

Stony Point Presbyterian Church

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Gun Violence, Gospel Values: One Congregation's Response to God's Call

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed planted in the soil. It is the smallest of all the earth's seeds, but once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of all shrubs ... - Mark 4:31-32

June 26, 2012

After the horrific shootings in Tuscon, AZ in January 2011 and our small congregation's subsequent conversations about gun violence, church member Rick Ufford-Chase asked if we would consider seriously addressing the subject *together, as people of faith*.

Due to some historical issues in the congregation, we knew that addressing such a controversial topic had the potential to be divisive and damaging, so we set about designing a "curriculum" that would invite open, theologically-based dialogue, while minimizing the potentially polarizing rhetoric that often dominates – and shuts down – any reasonable discussion about gun violence.

We based our curriculum on the excellent PC(USA) document, ***Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call***¹ (GVGV) and sought input from the congregation on specific gun violence issues during a Lenten reflection during worship on the spiritual discipline of "Non-Injury." We then used the congregation's input to design a year-long, monthly curriculum. The curriculum was approved by session in May 2011 and endorsed by the congregation at our Annual Meeting in June 2011.

In September 2011, Reverend Jim Atwood (one of the GVGV authors) came to Stony Point, preached at worship and led an afternoon kick-off event introducing the document and the reasons it was written. He also gave us much encouragement and wise insight.

Throughout the following months, a group that ranged in age from teenagers to senior citizens and varied in racial, ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds and political beliefs, grew to include 14 congregants and several occasional guests. We engaged in theological discourse and scripture-based reflection about the spiritual impact of the pervasive violence in our culture. We learned, lamented, resisted and grieved. We were challenged, as the document asked us, to wake up and to act. *"To honor the silenced voices we must pay attention, speak out, and give witness to God's "No" to gun violence. (GVGV, p. 18)*

We learned, to our enormous shock, that even in our small, "safe" suburban community, that *each and every one of us had been touched by gun violence at some point in our lives*. One of our group members, a bank manager, was tied up and held at gunpoint in a vault during an armed robbery. This realization led the group this year during Lent to tell their stories and raise awareness in the larger congregation of the many ways that gun violence has touched our lives. We wrote up a bulletin insert that gave an update on our process, notifying the congregation that group members would be giving testimonials during worship throughout Lent, and invited the congregation to join our group, pray with us and pray for us as we continued learning together. It was at this point that we experienced some "push-back." It was fine for us to study the issues of gun violence *after* worship as a group, but the desire to keep the discussion at an arm's length became a problem when we began to witness "publicly."

¹ ***Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call***, Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), 2011. <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf>

This uncomfortable and upsetting situation gave us the opportunity to address the underlying reasons for the resistance and find compassionate, pastorally appropriate ways to stay in relationship through a time of disagreement and distress. It proved to be a time of healing and relationship building, as well as a strengthening of resolve for members of the GVG group.

After Easter, we met to begin thinking about our next steps as our study period drew to a close. It was at this point that we decided to write a “position statement” to describe the process we had been through together, to state where we agreed, disagreed and the kinds of actions we feel called to, as a result of our study *together, as people of faith*.

It took a few drafts to find just the right words that accurately and appropriately expressed our process, feelings and commitments. The dialogues and debates involved in writing this statement proved to be another high point of the process – we demanded theological reasoning from each other for the decisions we made in writing and editing in a painstaking effort to avoid inflammatory and divisive rhetoric.

A few weeks ago, one of the group members (who is also a ruling elder) brought the statement to the session. She spoke with eloquence and passion, asking the session’s approval of the statement and the group’s desire to take action in response to what we have learned. During a Spirit-filled discussion, we wrestled with the same historical issues that have caused us anxiety for decades. When everyone had had the opportunity to express their views, we voted on the motion before us. The motion to approve the position statement and the group’s actions was passed unanimously. We stopped to pray and acknowledge what a significant step this was for us in the life of our congregation, and before I knew it, we were talking about writing up a procedure policy for how to handle our *next* position statement! It was *beautiful* to behold the Holy Spirit fill these faithful servant-leaders with confidence and faith.

This past Sunday, the position statement was presented once again, to the congregation at our Annual Meeting. Group members were prepared to speak to key areas of potential difficulty. Only one question was raised – a point of confusion over vocabulary. Once we clarified the language, the congregant made a motion to amend the document so that it would be a clearer, stronger position statement. That motion passed unanimously, as did the motion to endorse the statement. (see attached)

With full “permission” from our faith community to act in response to God’s call, our GVG group will soon meet to determine how to live out our Christian witness as peacemakers with loving, non-violent action. And, it seems that we won’t be alone in doing so. We have received a request from another church in the Hudson River Presbytery to help them undertake a similar study process; our 4-church youth ministry coordinator will soon address the issues of gun violence with our youth and their families; *and* we have been invited to make a presentation at an upcoming presbytery meeting.

It seems that the kingdom of God has come among us, just like that tiny mustard seed that took root in the field and eventually grew to take over. Each step along the way helped us learn to how to partner with one another, with God and with our community more effectively, and gave us the confidence and trust to take the next step into the future that God calls us – a future that is largely unrevealed.

If you would like to engage your congregation in a similar study of gun violence and we might be of assistance to you, please contact us. We would welcome the opportunity to further help manifest God’s kingdom.

I give thanks to God, to the GVG group, to the elders at Stony Point Presbyterian Church, to my co-facilitator Elder Rick Ufford-Chase, to the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and to all who have prayed with and for us, offered us wisdom, encouragement and advice throughout an amazing year of learning, reflection and growth.

Finally, I lift up our prayers for all who have suffered from gun violence. May our grief be grief that transforms and brings life. So be it. Amen.

In Christ,
Reverend Margery Rossi, Pastor
Stony Point Presbyterian Church

**Stony Point Presbyterian Church
Commitment to Work to End Gun Violence
Spring 2012**

Let us love, not in word or speech, but in deed and in truth. – 1 John 3:18

Introduction

Our commitment as a congregation to study the matter of gun violence began with the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and eighteen others, six of whom died, including nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green, in Tucson, Arizona in January of 2011.

Our year of discernment has come to an end with the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, seventeen-year-old in Sanford, Florida.

In between, shootings have been a daily occurrence in communities all across our country – so common, in fact, that they don't even warrant a news story unless they are particularly sensational, like those that occur in schools or workplaces.

Throughout this year, we have read and studied the PC(USA) document, ***Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call***.² We have engaged in theological discourse and reflection about the spiritual impact of such pervasive violence in our culture. We have learned, lamented, resisted and grieved. We have been challenged, as the document has asked us, to wake up and to act. "To honor the silenced voices we must pay attention, speak out, and give witness to God's "No" to gun violence. (*GVG, p. 18*)

At this point, we feel ready to do just that: to commit ourselves to action.

We respectfully request the session and congregation to endorse our efforts to be peacemakers in the world around us.

We offer the enclosed statement as a summary of our study to date and the actions we feel called to, as a community of believers with "open hearts, minds and doors."

Gun Violence Study Group Facilitators:

Margery Rossi

Rick Ufford-Chase

² *Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call*, Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), 2011.
<http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/acswp/pdf/gun-violence-policy.pdf>

Our Statement on Gun Violence

We, as members of Stony Point Presbyterian Church, in an effort to model the love and the care of Jesus Christ in the world, commit ourselves to work actively to reduce gun violence in our community and across our nation. We hear Jesus' call to us to be peacemakers and lift up this special concern as we pray, worship, study and take action together in the world.

We concur with the PC(USA) document, ***Gun Violence, Gospel Values***, that our country has made an idol out of our historic, constitutional commitment to protect the right to own guns. We are clear, however, that neither the study nor actions of our small group are an attempt to challenge the constitution of the United States of America, but instead, bear witness to the spiritual, emotional, physical, mental and financial consequences of such idolatry. We are also clear that this discussion is not about guns used for hunting. (GVGV, p. 17)

We differ:

We are not of one mind about the appropriateness of owning handguns for personal safety, but we have agreed to disagree on this matter – in love for one another and an effort to create a Christian community that allows for differences of opinion.

We are of one mind:

In a country where 100,000 people are shot by guns *each year*, resulting in 30,000 deaths *each and every year* – through murder, suicide, and accidents – we will do all that is within our power to stop the madness.

- ✘ **We oppose the proliferation of assault and military style weapons** in our community and in all communities across our country.
- ✘ **We support creation and enforcement of laws requiring full background checks** in all gun stores and at all gun shows, and we will hold businesses in our community accountable to perform those background checks before the sale of every weapon.
- ✘ **We condemn, and will work to thwart those gun dealers who act irresponsibly** by allowing the practice of “straw buying” to flourish, thereby undermining responsible laws that are in place to protect our public servants and all members of our communities.

Our Commitments:

Together, we will **continue to pray** for an end to our nation's addiction to guns, and for an end to the epidemic of gun violence in our country.

We will continue to **lift these concerns to God** as we worship together.

We will continue to **educate ourselves** in an effort to be thoughtful, thorough and prepared as we take action.

We will seek opportunities to **work in partnership** with law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other churches to stop gun violence.

We will **witness publicly** about our concern through nonviolent vigils and demonstrations.

We will be watchful for opportunities to **act together to reduce the violence**.

God has given us so much, and we have Good News to share with one another and with others. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is among us, and that we are called to the daily task of creating that Kingdom. We pray that others will join us as we step boldly into the life lived in tension between enjoyment of the good gifts God has given us and work in the world because of all Jesus has called us to do and be.

Let us be clear: this is not a call to arms but to community. (GVGV, p. 17)