

Reducing Gun Violence: A Platform Proposed by South Dakota Faith in Public Life Dec. 2013

Background: While gun violence in the United States has been declining over the past decade,¹ the level of violence remains too high, and the horrific acts of mass murder with firearms have given rise to renewed efforts at further reducing the prevalence and severity of gun violence in America. With last year's tragedy at Newtown, Connecticut, the members of South Dakota Faith in Public Life decided to focus our study this year on gun violence and the debate over gun laws, with the goal of possibly identifying common values shared by people of faith. Our hope in entering this study was that we could encourage conversation which would allow the faith community to understand both the fears and the affirmations that motivate us all. We recognized as we began that this is a complex topic, that solutions are elusive, and that both meaningful conversation and meaningful change are very difficult, primarily because of preconceived notions on both sides.

Vision: While acknowledging the basic 2nd amendment right to keep and bear arms, we seek a common commitment from political leaders and law enforcement to work on this issue until the day arrives when those in America who should not have a gun can't get one, when everyone in America who has a gun is fully educated on how to use and manage that gun properly, and when no one in America suffers as a victim of gun violence because we as a people have failed to take responsible action to prevent it.

Affirmations: With that in mind, we sought input from academics, law enforcement officials, and gun rights advocates. We looked both to the formal position statements and to the basic affirmations of our various faiths.² And we sought to learn to listen to the stories of those who had been touched by gun violence. From that study we bring the following affirmations and concerns in the hope that they will spark deeper understanding and further conversation toward positive change in our community.

1. All our faith traditions affirm that people deserve the right to live in safety and peace, free from fear of any kind of violence.
2. All our traditions deplore gratuitous gun violence and affirm that society needs to find appropriate ways to limit the accessibility of guns to criminals and to persons whose mental illness would preclude safe gun use.
3. Our traditions share a concern that the glorification of violence in our culture generally and in the media specifically may encourage violence as a first response to conflict.
4. At the same time, our traditions share respect for the religious freedom and the personal safety we enjoy under the Constitution. We specifically affirm the Second Amendment, though we acknowledge that it is interpreted differently by people of good will on both sides of gun issues. Our traditions share a concern for the well-being of one's neighbor. As religious leaders we affirm that loving one's neighbor entails accepting limitations on one's actions. We recall the Supreme Court decision of 2008, which upheld the Second Amendment right to own a gun but made clear that this right--like any right--is not unlimited, and therefore that laws imposing "conditions and qualifications" for the commercial sale of arms are constitutional.³
5. We recognize that current laws concerning guns have not been effectively enforced⁴ and government research about gun violence has not been funded.⁵

¹ <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/gun-violence/#prevalent>. Retrieved Sept. 17, 2013.

² Rev. Dr. Anna Madsen has also compiled official statements from many faith groups at <http://omgcenter.com/2012/12/gun-control-religion-and-politicians/>. Retrieved Sept. 17, 2013.

³ <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/07pdf/07-290.pdf>. Retrieved Sept. 7, 2013.

⁴ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/02/07/nra-interferes-with-atf-operations/1894355/>. Retrieved Sept. 17, 2013.

6. We acknowledge that current fear of overreach by the national government in some circles, and an answering fear of overreach by gun rights activists in other circles, make meaningful conversation particularly difficult at this juncture in American history. We also affirm the teaching that “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-control.” We call for conversation about our fears and in spite of our fears.

7. We call our communities of faith to listen to the stories of those who have been affected by gun violence of any kind. We affirm that the human toll of gun violence in American society as a whole has reached absolutely unacceptable levels and that this problem must be faced at all levels of society and of government until means are found and implemented to address this scourge.

8. We are particularly concerned that there is much misinformation and distortion of facts about, and positions on gun issues in circulation in the media generally and on the internet specifically. We call on all people of good will to demand that any assertions about these issues be supported by verifiable research.

9. We call on gun advocates and gun critics alike to enter into conversation about these issues with a spirit of humility and openness. No one has all the answers on reducing gun violence in America. No one has a right to dismiss others’ convictions out of hand. People of faith, however, must look beyond partisan political leanings and sloganeering to the deepest values of our traditions. Across many faith traditions, those shared values call us to work toward a day when all people under God can live together in peace and safety.

Proposals: The Board of Directors of South Dakota Faith in Public Life recommends the following **Basic Principles for Firearm Regulation Reform:**

1. Enforce current laws and support laws and policies designed to empower law enforcement with the tools needed to keep firearms away from those who are not legally allowed to have one, including universal background checks for all gun buyers.

2. Fund government research on gun deaths with the same level of commitment with which the government funds other public health issues, e.g. automobile deaths.

3. Support the safe use of weapons. Create policies and programs designed to require that gun owners demonstrate a basic level competency in the use of firearms based on a broadly agreed upon set of principles for safe use. This may require licensing and registration, much like motor vehicle licensing and registration.

4. Establish a “reasonable use” criteria, and then insure freedom of legal purchase and use within that criteria. Given that there is a constitutional right to bear arms and an agreed upon principle of a necessity to provide “appropriate conditions and qualifications” to that right for the sake of public safety, we recommend reasonable limits on the number of bullets that gun clips can hold and a ban on rapid-fire assault weapons.

5. Seek continued reform of firearm policy that holds in balance the right to bear arms with the vision of vastly reducing gun violence in America.

⁵ For information about a ban on government research into the public health effects of gun violence, in place since the 1990’s, see <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/obama-plan-eases-freeze-cdc-gun-violence-research-1B7999574?franchiseSlug=healthmain>. Retrieved Sept. 7, 2013.

Conclusion: During the course of this study and the writing of this position statement, it has become clear that easy and quick solutions to the problem of reducing gun violence do not exist. Nor do we operate under the illusion that the five modest proposals we advocate are adequate to “fix” the situation. Nevertheless, each small step toward reducing gun violence is a step in the right direction. We challenge you to prayerfully join us in finding common ground where we can stand together in peace and safety.

Signatories:

Rev. Bill Tesch, Chair (ELCA)
Rev. Dr. Bill Bates, Vice Chair (UMC)
Rev. Dr. Charles Ayars (PC/USA)
Father Charles Cimpl (RC)
Rev. Dr. Steve Corum (ABC/USA)
Dr. Hesham Elgouhari, M.D. (MCCSD)
Rev. Cynthia Hoy (UCC)
Rev. Dr. Marcia Moret Sietstra (UCC)
Rev. Dr. Valerie Putnam (PC/USA)
Rev. Dr. Ron Sisk, PhD (UMC, ABC)
Rev. Christina Swenson O'Hara (TEC)
Sister Mary Thomas (RC)
Rev. Kathryn Timpany (UCC)

Permission to copy for educational purposes is granted by South Dakota Faith in Public Life.