

Congress will consider gun violence legislation

By Deanna Hollas, Gun Violence Prevention Working Group

Thank you to all congregations that participated in the February Worship-Action program to remember the Parkland, FL high school shooting Feb. 14 and the Universal Day of Prayer for Students Feb. 17. As of Feb. 17, a total of 247 February Worship-Action Kits had been downloaded for congregations to combine prayer and action to prevent gun violence. Special thanks to all who helped get out the word: The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian News Service, the Stated Clerks of many presbyteries, the Office of Public Witness, GA Co-Moderator Cindy Kohlmann and many others.

Background Checks Legislation

The House of Representatives Judiciary Committee has held its first hearing on gun violence in eight years. The bill is HR 8 - The Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019. Under federal law, certain people are prohibited from buying or possessing firearms. Our current background check system has blocked licensed dealers from selling weapons to felons, domestic abusers, fugitives and others deemed dangerous to themselves and others, but there is nothing stopping them from buying a gun at a gun show, over the internet or through a private seller. HR 8 updates the existing background check system to include all gun sales with a few reasonable exceptions such as transfers within families and temporary transfers of firearms at a shooting range or while hunting. The bill has passed the committee and should be scheduled for a floor vote soon.

While preventing gun violence requires a combination of steps, no single step can do more to prevent gun violence than vetting every single gun buyer to assure people who have been determined to be dangerous do not get to buy firearms. Background checks save lives.

Senator Chris Murphy along with 41 other senators, reintroduced the Background Check Expansion Act (S.42) on January 8, 2019 in the U.S. Senate. The law expands the current federal background check system to include all gun sales. While this bill is still in committee, now is the time to take action on both bills.

Over 90% of Americans are in favor of background checks and agree that expanding them to include all gun sales will save lives.

ACT NOW: Your elected officials need to hear from you and know that you support these bills and want them to vote yes for expanded background checks. You can call your representative, send letters or make in person visits to their offices. You can also encourage them via social media. Here is a sample tweet or Facebook post:

I'm a resident of _____(district/state) and I want this Congress to take action on gun violence in America! I just told my House rep to #UpdateBackgroundChecks. It's past time for Congress to #UpdateBackgroundChecks!

Even with 90% of Americans supporting Background Checks, it will be very difficult to enact this legislation. The best way to stay informed on the progress of these bills is by signing up for text alerts from Everytown for Gun Safety (www.everytown.org/act/). You can also print a one-page hand-out "Background Checks and Congregational Action" at www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence

Do not be afraid to speak out and take action. You are not alone. To date, there have been over 800 downloads from congregations across the country of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship's gun violence prevention resources. Visit www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/ to download your copy of our Congregational Toolkit and join in the nationwide effort to save lives and stop gun violence.

Join PPF's Gun Violence Prevention Working Group! Contact Margery Rossi at gvp@presbypeacefellowship.org.



A Peacemaker's Calendar

2019 – ALL YEAR – This year is PPF's 75th anniversary. We'll be celebrating all year long, and one primary way we'll be celebrating is through an Endowment Campaign to get PPF's endowment to \$1 million so we can set ourselves up to work for peace for another 75 years. Throughout the year, we hope to hold birthday parties or other gatherings for PPF at people's homes and/or churches around the country to talk about PPF, share about the Endowment Campaign, and strengthen our relationship with Presbyterians. If you are willing to host one, please email Jan Orr-Harter (janoh4@aol.com).

April 5 – Compassion Peace and Justice Training Day at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. Gather with your fellow Presbyterians to look at how our church and our partners are working to organize for change. In plenaries and workshops we will look at the Church as a movement for change. We will hear from inspiring leaders and learn about past, present, and future efforts to bring about a more just society and world. To register, visit presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/washington/advocacy-training-weekend/

April 5 - 8 – Ecumenical Advocacy Days. PPF will be there! Join us in Washington D.C. for "Troubling the Waters for the Healing of the World." The 2019 conference will draw on pioneers from the Civil Rights era as well as inspiration from young leaders to learn from the past, share best practices, and encourage one another for the work ahead. (advocacydays.org)

June 3 - 14 – A Postcolonial Survey of the Bible: Empire, Kinship, and the Way of Jesus will be offered as a two-part training at the Underground Seminary, Minneapolis, MN. For information, email laura@undergroundsem.org.

July 20 - 30 – PPF/Fossil Free PCUSA delegation to Puerto Rico will meet with and listen to people who have been affected by climate change. Contact abby mohaupt (awmhaupt@gmail.com).

September 26 - 28 – Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Activist Council Meeting in Baltimore, MD. Everyone is welcome at this annual planning gathering. Watch for details in the next issue of ...*Briefly* and on the PPF web site.

October 11-14 – Colombia Accompanier Training, Montreat, NC, for those discerning whether to serve as nonviolent accompaniers in Colombia. Room and board are provided. Contact Emily Brewer (Colombia@presbypeacefellowship.org)

February 17 - 28, 2020 – Presbyterian Peacemaking Program Travel Seminar to Central America. The focus will be "Central American Migrant Trails: Exploring the Journeys to and from the United States and Why We Must Act." To apply, call 888-728-7228 x 5805.

March 15 - 28, 2020 – Presbyterian Peacemaking Program Mosaic of Peace Conference in Israel/Palestine. The focus will be "Witnessing for Peace and Wholeness in a Land Called 'Holy.'" To apply, call 888-728-7228 x 5805.

...BRIEFLY is the newsletter of the

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¡Presente!



Don Beisswenger, who died November 26, was a Presbyterian minister, Vanderbilt Divinity School professor, advocate for the homeless, PPF and SOA Watch activist, and the author of *Locked Up: Letters and Papers of a Prisoner of Conscience*.

We remember and celebrate Don's life and witness with deep gratitude.

Reflections from the Texas Border

By Jonathan Freeman, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary

On the morning of December 14, 2018, I woke up early to finish my last exam of the semester. Instead of experiencing the magnificent wave of relaxation that comes after clicking what you know is the last “submit” button you’ll have to look at for at least a month, I went straight from my dorm to another building here at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. There, I circled up with a group of similarly-exhausted students, and received a blessing for the trip we were about to go on. That evening, about thirty APTS students and faculty and a handful of other ministers from around the area would arrive in McAllen, Texas to begin our “Wall of Welcome” trip to the border. We went to stand in solidarity with our neighbors in tribulation, to serve communities embodying God’s love in that region, and to bear witness to the travesty of inhumanity taking place, and the hope of the Kingdom that we found in the midst of it.

To cover everything that impacted us while we were there goes well beyond the scope of this blurb. Basic things, like the profuse over-crowdedness at the respite center we volunteered at, felt completely overwhelming. Hundreds of families, every single one of whom having been through so much that the exhaustion we felt from finals week began to seem more like an afternoon nap, came through that tragically under-resourced center every day. The stories we heard of the domineering and life-threatening violence being fled, and the arduous journeys behind and ahead of the families we saw, were utterly heartbreaking. In a strange sense though, it wasn’t the depth of devastation that truly shocked me. What shook me to my core, and what I’m still struggling to find the right way to express, was the confusingly eschatological sense of hope that was there.

One of the faculty members on our trip, Professor Gregory Cuéllar, preached at our Día de los Muertos service months prior about the coming “Mobile Congregation,” the caravan of migrants making their way to our southern border in a community so attentive to the needs of its members, and so focused on love, justice, and hope, that to see it would be to see the divine dance of the Holy Trinity – mirrored more clearly than most of us ever witness in our American congregations. That Mobile Congregation was the catalyst of hope that we sensed during our trip to the border. In addition to the



Wall of Welcome participants gather in McAllen, Texas

desperate state of what we knew was all around us, we also felt the reality of victory living just on the cusp of the moment we inhabited. God was there, doing God’s work, for and amongst God’s people.

In order to welcome the Mobile Congregation and let them show us who God is, we need to pay attention to hope. I believe we are called to seek out moments like the ones my friends and I found at the border, and enter into the reality God makes for us. At the border, as well as in the Kingdom of God, “Entramos todos, o no entra ninguno.” – “We all enter, or none of us enters.”

“I see God in the eyes of the refugee grandmother still full of dreams and hope for a better life even after suffering so much; in the innocence of refugee children playing around the encampment as they wait for their guardians to plead their case to border authorities. I see God in those who give their lives and resources to humanitarian care and relief; in the passion and work of the Angry Tías and Abuelas and Sister Norma’s respite center; in those who work tirelessly to save lives and to effect change; in the groups who work to identify those who died along the journey and inform the families. And, I see God in the saints that don’t shut their eyes when they see the need of fellow siblings; in those who aid, accompany, defend and go above and beyond to embody God’s love and grace.”

... Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, Co-Moderator,
223rd General Assembly

Help PPF plan actions for immigration justice! Contact Emily
Brewer at emily@presbypeacefellowship.org.

Becoming a Peace Church

One Congregation's Journey



Ben Daniel is pastor of Montclair Presbyterian Church in Oakland, California, one of the denomination's self-declared peace churches. He was recently interviewed by Presbyterian Peace Fellowship Executive Director Emily Brewer. Here are some excerpts from their conversation, which you can find on the PPF Youtube channel.

Emily: Can you tell us about the statement your congregation created on being a peace church – what it says and how you all came to it?

Ben: The challenge for us is that we're a progressive church in a very liberal community in California. The first instinct of the members of our congregation was to simply make a statement of pacifism that would sound inspired by Gandhi and Joan Baez and maybe Bob Dylan. The initial response was to reprocess stuff that members of my congregation had been doing in the 60s and during the anti-Vietnam War era. I felt, and I got them to agree with me, that we really should try to articulate a reason for rejecting military violence that was rooted in our tradition as Presbyterian Christians. So we explored our tradition together, both our tradition as Christians looking at the nonviolence of the early church and also our tradition as reformed Calvinist Christians. And so we tried to use our tradition as a way of grounding or rooting our statement on nonviolence and antimilitarism.

Emily: The Presbyterian Church (USA) historically has just war theory as its stance on war and peace. Then in 2016, after a 6-year discernment process, the PC(USA) passed a statement that affirmed both just war and pacifism as stances that faithful Presbyterians might draw from. Was that statement helpful to you?

Ben: Yes, what we did is get to the Christian nonviolence place through just war. Our initial reaction was to say we don't want to have anything to do with just war. Just war gets used to justify all sorts of unjust wars. A good example of this is George H. W. Bush's invasion of Panama, which he called Operation Just Cause. We thought, "There's an apostrophe in that (Just 'Cause) – it was really Operation Just Because."

But then we actually looked at just war theory and looked at the components of it: a war has to have a just cause and motive, you can't kill civilians, peace has to be your ultimate aim, the violence has to be proportional, and all those things. We realized that there's no such thing as a just war. The beauty of the just war theory from our position is that, if you do it right, there is no modern war that can be just. It just doesn't work.

Incidentally, that was Calvin's approach to it. He noted that certainly war is allowed if it's a good war but, if you really pay attention to what you're doing, you can't have a just war if you spill innocent blood. So we did the same thing. We found that all just war theory does is point us to a place of pacifism. There is no such thing as a war that ends all war. All war leads to more war. War either leads to more war or to complete annihilation of an enemy. We didn't feel that was a position that was consistent with the gospel. And modern warfare does not spare civilian life. In fact, modern war intentionally targets civilians, and that is anathema in any just war system.

Emily: What, if anything, has changed about your congregation's sense of their call through this process? Has the way that you carry on your life as a congregation changed in any way?

Ben: My congregation has been actively protesting war since the Vietnam era. Every war. We protested the proliferation of every weapons system from handguns to hydrogen bombs. We have provided sanctuary to people escaping violence in various parts of Latin America. We also provided sanctuary to a Navy Air Corpsman during the Vietnam era when he didn't feel as if he could fight in Vietnam. So for our congregation to declare itself a peace church, a pacifist church, was not a big stretch. What was important to us was deciding what that meant. Did that mean that we didn't believe that the armed forces should be sent overseas to address crimes against humanity?

Being a peace church that was against particular wars was different from being a peace church that is against all war. Taking a final step and deciding, yes, we are truly a pacifist church, was an important step for us. We voted overwhelmingly to become a peace church, but it was a long, thoughtful, much discussed step.

I don't know what it means for the future yet. We're still trying to figure that out. But we're here now and we trust that the next step will be guided by the fact that we are a peace church. I also hope that the children of the church, should they choose to do so, will take advantage of the option of declaring themselves conscientious objectors.

Emily: Some of the resources are being created now by the denomination, since the 2016 statement says the church will provide resources for young people to think about those questions.

Ben: Yes, we want to support that. The more Presbyterian congregations, councils of the church, and levels of deliberative bodies that take the step of embracing pacifism, the easier it's going to be for our youth to declare themselves conscientious objectors. We think. We don't actually know because the rules of the next national draft haven't been written yet.



Emily: Do you have any wisdom or advice for a pastor or congregant who might be interested in beginning this process in their own congregation?

Ben: It seems to me that the best thing you can do is just start to converse, start talking. Our own process was we started talking about it. We read the materials from the 2016 General Assembly and we wondered what we could do with that. A nearby congregation, First Presbyterian Church of Palo Alto, which is also in the San Francisco Bay area, was in the process of becoming a peace church.

The nuts and bolts are that I wrote a peace church draft declaration and brought it to a group of interested people and that group completely took it apart and put it back together. I rewrote it based on their edits and we met again and took it apart and put it together, and I rewrote it based on those notes. And we did that over and over and over again for a process of about a year or year and a half. Then we took it to our church's social justice committee and they edited it and took it apart. So we edited and rewrote it. The same thing happened with the session. And then we presented it to the congregation and said, "Give us your ideas, give us your input." People gave us feedback and we edited it and put it back together and took it back to the congregation. It was a great process. It could be challenging because I am a writer and I got pretty attached to things I would write. Sometimes people didn't like it. That was hard but I was able to get over that and we all got over that. It was almost like LEGOS – taking it apart, putting it back together, finding other pieces, taking other pieces out. It was fun. It ended up being a deeply rich process.

I would also say that the conversation was as important as the final piece. I wish I could bottle up what happened in the room and give a link to that because the conversation was so meaningful and so rich. It fed my soul in important ways. I would want that for anybody.

The other thing is that I would be happy to talk to anybody who's interested in starting the process and give a little coaching or answer questions. Nobody's process should be the same. Everybody's congregation is different. But any help that I can give, I'm glad to do that.

Emily: Is there anything else you would like to say about the process or where you ended up?

Ben: We're living in a time when it's important for the church to be prophetic. The United States is an empire. All empires support themselves through violence and exploitation. Our empire currently is exceptionally violent. We're killing innocent people in places that a lot of people can't even find on a map. The church must speak up. We will look back on this period of our history and we're going to wonder where the voice of the church was.

Join PPF's Peace Church Working Group! Contact Geoff Browning at browninggeoff@gmail.com.

A Presbytery Divests from Fossil Fuels

By abby mohaupt, Fossil Free PCUSA

San Francisco Presbytery has voted to divest from the fossil fuel industry!

Talitha Aho, associate pastor of Montclair Presbyterian Church in Oakland, CA, and the originator of the motion to divest from fossil fuels, said, "At the September 2018 meeting of the Presbytery of San Francisco, PC(USA) Co-Moderator Cindy Kohlmann was there to speak with us and she laid down a challenge. All these presbyteries have been voting to divest – but have they done the work of divesting their own funds? We took that challenge and it went far easier than we could have hoped. Thanks be to God for a willing and eager presbytery!"

The co-moderator asked the presbytery how they would follow up on their concurrence with record-breaking number of concurrences on an overture to the GA to divest from fossil fuels. Aho made a motion to consider divestment from fossil fuels. This motion was taken to a second discussion time at the November presbytery meeting. At that point, the motion was sent to the presbytery's investment committee.

Members of the investment committee worked with their investment managers and leadership from Fossil Free PCUSA to determine the feasibility of divestment. Presbytery Associate for Mission and Church Assets Leonard Nielson said this about the process, "I think this is going to be a great move, and after we did the research, I am sort of surprised that the vote at GA didn't go through. We can certainly be helpful in helping others to understand that this particular divestment is not as complicated or risky as it was even 12-18 months ago. The investment market is starting to offer some really attractive products due to growing demand, and we can be a part of that demand."

Marc Jung, a member of presbytery, echoed this sentiment, saying, "When we looked into fossil fuel divestment for our presbytery, we discovered that there's a growing variety of viable investment choices available for consideration. So now it has become easier to make fossil free investments."

At the February 2019 presbytery meeting, the committee recommended divestment from fossil fuels to the presbytery, saying that such a motion would be in line with the presbytery's commitment to faithfully care for the earth, that divestment could be done quickly and efficiently, and that the reinvestment in renewables would not significantly affect the presbytery's bottom line.

Jeff Hutcheson, presbytery pastor for mission and vision, said "Everyone was united in taking action to love our hurting planet, and work creatively towards a brighter future. The Presbytery of

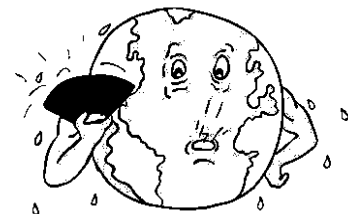
San Francisco is committed to realigning our resources and adjusting our lifestyles in ways that are life-giving for our planet and one another. We desire to faithfully follow Christ who said '*I came so that they may have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.*' (Ephesians 10:10, the Message Bible)"

Fossil Free PCUSA Moderator abby mohaupt (who is a member at large in San Francisco Presbytery as well as a member of the PPF Activist Council) says of this decision, "as climate change continues to affect our world at large, and California here at home, we must do everything we can to respond. Part of that response must include divestment from the industry whose products have most led to climate change. I'm delighted and grateful for the prophetic decision of San Francisco Presbytery, and I know their witness will be a model for others."

Delegation to Puerto Rico

This vote comes just as PPF and Fossil Free PCUSA are completing the details for a delegation trip to Puerto Rico in July. Applications for the delegation, which will be July 20-30, will be available on the PPF and Fossil Free PCUSA web sites starting in March. Participants on the delegation will meet with and listen to people who have been affected by climate change. The trip will remind us that our divestment work has always been about understanding the urgency of climate change, that people are already negatively impacted by climate change, and that the Presbyterian Church should not profit from that suffering.

Join PPF's Fossil Free PCUSA project! Contact abby mohaupt at awmohaupt@gmail.com.



The Struggle for Peace in Colombia

Reports from the PPF Delegation, January 2019



A farm in Llano Grande, a community of former FARC combatants.

Our first night we visited the town of Caracolón, which consists of displaced citizens. “Displaced” hardly seems like a harsh enough word for their situation. In reality, an armed group entered their community, massacred 400 of their family and community members, burned their houses, and left many orphans and widows. They then went to Dabeiba, where they were in shelters, accompanied by the nuns of the town, and for four years agitated the government until they provided land for them.

Twenty-one years after their displacement, they still live on the government provided land, where on very steep mountainsides, they farm the land. About 140 live in the community, and though they try to sustain themselves, it isn’t easy. The land doesn’t produce enough for the community, but they are farmers, and don’t see opportunity in the city.

...Courtney Hemmelgarn from Kettering, OH

We met with former guerillas who have laid down their arms and renounced violence. They live in an enclosed camp under the ever-present and watchful eye of the police and military. Although they were promised land and reintegration into society as part of the peace accords, neither has happened.

...Bennet McConaughy from Seattle, WA

Unpacking the complex violations of land ownership in Colombia is a nightmare, one that millions of people are living out. Some people have been displaced off their land and forced to sign false sale documents, making it extremely difficult to prove they were forcibly displaced and difficult to have their land restituted. Some people have been displaced off of land that was subsequently planted with African oil palm, which eats up the soil and leaves it dead. Some people have been displaced off of land that was then sold to multinational corporations for palm oil or bananas or other export crops — good luck getting the land back from a powerful multinational corporation with governmental pull. Some people were displaced from land that is still occupied by armed groups. Some people were displaced from land where they had lived for generations without formal deeds, so they can’t prove the lands were theirs to begin with.

And land is everything. Land is food, land is a dignified living, land is heritage, land is self-sufficiency, land is life, land is the essence of being a campesino.

...Alison Wood from Tucson, AZ

The community of Caracolón is one of resistance. Shortly after being displaced, they formed a committee of memory (as well as other committees for youth and women) where they shared their experiences of the violence. They made monuments to the victims who had died in the massacre and displacement. They acknowledged that they still feel the ongoing trauma of displacement, but by talking about it, they are able to take care of each other and organize to try and get their land back.

It is communities like Caracolón who have been most affected by the violence of the last six decades. It is communities like Caracolón who should be seeing the effects of the Peace Accords—they should be able to return to their land, but instead, community leader Gloria says, “We are living again with terror.” They have hope in the accords, but they are still waiting for them to be realized. And they are not waiting passively, but they continue luchando (struggling) for their land, they continue taking care of each other and telling the stories.

...Emily Brewer from New York, NY

Read more Colombia reports on the PPF web site.

Join our Colombia/Border Witness/Immigration Justice planning team! Contact Emily Brewer at Colombia@presbypeacefellowship.org.



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CELEBRATING 75 YEARS!

WINTER 2019

Inside: Updates on our work – Gun violence prevention, Immigration, Peace churches, Fossil fuel divestment, and Colombia

And One to Grow On!

By Ralph N. Mould, a PPF founder

On this birthday of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, the circumstances surrounding its birth are worth recalling. Throughout the 1930s there was vigorous debate over war and peace, not least in the churches. Then came the sickening start of World War II. The lights did go out all over Europe and the skies grew ever angrier, as the thunder and lightning played over humans destroying one another. Gradually the U.S. was pulled into the vortex of the conflict and many people said, "It's a dirty business but it's got to be done."

There were some people, however, especially young men called into military service who for reasons of Christian conscience felt they could not participate in the war. The government made provision for them in what was called Civilian Public Service – typically, jobs as hospital orderlies, forest fire fighters, institutional janitors, and the like. Since the CO's had to have their religious stance certified by their denominations the churches suddenly found they had a new problem, especially since CO's received no wages and had to pay for their own room and board – and many did not have the means.

John Oliver Nelson and I wanted to support the CO's so we submitted resolutions to the General Assembly which authorized solicitation of funds from congregations. All told, we came to have 315 Presbyterian CO's and congregations contributed over \$80,000.



In this situation there was formed in 1944 what was first called a Council of Presbyterian CO's, to which any CO, young or old, could belong. There were not many of us – a telephone booth accommodated us, but we hung together through mutual commitment and common ministry. And, not a few Presbyterians, tempted to stray to other fields, were sustained and stayed within the Presbyterian family.

Over the years we formed the custom of an annual meal meeting at the General Assembly, and the name was changed to Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. We were privileged to help initiate the study report, "Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling," and to see Peacemaking flourish as a priority program across the Church.

Today there are tens of thousands of Presbyterians who work for peace in countless ways, perhaps not taking an absolute position but sharing with us basic perspective and concerns. There are endless facets of the complex international situation where conscience in Christ must be brought to bear. Whether it's draft registration, or tax resistance, or support of those who help transport or give sanctuary to those called illegals, or judging whether nuclear deterrence can be moral if all nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity, or fueling wars with arms sent abroad, or arms control. Conscience is decisive.

And now EVERYONE who rejoices in our history and wishes us long life, please now rise – as I light this birthday candle symbolizing: ONE TO GROW ON. And then let's sing together, "Happy Birthday" to Peace Fellowship.

(From remarks delivered on June 2, 1984, at the Phoenix General Assembly in celebration of the 40th birthday of PPF.)