



## A SUSTAINED JOURNEY

### How the ELCA has addressed the issue of gun violence

This overview of the ELCA's attention to gun violence in our society provides a bare-bones narrative and an analysis of key church documents. This two-page summary provides a road map, whereas the appendix provides brief descriptions of documents and selected illustrations of public action. The boldface terms in the summary indicate documents detailed in the appendix. (The social teaching and policy documents mentioned, along with supplemental resources, can be found at <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society>.)

#### SUMMARY

##### I. KEY DOCUMENTS AND HISTORICAL PROGRESSION

###### A. EARLY ADDRESS

The ELCA addressed gun violence early in its existence through two social policy resolutions, adopted at churchwide assemblies in 1989 and 1993. The language of the **1993 resolution "Community Violence and Gun Control"** is particularly comprehensive. It calls upon congregations, synods, and agencies to work for passage and enforcement of local, state, and national legislation that controls the "manufacture, importation, exportation, sale, purchase, transfer, receipt, possession and or transportation of handguns, assault weapons, and assault-like weapons and their parts, excluding rifles and shotguns used for hunting and sporting purposes, for use other than law enforcement and military purposes."

Thereafter, the **1994 social message "Community Violence"** and the **1995 social statement *For Peace in God's World*** frame the social and theological analyses applicable for church response to issues of gun violence. As indicated by their titles, the scope of each is broader than simply gun violence, but their policy recommendations are generally applicable.

The next church document specific to gun violence was a **1996 memorial passed by Women of the ELCA** that addressed gun violence against children and asked congregations to educate themselves and annually observe "Rachel's Day" (Jeremiah 31:15-17).

###### B. RESPONSE TO MASS SHOOTINGS

Guided by these early documents, members of this church have acted locally or worked in various ways on state and federal efforts. Over the years, ELCA Advocacy has dedicated staff resources as available and has participated continually in coalitions, in organized visits, and in communications to members of state and federal elected bodies. However, there has been a clear uptick in attention and action in this decade within our church, evident in the variety and frequency of public statements and the appearance of such groups as Lutherans for Gun Violence Prevention <http://www.engageelca.org>.

Responding to multiple mass shootings in 2012, the Conference of Bishops (COB) issued a **2013 Pastoral Letter on Violence** that summarizes theological, ethical, and practical perspectives and invites engagement via 1) lament, 2) moral formation and discernment, and 3) advocacy.

From 2013 to 2019, at least **eight public messages from the Presiding Bishop** have responded to gun attacks on police and mass shootings at synagogues, mosques, churches, nightclubs, and schools. These letters express lament, interfaith solidarity, condemnation of hatred in all its forms, and support for victims and communities. They speak to the image of God in all people and suggest actions for reaching out in communities, opposing bigotry, and advocating for gun control policies. They ask us to repent for our own participation in cultures of violence, and they promote ministries of reconciliation.

During that same period, other kinds of efforts also increased. In July 2016, ELCA constituents were invited to send letters to Congress urging support of gun safety measures. In August 2016 the Churchwide Assembly adopted the social policy resolution “**Gun Violence Prevention,**” affirming this church’s position on the need for background checks and an assault weapons ban. It also asked the Church Council to consider forming an ELCA task force to address gun violence prevention.

While such efforts indicate sustained work, it is also true that mass shootings prompt specific response. After the Parkland, Fla., high school shooting in 2018, the presiding bishop again wrote to Congress to endorse background checks and an assault weapons ban. After the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the presiding bishop sent a letter of support while ELCA constituents mounted another letter-writing campaign seeking gun safety measures.

## II. ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

The three key ELCA social teaching documents relating to gun violence are the 1993 resolution “Community Violence and Gun Control, the 1994 social message on “Community Violence,” and the broader 1995 social statement *For Peace in God’s World*. The fullest pastoral address is the 2013 “COB Pastoral Letter on Violence.” (See brief highlights of each in Appendix.) Though not identical, they reflect significant cohesion in the grounding they offer.

None of these documents seeks a ban on all gun ownership or objects to using guns for sporting activities. Taken together, however, they point to the systemic and intersectional nature of gun violence. Woven through these and other ELCA pronouncements is sustained attention to the interplay of gun violence with, racism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, anti-Islam, hatred of people’s gender or sexual orientation, domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, gang violence, terrorism, mental illness, access to weapons, the increasing power of weapons, etc. The 2013 COB letter concluded, “To focus only on guns is to miss the depth of our vocation. Yet, guns and access are keys to the challenges we face.”

Whereas advocacy and the application of ELCA gun-violence positions in the public square are most visible when prompted by mass shootings, such incidents generally reveal the need for sustained spiritual and political response. For example, though legislators react to ban assault weapons after mass shootings, the ELCA has consistently called for universal background checks, which have a broader reach.

The ELCA already has solid resources at its disposal and has used them over the years. But the journey is long, and more travelers are needed. The ELCA has a special role to raise awareness of the spiritual and volitional character of these issues as the ELCA discerns the scope and priorities of a sustained journey.