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Gun violence

United Methodist resolution pleads for public safety measures

by Wayne Rhodes, Editor, Faith in Action on December 19, 2012

Gun violence has been a concern of United Methodists for decades. The denomination adopted a resolution in 1976 that describes the United States as a "shooting gallery."

That resolution, "Gun Control," declares that the "mounting proliferation of firearms in U.S. society" means the safety of citizens "cannot be guaranteed." The resolution calls on the church to affirm its faith through vigorous efforts to curb gun violence.

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The situation described nearly 40 years ago seems to have changed little, if not worsened significantly. The resolution itself, though, has morphed through those years into focusing on "Gun Violence" (§3426, *Book of Resolutions*, 2008). The earlier resolution said "special controls should be applied to the handgun, for it is the most deadly and least utilitarian weapon in American society."

That resolution does not mention assault weapons, which certainly have displaced handguns as "the most deadly and least utilitarian weapon in American society." Look at the recent Aurora, Colo., killings or those at Virginia Tech for examples that underscore this death-dealing shift.

Scope of resolution broadened

The United Methodist General Conference, the denomination's highest policy-setting body, adopted the current resolution in 2000, then revised and readopted it in 2008. The scope of the current resolution has broadened dramatically, including regulating transfer of all small arms and light weapons so as to curb gun violence throughout the world. Unregulated small-arms trade, including such as assault weapons and shoulder-fired missiles, often leads to human rights abuses, according to the resolution.

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"Violence and, more particularly, violence to children and youths is a primary concern for United Methodists," the current resolution declares. It emphasizes that gun violence is killing children throughout the world, not just the United States.

The risk of handgun violence to children and youths is more prevalent in the United States today than in any previous generation, though, according to the resolution. "Communities and schools in the United States are so exposed to large numbers of privately owned guns that no mere attempts at providing slightly better security can match the awful threat of guns finding their way through our well-intentioned safety systems," the resolution points out.

"Gun Violence" supports federal legislation in the U.S. Congress to regulate the importation, manufacturing, sale and possession of guns and ammunition by the general public. "Such legislation should include provisions for the registration and licensing of gun purchasers and owners, appropriate background investigation and waiting periods prior to gun purchase, and regulation of subsequent sale," it states.

Licensing provisions

The earlier resolution declares support for the licensing of gun owners and registration of all firearms. "Licensing provisions should require adequate identification of gun owners and provide basic standards with respect to age, absence of mental illness, and lack of a serious criminal record," the resolution states. "These and other objective standards should be applied in determining the granting or denial of any license."

Today's resolution declares that acts of "senseless violence" should not be an acceptable occurrence in any community. It says the church "must continue to address these issues of violence" and develop programs to enrich the lives of all children and youths.

The United Methodist resolution on "Gun Violence" follows:

Resolution #3426. Gun Violence

Violence and, more particularly, violence to children and youths is a primary concern for United Methodists. We recognize and deplore violence which kills and injures children and youths. In the name of Christ, who came "and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (Ephesians 2:17) and challenged all his disciples to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), we call upon the church to affirm its faith through vigorous efforts to curb and eliminate gun violence.

Gun violence is killing children throughout the world, including the United States. In the United States alone, there are an estimated 223 million firearms. Approximately one out of every three households owns a handgun. The risk of handgun violence to children and youths is more prevalent in the United States today than in any previous generation. Communities and schools in the United States are so exposed to large

numbers of privately owned guns that no mere attempts at providing slightly better security can match the awful threat of guns finding their way through our well-intentioned safety systems.

Many children go to school amidst passionately violent segments of current youth culture. No appeals to individual autonomy are sufficient to justify our church's ignorance of this threat. The need to prevent the incidence of firearm-related injury and death is an issue of increasing concern and a priority public-health issue. The United Methodist Church is among those religious communions calling for social policies and personal lifestyles that bring an end to senseless gun violence.

Gun violence in U.S. schools has emerged as a growing and disturbing trend. The United Methodist Church supports ministries that address the issue of violence and crime prevention for children/youths in urban areas through the Communities of Shalom. Violence is no longer confined to the streets of urban areas but has occurred at an increasing rate in U.S. suburban communities. Over the past several years, high-profile cases of school shootings involving suburban youths killing and injuring teachers and peers alike have once again brought the issue of guns and youth to the forefront of national attention.

Amnesty International reports that hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world are killed every year because of the unregulated small-arms trade. The small-arms trade, which includes such arms as assault weapons and shoulder-fired missiles, is legal but out of control. Amnesty International reports that as many as 639 million small arms and light weapons are in circulation around the world. The small-arms trade incites local conflicts, which so often lead to unnecessary human-rights abuses. The proliferation of small arms has led to the forced recruitment of children into war and local ethnic conflicts escalating into destabilizing regional warfare. We urge all nations where there is a presence of The United Methodist Church to participate in the process of developing a legally binding Arms Trade Treaty through the United Nations to regulate the transfer of all small arms and light weapons so as to curb gun violence throughout the world.

These acts of senseless violence should not be an acceptable occurrence in any community: suburban, urban or rural. The church must continue to address these issues of violence and develop programs to enrich the lives of all children/youths.

In light of the increase of gun violence affecting the lives of children and youths, we call upon The United Methodist Church to:

1. convene workshops of clergy and mental health care professionals from communities (urban, rural and suburban) in which gun violence has had a significant impact in order to discuss ways by which The United Methodist Church should respond to this growing tragedy, and to determine what role the church should take in facilitating dialogue to address the issue of gun violence in our schools and among our children;

2. educate the United Methodist community (parents, children and youths) on gun safety, violence prevention, adult responsibility around gun-violence prevention, and the public health impact of gun violence;
3. identify community-based, state and national organizations working on the issue of gun violence, and seek their assistance to design education and prevention workshops around the issue of gun violence and its effect on children and youths;
4. develop advocacy groups within local congregations to advocate for the eventual reduction of the availability of guns in society with a particular emphasis upon handguns, handgun ammunition, assault weapons, automatic weapons, automatic weapon conversion kits and guns that cannot be detected by traditionally used metal-detection devices. These groups can be linked to community-based, state and national organizations working on gun and violence issues;
5. support federal legislation in the U.S. Congress to regulate the importation, manufacturing, sale and possession of guns and ammunition by the general public. Such legislation should include provisions for the registration and licensing of gun purchasers and owners, appropriate background investigation and waiting periods prior to gun purchase, and regulation of subsequent sale;
6. call upon all governments of the world in which there is a United Methodist presence to establish national bans on ownership by the general public of handguns, assault weapons, automatic weapon conversion kits, and weapons that cannot be detected by traditionally used metal-detection devices;
7. call upon the print, broadcasting and electronic media, as well as the entertainment industry, to refrain from promoting gun usage to children;
8. discourage the graphic depiction and glorification of violence by the entertainment industry, which greatly influences our society, and recommend that these issues be addressed through education and consciousness raising;
9. call upon the federal and state governments to provide significant assistance to victims of gun violence and their families;
10. recommend that annual conferences make visible public witness to the sin of gun violence and to the hope of community healing; and
11. reflecting the traditional role of The United Methodist Church has been one of safety and sanctuary, every United Methodist church is officially declared a weapon-free zone.

Adopted 2000
Revised and Readopted 2008

See Social Principles, ¶162.