

People of Faith Confronting Gun Violence, Burlington VT - December 13, 2015
 ©The Right Reverend Thomas C. Ely, Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Vermont

The prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi resonates deeply with me, especially today as we gather for this sacred time of remembrance, witness, prayer and commitment. I am here because I seek to be an instrument of God's peace in an increasingly violent world, and so I invite you to join me in prayer:

*God, make me an instrument of your peace.
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 Where there is injury, pardon;
 Where there is doubt, faith;
 Where there is despair, hope;
 Where there is darkness, light;
 Where there is sadness, joy. Amen.*

We gather here today, as people of faith, perhaps as people searching for faith, and perhaps as people who have no particular religious faith, but who are human beings gathering with other human beings because our hearts ache in the face of violence, and our wills are determined to do something about it. We gather to remember and pray for the victims of gun violence, and for their families and friends whose lives have been shaken and forever altered by gun violence. We gather to pray for the perpetrators of gun violence and all who seek to do others harm. We gather because we are frustrated by the inability, or unwillingness, of our leaders to work together to confront and find solutions to the epidemic of gun violence in our country. We gather because each life lost to gun violence, whether in mass shootings, murder, suicide, accidents or other incidents is precious to God, and we are weary (and perhaps angry) of hearing that there is nothing we can do about it.

Gun violence has long been a problem in the United States and this epidemic won't go away overnight. I believe it needs to be named for what it is and dealt with as a matter of public health, public safety and common concern. On my best days, and I hope this is one of those days, I don't look to place blame for this condition, but rather to find ways to address it together, as people who respect and honor the dignity of every human being.

Like many of you, I remember where I was on December 14th 2012 when I heard the news about the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Connecticut was my home before coming to Vermont 15 years ago, and I know Newtown well. I was at a church gathering in Vermont that day, and perhaps because December 14th is my birthday, I will always carry with me the memory of that day. I immediately got on my cell phone and was able to reach my colleagues in Connecticut who would soon be among those offering comfort and solace to the families of the victims and the wider community. Like many of you, I watched and wept as the tragic reports and pictures began to reach us.

Sandy Hook was not the first mass shooting and, as we know, it was certainly not the last. It is, however, a moment in time that awakened many of us to the epidemic of gun violence in our society and to the deeper cultural reality of violence in its many forms. It was out of that tragedy that Bishops United Against Gun Violence was founded. This coalition of over 60 Episcopal Church Bishops, of which I am one, is committed to exploring all possible means of reducing the appalling levels of gun violence in our society, and to advocating for policies and legislation that save lives. We offer a big tent where bishops who are NRA members and those

who do not own or use guns can talk about the epidemic of gun violence together. Creating a space for conversation on these matters is key to our strategy.¹

While mass shootings are the ones that tend to grab our attention the most, thanks in part to the media saturation whenever there is such an occurrence, I want to be clear that this interfaith prayer and remembrance vigil, and its moral call for people of faith to confront the tragedy of gun violence, is meant to draw our attention, our prayers and our actions in the face of all incidents of gun violence in our state and in our country. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control in 2013 identify over 11,000 homicide deaths in the United States, including incidents of domestic violence, involving guns and over 21,000 suicides involving firearms.²

Closer to home, the Centers for Disease Control statistics indicate that Vermont has the second highest per capita gun death rate in New England.³ According to the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center, nearly all gun deaths in Vermont (90%) are a result of suicide.⁴ And, according to the 2015 State of Vermont Domestic Violence Fatality Review Commission Report, between 1994 – 2014, 50% of all Vermont homicides were domestic violence related and 57% of Vermont's adult domestic violence-related homicides were committed with firearms.⁵

Statistics notwithstanding, we have a problem with gun violence in this country and we need to do something about it. I was pleased to see Rhode Island's Governor, Gina Raimondo, announce this past week that she is convening federal, state and local officials, including judges and law enforcement in a roundtable discussion on ways to reduce gun violence.⁶ We need more efforts like that. In making the announcement she said, *"Gun violence has affected too many families across our country -- it's out of control, it's unacceptable, and it's hurting our children and our communities. Enough is enough. It's time to commit ourselves to working together to build a safer state and a safer country."* I am grateful that the organizers of this vigil are committed to encouraging and supporting forums in our faith communities called "Sacred conversations on guns and the common good."

I believe that people of good will who want to fix a problem can fix that problem. We have seen the results over and over again in our country when that happens. But it will take a critical mass to make that happen in order to address gun violence – pacifists, gun owners, gun manufacturers, gun sellers, hunters, members of law enforcement, politicians, religious and community leaders, members of organizations spanning the spectrum on this topic, and committed citizens from every walk of life. Do we want to change the culture of violence and the current epidemic of gun violence in this country, or not? I think that is the question we must answer. Answer yes, and it can happen.

Rock Point School (some of you know it) is a residential boarding and day school in Burlington, operated under the auspices of the Episcopal Church in Vermont. The School offers a positive alternative to traditional high school, especially for students who haven't found success, for a wide variety of reasons, in traditional academic environments. The short hand way

¹ <http://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/>

² <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/injury.htm>

³ Vermont has 9.3 gun deaths per 100,000 people. Maine is slightly higher at 10.9 gun deaths per 100,000, while Massachusetts is the lowest at 3.1 <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/Firearm.htm>

⁴ In Vermont, there are (on average) 80 suicides annually for a rate of 14 deaths per 100,000 people, with over half coming via gun shot <http://vtspc.org/vsp/statistics-data/#vermont-statistics-on-suicide>; <http://vtspc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Gun-Related-MM-Data-Brief-VT-Dec-2014-2.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.vtnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015-DV-Fatality-Report.pdf> in addition, 77% of the suicides associated with the homicides were committed with firearms

⁶ http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20151208/NEWS/151209360/-1/breaking_ajax

of expressing the mission of Rock Point School is “Become Your Best Self.” This sentiment reflects our commitment to do all we can to help each student excel. Sometimes that requires exceptional approaches in the face of challenging circumstances, but it is the foundation of our commitment to excellence, built upon the shared values of our educational community and approach.

The question I am asking is how do we become our best self as a country in the midst of this current epidemic of gun violence? How will we balance the shared values of freedom, liberty, the common good, safety for all, human dignity and the other values that lie at the heart of our identity as a people as we seek to address this problem? When will we stop talking at and past each other and start talking to and with each other and find things we can do together to make a difference?

Breaking the cycle of violence begins in our homes and in our communities, as a recent policy alert from the Episcopal Public Policy Network reminds us.⁷ *“We have the agency to break the cycle of violence right now through monitoring media, building relationships, raising awareness, and communicating carefully. Only then can the ‘cycle of violence’ be countered by a ‘spiral of peace.’”*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”* I want to be among those children of God. This spiral of peace begins in our hearts and in our homes and it starts now as we actively pursue all efforts to be instruments of God’s peace. It moves outward from there, circling family, neighbors, and our world community in compassion, education, awareness, and action, so that one day the vision offered by the prophet Isaiah when speaking about a restored Jerusalem might actually come to pass in our world; *Violence shall no more be heard in your land, wasting nor destruction within your borders; but you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.*

The only way to find out is to try. To become instruments of God’s peace. To become our best selves. I hope that is part of why you are gathered here today. Today, our lighting of candles to pierce the darkness and our prayers of remembrance offer hope to hearts that are broken and to a world in need of healing. May we be servants of that hope and healing, for nothing can overcome such light.

⁷ <http://advocacy.episcopalchurch.org/app/document/10622175>