2007 were down 24 percent from 2006. The trend continued into 2008—by April, there had been a 50 percent reduction in gang-related homicides."³⁹

Racial meanings run deep in American society. The election of the first African American president at the crest of the economic recession tapped into fears among many. At a later point, we note the hope that was embodied in the change in administrations, but realism prompts us to consider the reaction that has also appeared

and the role guns play in it. Soon after the election, gun and ammunition sales rose, indicating a rise in fear and a decline in trust in government and in neighbor. Threatening public display of weapons became part of rallies during the summer of 2009, prompting memories of the assassinations in U.S. history. Though the causes for these partly-populist displays of anger are still being debated, and free speech rights are always deserving of respect, these events did not celebrate the social trust that is the glue of a civil society.⁴⁰ With the erosion of trust comes the deterioration of healthy social interaction; eventually civil society can be undermined. The proposal to reverse this defensive pattern is precisely an effort to build solidarity and bridge the racial and economic divides in our society.

D. Toward a strategy that counts the costs.

While Presbyterians and other communities of faith were issuing statements against gun violence over the past twenty years, however, the violence continued at consistent rates, resulting in over 620,000 Americans killed and 1.4 million injured by guns during this period.⁴¹ It is time, therefore, for the church to pay attention not just to the faithfulness of our spoken word, but the effectiveness of our action in stopping the preventable deaths of so many of our sons and daughters, parents and siblings, friends and neighbors. It is time to enact God's "No." It is time to recover a constructive moral outrage of the prophets and the moral courage of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before. It is time to repent of our tolerance of that which is unacceptable.

If the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), along with our ecumenical partners in peacemaking, are to be effective in facilitating social change, which is deeply grounded in our faith, we need to be smart and intentional about how to generate that change. The church's primary calling is to help prepare people for the possibility of a real spiritual awakening which can instigate a social movement. A social movement is broad based in its organization, drawing much of its energy from the grassroots, rather than from a small group of leaders. It seeks to change not just laws, but the cultural norms and ways of thinking about a social problem, be it drunk driving, tobacco usage or gun violence.

Social scientists have long studied the phenomena of social movements, not only those that are effective in bringing about change, but also those that never gain traction or simply dissipate, despite having a compelling cause. Such has been the case with gun policy. Despite waves of outrage over assassinations and the strength of the Million Mom March, there has not been a sustained, effective, grassroots movement in this country to control access to firearms.⁴² A relatively small number of gun control advocates have worked for years, with limited resources, within a limited sphere of legislative change, primarily focused on federal policy. They have been faithful in their efforts but not as effective in developing and sustaining a movement needed for change that is deep, wide and lasting.

Scholars of social movements have shown that there have to be a number of coexisting conditions for the mobilization of people seeking change to take place. Each condition is vital to an effective social movement, but taken individually cannot spark and sustain an effective movement. First, having a clear cause or grievance is necessary for change to be desired, but will not spark an awakening. Like the proverbial frog in a kettle, we can adapt ourselves to rising levels of suffering and injustice. This is abundantly clear in our tolerance of gun violence. Second, moral arguments, prophetic sermons and hard data about a social problem may fuel an awakening, but in and of themselves do not create a social movement, much to our disappointment. Third, some expect "sparkling events" (or "shifts in political opportunities") to create tipping points, and unleash pent up frustration into a coherent movement for change. But such large media events have exploded onto our national radar screen . . . only to fade without provoking or sustaining a social movement for change. Fourth, a focus on resources—both human and capital—has shown that they are an essential component for any successful social movement. But in isolation, an abundance of funding, connections or even leadership does not mobilize people for social change. Even Sarah Brady, with her credibility and connections, has not built a grassroots movement. Social theorist Doug McAdam of Stanford University has identified a fifth critical condition which needs to be present in combination with all four of the other variables in order for an effective social movement to take place: a sense of viability⁴³. This is the belief that, in fact, our actions can bring real change which sustains movements for social change. What we do matters, both in the immediate and in the transcendent understandings of time. This is what people of faith call hope.

These five variables are not mutually exclusive. For example, we cannot frame an issue in moral or theological terms independent of there being a problem to begin with. But when all five are aligned, “perfect storm” conditions exist which can spark and sustain an effective social movement:

- a critical understanding of the problem, or high sense of grievance
- a living connection to the commitments from our tradition for moral action, or a strong moral imperative
- an informed perspective on the shifts in political, cultural and social realities which open up new opportunities for collective action
- an appreciation of the abundance of resources we bring to our effort
- a sense of hope, that by pursuing our vocation and in the power of the Holy Spirit, change is indeed possible.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness policy and its gun violence study team believe that the time is right for transformation in this society’s treatment of gun violence—in part because of the Supreme Court’s assurance that personal ownership of guns is secure for the foreseeable future. We make no determination here on Second Amendment interpretation. But in a time when social costs of all kinds are being reassessed, we call on the whole church to look realistically at our context, and to commit itself to study and action to stop the unnecessary killing of so many of God’s dear children. We now suggest how the five elements of analysis above may guide us today.

1. *The Grievance of Gun Violence.*

a. *The Loss of Human Life.*

The numbers are so overwhelming as to be numbing. Consider: every day in the U.S. 85 people die from guns and 191 are injured.⁴⁴ Over the course of a typical year, about 30,000 will be killed through gun-related murder, suicide, accident or police intervention. Approximately 70,000 will survive gun injuries, only to have their lives and those of their families forever changed. Most tragically, almost 21,000 of the victims are American children and teens (ages 0-19). Over 3,000 kids killed—that’s 9 children a day--and 2,225 of these children were murdered. Almost 800 children pick up guns and end their own young lives each year. All told, every year is 9/11 for our children. Statistics can make our eyes glaze over, but understanding the pain involved for each of these families can only lead us, to grieve like Rachel,

A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.⁴⁵

b. *The Economic Burden.*

It is, of course, impossible to calculate the worth of a human life, for each one is of inestimable value to God. But we are, as a human community, related to one another as we participate in the oikoumene of the Creator. We particularly experience our interdependence through the economy. Clearly, when one hurts, all are impacted. Ten years ago Jens Ludwig and Philip J. Cook tried to calculate the financial burden created by gun violence and shouldered by the American taxpayer. Taking into consideration the health care costs of its victims, the additional security costs of prevention and the judicial and penal costs of processing its perpetrators, they estimated that the already-strapped American economy takes on an additional \$100 billion per year.⁴⁶

c. *The Spiritual Malaise.*

Even if we are not physically affected by gun violence, the preventable deaths and injuries of so many impacts us all in ways other than economic. Our commonwealth is diminished when lives are unnecessarily cut short, their contribution to the human community never known, their children not born. But most fundamentally, the cost has been spiritual: we have come to accept what is unacceptable to the Creator. We, like Rachel, should be inconsolable, yet we find ourselves numbed and passively tolerating higher levels of violence in our communities, in our television and movies, video games, and in our streets. Where is our grief at the loss of life and the loss of conscience? How have we gotten to this point of passive acceptance of gun violence?

Ours must not be a grief that immobilizes us or is expressed only in sympathy to victims. Ours must be, instead, a godly grief that calls us to transformation. As Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, “I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” (2 Cor. 7:9-10)

d. The intersection of widespread gun ownership and fear in the culture.

With the constant depictions of violence, a narrative justifying conflict resolution through force, and powerful guns easily available, a dangerous cocktail is being stirred. Add to that the national and international data showing a high correlation between the percentage of households with firearms and the rate of gun-related homicide, suicide and accident.⁴⁷ That is to say, whether comparing communities, states, or countries, where there are more guns, there is more gun violence. Consider:

- With almost half of American households legally owning guns there are about eleven gun deaths per 100,000 population. In England very few households are armed (<5 percent). In 2006 there were 159 gun deaths there, or .31 per 100,000. Japan prohibits handguns and long guns are highly regulated. There were 96 gun deaths in 2006 or .08 per 100,000.
- More than half of gun deaths are suicide.⁴⁸ Studies of suicide survivors show that 70 percent contemplated killing themselves for less than an hour. While there was no difference in the rate of non-gun related suicides in states with high or low rates of gun ownership, the picture changed drastically when looking at suicides by gun—there were almost four times the number of successful suicides by gun in those states with higher rates of gun ownership.⁴⁹ If guns are accessible, they will be used in moments of depression.
- The African American community is the hardest hit by gun violence, as we have suggested earlier. The deterioration of social trust and the consolidation of poverty in inner city neighborhoods has spawned a culture of violence in which guns have become the “symbols and tools” not so much of freedom as survival. The result: the firearm death rate for African Americans is twice what it is for white Americans. Although African American males only make up 6 percent of the population, they account for 47 percent of gun homicides. Young African American men (aged 15-34) are more likely to die by bullet than disease, accident or suicide. This is not true for any other demographic group.⁵⁰ Tragically, most of these homicides are the result of black-on-black violence, an extreme expression of what Cornel West has labeled a culture of nihilism.⁵¹
- U.S. guns have been documented to fuel the heightened levels of gun violence in Northern Mexico related to the drug trade. Limited enforcement of existing laws, use of “straw buyers” without criminal records, and other forms of cross-border trafficking have all contributed to a widespread availability of guns.⁵² On August 5, 2009, The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received a letter from Mexico:

The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico is worried due to the high percentage of violence that we are living within our country today. Kidnapping and murders are everywhere, especially in cities such as Tijuana, Monterrey, Juarez, Morelia, Acapulco, just to mention those with the highest percentage of insecurity. This is why we come to you, brothers and sisters in Christ, so that you may help us . . . in transmitting our concerns to those in charge of selling guns to Mexican people . . . (which kill) in many cases . . . innocent people. So, as leaders of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, we have come to the conclusion that we have to raise our voices against violence; and together with you all, we might share the same feeling, so that our presidents may work hard to make stability a reality in our countries.⁵³

- Despite some restrictive legislation in the 1990s which prohibited those with prior history of domestic violence to get a gun, their accessibility continues to turn family fights into deadly confrontations. A recent study showed that having one or more guns in the home made a woman 7.2 times more likely to be the victim of gun homicide.⁵⁴

Clearly, if there is a gun easily within reach in one's pocket (or cupboard, garage or glove compartment) a moment of rage or despair can become tragic. Ironically, one of the primary arguments for gun ownership is self protection. But a recent study from the University of Pennsylvania confirms the correlation between gun ownership and becoming a victim of gun violence. The study found that those with guns were 4.5 times more likely to be shot in an assault than those not possessing a gun.⁵⁵ If guns did in fact protect us from violence, the U.S. would be the safest country on earth. Instead, we are the most at-risk for gun violence among developed countries. And the costs are most visible in our urban hospital emergency rooms, backlogged courtrooms, and still growing prison population.⁵⁶

The international dimension of our context is not only in globally popular Internet games or the specific gun fight the army of Mexico is having with the drug cartels whose arms are more powerful than those of the army. Dependence on force has not only been a dominant paradigm in foreign policy, it is also reflected in lucrative exports. Currently, the United States is the #1 supplier of small arms to the developing world; many of these guns are sold illegally.⁵⁷ One of the consequences of the "war on terror" has been a sense of insecurity that fosters violence and ironically spreads it across borders. This fear of terror is certainly not the reign of shalom which God wills for our beloved human community.

2. *The Gospel Imperative.*

Jesus went further in naming the idols that become the foundation of an unredeemed society. He reprimanded Peter for first grabbing a weapon in his defense. "Those who live by the sword will die by it," Jesus clearly put it. If weapons become the basis of your social relations, they will kill you. If preserving your guns has become more important than the safety of thousands of other people, then weapons have become your idol, in diametric opposition to the vision of a city which is a joy, where children and old people live out their years, and the weeping of grief-stricken mothers is no longer heard.

It is not enough to have a social critique, however. The first letter of John challenges us "not (to) love in word or speech but in deed and in truth."⁵⁸ We must struggle with how to implement the vision, a challenge which was taken up by John Calvin as well. At the very core of his theology was an understanding that the intentions of God should be implemented on earth.

Let us be clear: this is not a call to arms but to community. There is a direct connection, as we have seen, between God's intentions, the prophets' visions, Jesus' teaching, and the implications for our own actions. If God commands that we not kill and that we work for a future when former enemies work together as friends, then the injunction extends beyond our own individual choices, as important as they are. We are compelled to work for policies, or ways of ordering society, which "defend," "promote tranquility," "ward off harm," and remove harm. How we love the stranger is not through our good feelings or individual acts of charity but through advocating for policies which will extend protection to the greatest number of people.

Confronting the crisis of gun violence in the U.S. and indeed around the world, we are called to advocate policies—and to act upon them—which will defend and protect the public, not only from external threats, but too often from itself. The church is not as disturbed with the legitimate possession and use of hunting rifles, shotguns and sport shooting guns, but we are categorically opposed to the poor regulation and easy flow of guns which are manufactured to efficiently kill human beings. We must exert special efforts to stop unlicensed sellers peddling guns at our country's thousands of gun shows with "no questions asked," and to stop unscrupulous licensed

dealers from selling to straw purchasers who then turn guns over to traffickers. Too often, this easy access results in harm to self or others which could have been prevented.

3. *If not now, when? (A shift in political and social opportunity)*

Critical to any effective movement for social change is the capacity to read the signs of the times . . . not only to be able to recognize and name a crisis, but to identify those shifts in opportunity which introduce brief windows of time in which change becomes possible.

Clearly as we conclude the first decade of the 21st century we are in such a time. On January 20, 2009 the nation celebrated the inauguration of Barack Obama, who was swept into office on a wave of hope for change. The stunning political moment expressed the frustrations of a public who would not accept the trends of war, violence and economic instability as deterministic trajectories. While unclear of the policy implications, there was a consensus that change was needed. Concurrent with the recession, Americans were also experiencing the need to make changes in their personal lives and family budgets. The sea was changing.

Paradigm shifts occur in different ways besides political and economic changes. There was also a sense of uncertainty about the future that was stirred up by the political transition. Many whose jobs and economic stability was fragile experienced a new wave of fear. Perhaps related to this, a number of gun-related tragedies occurred in 2009—the murder of a doctor who had performed abortions while he was at Sunday worship, the killing of an abortion protester, the massacre of dedicated staff people at a community center for new immigrants, the murder of three police officers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and four in Oakland, California, and the killings of women at a fitness center, among them. Tragedies such as these become a moment when we can publicly lament and bitterly weep like Rachel, but also cry out “No more!” If guns were less accessible and more carefully monitored with licensing and waiting periods, if policies for carefully following disturbed and threatening individuals were in place and enforced, then these lives might have been spared. But the first step is to pay careful attention to what is happening—to shifts in social opportunities which make change possible—and to make sure that we do not become inured to the tragic and preventable loss of life. To honor the silenced voices we must pay attention, speak out and give witness to God’s “No” to gun violence.

4. *Resources available.*

Significant social change is possible only when there are resources available to support movements that address policies, structures and cultural values. Financial resources are of course important to make advocacy efforts possible. Americans still give more to their communities of faith than to any other charity or cause. Certainly the stewardship of our treasure will need to reflect the commitments of our hearts in supporting efforts to prevent gun violence.

But capital comes in many other forms as well—social, cultural and spiritual. Prayer and worship cannot be undervalued as the most powerful resource of the church. In worship we can give voice to the suffering caused by gun violence and join in prayer to align our hearts with God’s intentions through the Holy Spirit. The church also brings many kinds of “social capital” to the table. We are part of a connectional system and a larger ecumenical community representing millions of people. We have the capacity to train leaders and educate ourselves on the issues. We have spaces for meetings and can have credibility as moral leaders.

An underutilized resource is public opinion. Currently three out of four Americans believe that gun laws should be “stricter, making it harder for people to purchase guns.”⁵⁹ Looking more closely at the respondents, there is a large consensus across Protestant, Catholic and Jewish perspectives. Those who attend worship weekly, monthly or yearly do not differ significantly in their perspectives. Even political ideology does not make that much of a difference: about 71 percent of self-defined political conservatives favor stricter laws compared to 79 percent of those who consider themselves liberals. Over the past thirty years, in fact, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of Americans who want more regulation of guns⁶⁰:

- Those supporting police permits to carry guns increased from 70 percent–79 percent.
- 85 percent now support limiting sales of high power/50 caliber rifles.
- 82 percent want to limit sales of semi-automatic assault weapons.
- 80 percent now support mandatory criminal background checks for private gun sales.

This common sense is a resource that needs to find its collective voice. In this we agree with Allen Rostron’s paper, “Cease Fire: A ‘Win-Win’ Strategy on Gun Policy for the Obama Administration” with its sense of practical possibility and claim that despite the shrill voices, there is a massive desire in our culture to make some progress again.⁶¹

5. *A sense of viability in change: the Christian hope.*

Even with a compelling grievance, strong moral imperative, shift in political opportunities, and an abundance of resources, social change cannot take place without the most important ingredient—a sense of viability that change is, indeed, possible. For Reformed Christians we claim the hope that God is active in the world and that there is hope in this world, as well as the next, that God’s glory can be manifest. As sinful as humans are, individually and collectively, the Good News is that God does not give up on us. Ever. Transformation is possible and God’s “Yes” in Jesus Christ confirms for us every day that we are worth the effort.

As people of faith, we need to embrace and celebrate this hope, which continues to be incarnated in history:

- Who would have imagined that a Baptist preacher and determined people of faith could have successfully challenged the unjust laws and practices of segregation?
- When the world expected a bloody resolution to the struggle against the iron fist of apartheid in South Africa, who knew that local and global resistance movements could bring about a peaceful transition to a democratic, racially inclusive society?
- Who would have predicted that a country addicted to cigarettes and the power of the Big Tobacco could be transformed?
- Who would have imagined that the mobilized grief of mothers who had lost their children to drunk drivers could change cultural values, social practices and legal accountability around drunk driving?
- Despite the protestations from the ubiquitous gun lobby, we know that increased regulation of guns does work. The six states with the lowest per capita rates of gun death (HI, RI, MA, CT, NY, NJ) are all considered to have strong gun laws.

God’s work in the world through people of faith needs to be lifted up. We must repent of our lack of faith, which laments that nothing can change. Our hope must be nurtured, informed and celebrated with a resolve in our faith communities to resist those who cry, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace.” (Jer. 6:14) Let us study and act to heed God’s call to prevent gun violence.

E. *The Call to Action.*

God has provided us with the elements to be agents of change in the world. The change needs to be comprehensive: we need to address the idolatry of guns, the violence which permeates our culture, our obsessions

with personal rights over public responsibility, the practices of widespread and indiscriminate sale of military style weapons, as well as the legislation necessary to regulate the accessibility and sale of military weapons disguised as “sporting guns”. We must keep our “eyes on the prize,” of preventing gun violence and the unnecessary deaths and injuries which result. Enough blood has been spilled. We affirm that through good organizational effort, animated by the passion for justice which comes to the people of God through the Holy Spirit, gun violence can be dramatically reduced.

May our Church re-dedicate itself to this crucial task.

Note: The Gun Violence Study Group met twice in addition to a September 2008 conference that initially brought together three of the group members and staff. The team was chaired by Bryan Miller, Director of Cease-Fire, NJ, formerly in international sales; James Atwood, a retired pastor and former mission co-worker in Japan; Catherine Snyder, a campus minister at Virginia Tech; Deborah Brincivalli, Executive Presbyter, West Jersey Presbytery, formerly a pastor and police officer; Vernon Carroll, National Parks administrator and former rancher; James Noel, Professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary; and John Knapp, University Professor of ethics at Samford University who was also liaison member from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). Julio Medina, also appointed, was unable to serve. Professor Katie Day, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, served as consultant writer, with Christian Iosso, ACSWP Coordinator, serving as staff. The report’s title comes from the title of the September 2008 conference co-sponsored by ACSWP, the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, and the Stony Point Conference Center which hosted the event. The team’s meetings in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, including meetings with experts in the field with different views on strategy and message.

Endnotes:

¹ <http://www.bradycampaign.org/facts/gunviolence/GVsuicide>

² See “Taking a Stand: Reducing Gun Violence in Our Communities, a report from the International Association of Chiefs of Police 2007 Great Lakes Summit on Gun Violence: p. 6.
<http://www.theiacp.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=%2Fs0LiOkJK5Q%3D&tabid=87>

³ Data from the past year is incomplete, and yet cases of family and small group shootings are regularly reported.

⁴ Data from the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey organization:
<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/files/sas/publications/yearb2007.html>

⁵ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Philadelphia-and-surrounding-areas/Heeding-Gods-Call-Taking-Action-to-End-Gun-Violence/236075819633>

⁶ The Million Mom March linked with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence in 2001:
<http://www.bradycampaign.org/chapters/>

⁷ www.press.umich.edu/pdf/0472115103-ch1.pdf: Julie Samia Mair, Stephen Teret, & Shannon Frattaroli, A Public Health Perspective on Gun Violence Prevention, P. 50. The authors particularly recommend low-cost, loaded chamber indicators and magazine safeties to let owners know if a bullet remains in the gun chamber even if a magazine of bullets is removed. “Owner-recognition” technologies are also being developed that personalize guns and prevent their use when stolen or in the hands of a child; this goes beyond gun locks and locking up guns.

⁸ Ibid, p. 52.

⁹ Beyond the Centers for Disease Control, which have added more data collection on the causes of death to their statistics on morbidity and mortality (with funding and research limitations enforced by Congress), one of the chief public proponents of the public health approach is the Johns Hopkins University’s Bloomberg School of Public Health, re-named and supported strongly by the Mayor of New York in his private capacity.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 54-5, 61.

¹¹ Allen Rostron, "Cease Fire: A "Win-Win" Strategy on Gun Policy for the Obama Administration," *Harvard Law & Policy Review*, Vol. 3, pp. 347-367, notably pp. 350 and 355, which summarize and cite poll data and also indicate that in the 2008 election "gun policy was well down on the list of issues that mattered most to voters," a positive development in his view. See also "Public Attitudes toward the Regulation of Firearms," by Tom Smith, cited later in resolution.

¹² Adam Liptak, "Justices Lean Toward Extending Gun Rights," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2010, pp. 1 and 18. The case, *McDonald v. Chicago*, No. 08-1521, has to do with the scope of the Second Amendment to govern not simply the federal government itself (and the District of Columbia) but all state regulation, based on the court majority's opinion that gun rights are individual and not only related to "militias" or common defense.

¹³ Siebel, Brian J., and Allen K. Rostron, *No Gun Left Behind: The Gun Lobby's Campaign to Push Guns Into Colleges and Schools*, Washington, DC: May 2007.

¹⁴ Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. *Incidents of Assault Weapon Violence Reported Since Ban Expired*. Washington, DC, updated regularly, see .pdf for most recent incident.

¹⁵ May 2005, Vol 95, No. 5 | *American Journal of Public Health* 830-832
2005 [American Public Health Association](#)

¹⁶ Hemenway, David and Deborah Azrael., "The Relative Frequency of Offensive and Defensive Gun Uses: Results From a National Survey," *Violence and Victims*, 15(3) (2000): 257-272.

¹⁷ E.J. Dionne, Jr. "Beyond the NRA's Absolutism," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2009. Dionne comments on a poll conducted by Frank Luntz for the anti-gun violence lobby, *Mayors Against Illegal Guns*, which surveyed 832 gun owners, including 401 NRA members. 86 percent of the group agreed with the statement: We can do more to stop criminals from getting guns while also protecting the rights of citizens to freely own them." Luntz himself says, "I support the NRA", but he doesn't agree with the NRA's "slippery slope argument" which declares that any new gun law is but the first step for confiscation. "When the choice is between national security and terrorism versus no limits on owning guns," Luntz says, "I'm on the side of national security and fighting terrorism."

¹⁸ Kristin A. Goss, in *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*, Princeton, 2006, documents NRA battles over gun-related initiatives and funding of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (now, and Explosives: BATFE) and the Centers for Disease Control (pp. 80-89) and effective political framing of gun "control" issues (pp. 151-64).

¹⁹ General Assemblies: 108th, PCUS, 1968; 184th, UPCUSA 1972; 116th, PCUS 1976; 193rd, UPCUSA, 1981; 201st, 1989; 197th, 1985; 202nd, 1990; 213th, 2001. In the 1989-90 organized discussion was held with pro-gun groups as part of the church policy process.

²⁰ *Hope, Respect, Reconciliation: A Christian Response to Gun Violence* by Brian Arnold (1991) and updated by The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (1996).

²¹ *Resolution on Gun Violence*, 1990: 40.121b

²² Isaiah 65:18-20

²³ Institutes, Book II, Chapter VIII, Number 39

²⁴ *Guns, Democracy and the Insurrectionist Idea*, Josh Horwitz and Casey Anderson (University of Michigan Press, 2009), p.6.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.2.

²⁶ <http://www.nraila.org/Legislation/Federal/Read.aspx?id=5224>. This National Rifle Association-Institute for Legislative Action on-line newsletter describes the years they have been working to counter UN efforts.

²⁷ James Atwood, Presbyterian minister and former mission co-worker in Japan, has assembled a disturbing yet amusing collection of gun or violence-related phrases. See www.pcusa.org/acswp and look for gun violence resources.

- ²⁸ <http://www.miller-mccune.com/culture-society/this-is-your-brain-on-violence-4779/> Tom Jacobs, "This is your brain on violence," Miller-McCune magazine on-line, January 4, 2008: "A team at Columbia's Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging Research Center found that on-screen violence stimulates specific responses in the human brain— activity that does not occur in reaction to other types of imagery. The study suggests that repeated exposure to violent images heightens our readiness to take action even as it suppresses the region of the brain that modulates aggression." The director of this study, Joy Hirsch, does not argue causal linkages between exposure to imagery and specific acts of violence, but use of the new brain-scanning technology has changed a debate that has been going on for 50 years and has involved a range of behavior-affecting drugs. It is beyond the scope of this resolution to describe all elements in the culture related to violence. One of ACSWP's commenters, William Laws, points to the film by Michael Moore, *Bowling for Columbine*, which parodies the culture but contains two places of reconciliation and genuine grief.
- ²⁹ Allen Rostron, op. cit., p. 357.
- ³⁰ <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199211/southern-discomfort> Richard Nisbett, Southern Discomfort, Psychology Today, Nov. 1, 1992. "In scrutinizing national opinion surveys, Nisbett found that white male Southerners don't endorse violence in general--but in three specific ways: for protection, in response to insults, and in the socialization of children. Asked whether a man has the right to kill to defend his home, 36 percent of Southerners say yes, versus 18 percent of Northerners." *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* by Richard E. Nisbett, Dov Cohen Softcover, Perseus Books, ISBN 0813319935. This matter of honor exceeds, in their view, settler, slavery, and poverty influences and also influences higher resort to violence in rural areas, legacies of Scotch-Irish shepherding sub-cultures. A similar argument is made in James H. Webb's *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (2004)
- ³¹ http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/content/cpt/article_060823wink.shtml In this sermon, Biblical scholar Walter Wink, author of a major trilogy examining the language of "the powers" in the Bible, summarizes and applies "the myth of redemptive violence" to aspects of U.S. culture: "In short, the Myth of Redemptive Violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo."
- ³² <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/history/healthlegacies.cfm> This symposium at the University of Alberta illustrates the range of influences attributed to military hierarchy, cohesion, training, experience, and institutional requirements on societies. Cultural variables such as the role of the military in society and the impacts of wars are as hard to quantify as they are to deny.
- ³³ Kaplan, McFarland, Huguet, *Characteristics of adult male and female firearm suicide decedents: findings from the National Violent Death Reporting System*, *Injury Prevention* 2009 (15:5) 322-327.
- ³⁴ James K. Noel, *Discussion of the Macrostructure of Black on Black Inner-City Violence*, January 2008 (before a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy)
- ³⁵ <http://www.paulsjusticepage.com/reality-of-justice/blackgenocide.htm> This article appeared the *Journal of African Men*, v 1 #2, Fall 1995. © 1995 Robert Johnson and Paul Leighton.
- ³⁶ Ibid., Noel's discussion of structural factors did not deny personal responsibility but situated it within the bleak opportunities of the ghetto and the "prison industrial complex;" he also cited, Loic Wacquant, *From Slavery to Mass Incarceration*: <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2367>.
- ³⁷ Webster, Vernick, Teret, *How Cities Can Combat Illegal Guns and Gun Violence*, Center for Gun Policy and Research, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2006). http://www.jhsph.edu/bin/q/z/How_Cities_Can_Combat_Illegal_Guns.pdf
- ³⁸ John Seabrook, "Don't Shoot: A Radical Approach to the Problem of Gang Violence," *The New Yorker*, June 22, 2009, p.33.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 38. See David Kennedy, *Deterrence and Crime Prevention* (2008).
- ⁴⁰ See *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2000.
- ⁴¹ Based on statistics and projections from the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁴² See *Disarmed: The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*, Kristin A. Goss (Princeton University Press, 2006)

⁴³ *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Doug McAdam (University of Chicago Press, 1999) 2nd edition; see also *Readings on Social Movements: Origins, Dynamics and Outcomes* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁴ Brady Campaign, www.bradiycampaign.org/studies/view/92/

⁴⁵ Jeremiah 31:15

⁴⁶ Ludwig, Jens & Philip J Cook, *Gun Violence: the real costs*. Oxford University Press, 2000

⁴⁷ see *Global Firearm Deaths* (Toronto: Small Arms/Firearms Education and Research Network, 2005); United Nations *Eighth International Crime Victims Survey, 2000* and Gun Control Network (www.gun-control-network.org)

⁴⁸ It should be noted that suicide is not always a solitary act. Often domestic violence results in “murder-suicides,” and usually the perpetrators of massacres end up taking their own lives. In fact, suicide is often their driving emotion—they want to take others with them perhaps to be noticed or to satisfy their personal rage. The effects of bullying and personal isolation are additional factors.

⁴⁹ “Guns and Suicide in the United States,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 9/4/08

⁵⁰ Statistics from 2004, Brady Campaign

⁵¹ *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), “Nihilism is to be understood here . . . (as) the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world.” (p.14)

⁵² <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2009/0408/p06s19-woam.html>. Patrik Jonsson and Sarah Miller Liana, “Are Mexican drug traffickers armed with U.S. guns?” *Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2009. “At the center of the debate are claims that most of the weapons Mexican drug traffickers employ—creating sensational headlines as cartels battle the Mexican military—come from U.S. sources. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) says more than 90 percent of the guns seized in Mexico that can be traced, originated in the U.S. In 2008, the Mexican government sent the ATF 11,000 arms for tracing. According to an ATF spokesman, all were successfully traced (testimony of March 24, 2008, by Agent William Newell) . . . Guns sold illegally in Mexico reportedly are bought legally in US gun stores along the border by so-called “straw purchasers,” such as those employed by (trafficker named) Hernandez in San Antonio.”

⁵³ Copy of August 5, 2009 letter available on ACSWP website, gun violence resources section.

⁵⁴ See Violence Policy Center, http://www.vpc.org/fact_sht/domviofs.htm

⁵⁵ *American Journal of Public Health*, November 2009.

⁵⁶ Associated Press, U.S. Prison Population Rises Despite a Drop in 20 States, *The New York Times*, December 9, 2009, p. A22.

⁵⁷ A most sustained treatment of this, including a lengthy assessment of the Mexican situation, is in “Guns: The Small Arms Trade in the Americas, NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America) *Report on the Americas*, 41:2, March/April 2008. Other data can be found at the New America Foundation’s Arms and Security Initiative: www.asi.newamerica.net/home

⁵⁸ 1 John 3:18

⁵⁹ General Social Survey, 2006

⁶⁰ “Public Attitudes towards the Regulation of Firearms,” Tom W. Smith, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 2007.

⁶¹ Allen Rostron, op. cit. at endnote 10 above.

Appendix A

Guns and Violence in Our Language

Compiled by Jim Atwood

Big shot	gang bang
shot down	gat (gang slang for a gun)
gun shy	shoot the works
the smoking gun	shoot up the joint
lock, stock, and barrel	went off like a gun
like shooting fish (monkeys) in a barrel	who is our target audience?
we reached a stand off	He is packin heat
trigger an idea	a bang of a good time
trigger happy	on target
brushed his teeth with gunpowder	right on target
he shot his mouth off	off target
don't jump the gun	bullseye
a shotgun wedding	my aim was off
he's a trouble shooter	Forewarned is forearmed
she blew me away	it's a long shot
go off half-cocked	shooting the bull
she's a pistol	it's just a warning shot
that's a notch in the old gun belt	a shot over his bow
stick to your guns	he grabbed the wrong end of the barrel
I'll be a son of a gun	pulling the trigger
Take true aim	he shoots from the hip
sure shot	he's a straight shooter
go off with a bang	he took a shot to the head(Boxing)
I dodged a bullet	Keep firing (Basketball-hockey)
the Senator is under fire	Rodriguez is their big gun
I hope he won't go postal (re: fired employees)	there goes the whole shooting match
She went ballistic	faster than a speeding bullet
shoot to the top	just take a shot in the dark
a scatter shot approach	What weapons are at our disposal?
Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition	high caliber, low caliber people
shoot for the moon	pop a cap
Have gun will travel	bite the bullet
Supershot	The world ends not with a bang but with a whimper
Hot shot	pistol whipped
Going great guns	Who's riding shotgun?
on a hit list	he blew his brains out
Sharpshooter	he blew it to smithereens
I'll give it my best shot	he jumped the gun
He's just shooting blanks	the third bullet on the page(a list of items)
he's shell shocked	he's got an arm like a cannon (baseball, football)
Shoot me for a billy goat	he shot through the line (football)
shot to hell	she's got an explosive personality
Where is your piece? (gun)	pull out the big guns
You call the shots	

shot down an argument
shoot holes in one's approach
Be loaded for bear
Stick to your guns
He is grace under fire
He got flack from the citizens
I've got a question. O.K. Shoot
I've got a question. O.K. Fire away
Someone's gunning for me.
What are we aiming at?
What are we shooting for?
He's shooting blanks
We were outgunned.
You've given me some ammunition for my talk
Getting shot at from every direction
He's a hired gun
He shot his mouth off
We killed them 42-0
Is that a trigger for you? (Used in counseling)
Nice kill, Mary! (Volleyball)
Shoot me an e mail
Double barreled approach
Looking down the barrel of a gun
Blast off
She's a blast
Torpedo an idea
I bombed out (failed)
We oughta nuke 'em.
Give me some cover
He was bombarded by questions
Now, this is the "killer"
Where are the land mines?
Let's get fired up.
Aiming to kill
You do that & I'll kill you
Fire at will
Fire when ready
Got a rocket in my pocket
Draw a bead on you
They've got you in the crosshairs
Sounds like a booby trap
It's a straight shot into the city
Duck and cover
It will backfire on us
We'll have a shootout
Got him in our sights
We'll have three shots to the end zone
Reporters asked rapid-fire questions
It's not a magic bullet, but it will help
Where's the silver bullet?

Shotgun formation (football)
He's (quarterback) in the gun
She knocked 'em dead
What's the plan of attack?
It was a bang-bang play at first base
Don't shoot the messenger
The guy needs killin'
They took pot shots at the speech.
It's a shotgun approach, not a rifle.
He went to a gun fight with a knife.
More bang for your buck
Young guns (new leaders)
Guns (for biceps)

