

A RESOLUTION CALLING FOR MEASURES TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE IN PENNSYLVANIA

WHEREAS: As Christians, we are called to be peacemakers. God has commanded, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). The Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians (13:11) calls us to “live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.” The Deuteronomist shares God’s message to the people of Israel: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him...” (Deut. 30:19-20a). As Christians, our responsibility can be summed up in a statement from the ELCA Conference of Bishops: “In proclaiming God’s law, we declare that all people are accountable before God and the community to honor and respect the life God has given.”¹ Christians are called to recommit ourselves to the work of peacemaking; and

WHEREAS: Responding to Herod’s ordering of the slaughter of the innocents, the evangelist Matthew declared, “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more” (2:18). The violence continues today, amplified by not just the presence, but the unprecedented number of guns in our society. According to a statement from the National Council of Churches, “It is difficult to imagine that the One whose own Passion models the redemptive power of non-violence would look favorably on the violence of contemporary U.S. society. Present-day violence is made far worse than it otherwise would be by the prevalence of weapons on our streets. This (idealistic) stream of the Christian tradition insists that it is idolatry to trust in guns to make us secure, since that usually leads to mutual escalation while distracting us from the One whose love alone gives us security”²; and

WHEREAS: “Public mass shootings account for a tiny fraction of the country’s gun deaths, but they are uniquely terrifying because they occur without warning in the most mundane places. Most of the victims are chosen not for what they have done but simply for where they happen to be”³; and

WHEREAS: “Suicide is a public health crisis in the United States, and firearms play a large role. An average of 20,000 people die by firearm suicide each year – over 50 every single day. These firearm suicide deaths constitute 3 of every 5 US firearm deaths, and half of all US suicide deaths.(1) Firearms are among the most lethal suicide attempt methods, with approximately 9 out of 10 firearm suicide attempts resulting in death.”⁴ Also, “In 2016, 1,555 people died from gun violence in Pennsylvania. 63% of all gun deaths in Pennsylvania were suicides, and 35% were homicides. Pennsylvania had the 25th highest firearm homicide rate and the 36th highest firearm suicide rate”⁵; and

WHEREAS: Gun violence in Pennsylvania is an urgent public health issue that demands attention from the state’s leadership; and

¹ <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/7915>

² <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/ncc-reaffirms-its-2010-resolution-on-gun-violence/>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/mass-shootings-in-america/>; continually updated statistics available at <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

⁴ <https://efsgv.org/firearm-suicide-prevention/>; internal footnote attributed to National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC. 1999-2016 US Suicide Deaths and Rates per 100,000. Fatal Injury Reports, 1999-2016. Retrieved March 5, 2018, from <http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>

⁵ <https://efsgv.org/ssinfo/pennsylvania/>

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania ranks 16th among the states for the highest rate of gun homicides per every 100,000 people. Between 2005 and 2014, 13,781 people in Pennsylvania were killed with a gun—an average of 520 gun homicides per year, or one person every 17 hours⁶; and

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania's rate of gun homicides is among the highest in the nation, particularly in communities of color. Murder rates for African Americans and Latinos combined represent close to 79% of all gun homicides in Pennsylvania. From 2005 to 2014, PA ranked fourth in the nation for the rate of gun homicides of African Americans (55% higher than the national average), and second in the nation for the highest gun homicide rate of Hispanics, (63% higher than the national average)⁷; and

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania law enforcement officers are killed with guns at an exceptionally high rate, with Pennsylvania ranked fifth in the nation for the rate of police officers assaulted with a firearm⁸; and

WHEREAS: More Pennsylvanians are killed by gun violence than in car accidents annually, a reversal from 1999. PA is one of 21 states where gun deaths have surpassed car accident deaths. In 1999, car accident deaths were 29% higher than gun-related deaths; by 2014, car accident deaths were 12% lower than gun-related deaths. If this trend continues, the number of car accident deaths in the state will be 21% lower than that of gun deaths by 2019⁹; and

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania is a top supplier of crime guns recovered in other states; from 2012 to 2014, Pennsylvania ranked eighth for highest number of guns exported to other states and recovered in crimes, with a total of 5,844 such guns¹⁰; and

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania women are killed with guns wielded by intimate partners at a high rate. Nationally women are 500% more likely to be killed by an intimate partner in households with a history of domestic violence when a gun is present in the home. From 2005 to 2014, 463 women in Pennsylvania were murdered by their intimate partners, a full 8% higher than the national average¹¹; and

WHEREAS: In 2015, the state received a “C” grade for the strength of its gun laws from the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.¹² Passing even minimal measures to curb gun violence has been difficult in Pennsylvania. The National Rifle Association has significant influence in Pennsylvania's General Assembly—in both parties. The NRA has donated more money to Congressional members in the Commonwealth than in any other state in the Northeast, and Pennsylvania ranks No. 5 nationwide in NRA donations¹³; and

WHEREAS: While people of faith hold disparate views concerning gun ownership and the 2nd Amendment, we believe most Christians represented by the Council are concerned about the levels of gun violence that exist in Pennsylvania and throughout the United States, based on: (1) Jesus' call to his followers to be peacemakers

⁶ Pennsylvania Under the Gun, Center for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/guns-crime/reports/2016/05/16/137219/pennsylvania-under-the-gun/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2016/06/14/pennsylvania-gun-laws/#3QMhGhEL3HXpdRXu.99>

(Matthew 5:9); (2) an embrace of Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community and the hope for peace and safety in our homes, communities, state, and nation; and (3) a desire, as part of the church's call to be peacemakers, to prevent guns from reaching the hands of people who would use them criminally or irresponsibly; and

WHEREAS: There is much more that must be done to strengthen laws in the Commonwealth to reduce gun violence and gun-related crime.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED (1): The Pennsylvania Council of Churches will recommit itself to the work of peacemaking, working to educate people of faith on the scourge of gun violence, ways of preventing gun violence, and legislation aimed at reducing gun violence, helping them to "Consider ways in which our personal and institutional decisions--in the economic, social, and community spheres--provide a creative means to decrease the prevalence and ease of access to guns designed to destroy human life"¹⁴; and be it further

RESOLVED (2): The Council will "Join with larger efforts to change policies that favor or inadequately oppose access to and use of weapons that do not further the incarnate healing of Christ."¹⁵; and be it further

RESOLVED (3): The Council, in cooperation with other advocates throughout Pennsylvania, will urge elected officials and policymakers to enact legislation and policies to reduce gun violence in Pennsylvania; and be it further

RESOLVED (4): The Council will communicate this resolution to the Governor of Pennsylvania, and to all members of Pennsylvania's General Assembly, and will urge its member bodies to consider adoption of similar resolutions.

Approved by the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches on this 16th day of October, 2018.

Rev. Elizabeth L. Bidgood Enders

The Rev. Elizabeth Bidgood Enders, President
Board of Directors
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¹⁴ <http://www.brethren.org/news/2018/lukewarm-no-more-statement-gun-violence.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.