



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

A social message on ...

Community Violence

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THE REALITY AND FEAR OF VIOLENCE TODAY

Violence between humans is an age-old mark of sin. Cain slew Abel; Shechem raped Dinah; David plotted the death of Uriah. Massacres, raids, and widespread abuse of peoples have been a part of our history. Those in power have often extended their racial, sexual, economic, and/or political domination through violent means. Violence is woven in and through the distinctive stories that have shaped us as Americans.

If there is something timeless about violence, there are also disturbingly new aspects. Today the word violence evokes images of random shootings and muggings on city streets and country lanes; savage abuse of women, men, and children; senseless brutality depicted in movies, TV shows, and video games. The breakdown of families and communities is a widespread fact of life, and violence one of its wages. For some women and children, home is less safe than the street.¹ Hate crimes continue.² Neighborhood, schoolyard, workplace, or family disputes spark into violence and become lethal. They become headline news, reinforcing the atmosphere of violence and inspiring profitable entertainment media.

People who are poor and vulnerable have long experienced life as “nasty, brutish, and short;” now those who thought they were privileged and protected are also haunted by violence. Many of the young, who previously were sheltered from exposure to violence,

are now not only “entertained” by violence, but increasingly are both its victims and perpetrators. People who are poor, who are of color, or who live in inner cities are typically the most pervasively and deeply affected by violence. However, disintegrating social structures and values have occasioned turbulence that affects people of every class, color, and locality.

Even when experienced as stark and brutal, the causes of violence are complex. Different forms of violence have distinctive dynamics and remedies. Social as well as individual factors are involved. The collapse of families, economic injustices, breakdown of community institutions, unemployment, inadequate moral formation and guidance, personal irresponsibility, racism and sexism, inability to deal with anger and conflict, homophobia, low self-esteem, psychological problems, biochemical imbalances, and substance abuse – these and other factors lie behind the incidence of violent crime today. Fear, anxiety, and alienation are expressed through readily-available weapons of destruction.

Violence breeds more violence. Incidents of violence stir up anger and a craving for vengeance. Fear festers an attitude of “we’re not going to take it anymore.” Increasingly, our national mood has been described as one of “getting mad and getting even.” Possessing a gun is viewed by many ordinary citizens as their last line of defense against the chaos in society, or at least a means by which to get some respect. Harsher, more vindictive sentences (including the death penalty) have much popular appeal, despite their expense and failure to deter further crime.³

“Tough on crime” policy stances are often proposed in response to the fear of violent crimes. Such stances have their place, but also their limits. Although police and prisons help to protect society, they have no real effect on the causes of violence. More prison cells and larger police forces do not necessarily lead to greater security. The United States has the highest imprisonment rate in the world, but that has not significantly affected its high rate of violent crime. Instead of addressing the root causes of violence, “tough on crime” measures can blind us to the injustices that breed violence in the first place.

People of color or those who do not speak English have long been suspicious of the protection and justice that police and criminal justice systems claim to provide. Prisons can often become “schools” that harden criminals, making them even more disillusioned and enraged.

Violence and rumors of violence continue to spread – feared yet also expected in daily life. In the face of this, what are we as a church called to be and do? What resources of our faith can we bring to bear on this apparently intractable predicament? How shall we respond to both victims and perpetrators of violence? What shall we do in cooperation with others as together we seek to counter violence in our communities?

RESPONDING OUT OF THE FAITH WE CONFESS

In the face of violence, God’s resolve for peace in human communities is unshakable. Deliberate acts to harm or kill innocent people violate God’s intention for human community. God’s commandment is “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). In proclaiming God’s law, we declare that all people are accountable before God and the community to honor and respect the life God has given.

Before God, we all are in captivity to sin, and in need of God’s mercy. Some have committed acts of violence. Others have been sinned against through acts of violence. Still others are overwhelmed by fears of violence. In proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ’s forgiveness, healing, and new life, the church addresses the ultimate root of violence. Through his death, Christ broke down the dividing walls of hostility, fear, and violence between people, reconciling us to God and one another (Ephesians 2:13-17). God’s reign of peace has come in Jesus Christ, and will be complete in a “new heaven and new earth” where death and pain “will be no more” (Revelation 21:1,4).

The Holy Spirit works among us to wrench us from violence, hate, greed, and fear, and transforms us into people who are called to trust God and live in community with one another. In doing so, we need to confront the violent tendencies within ourselves and our society, and find ways to cultivate the practice of nonviolence.

Christians, as salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13) and light of the world (Matthew 5:14), are called to respond to violent crime in the restorative ways taught by Jesus (Matthew 5:38-39) and shown by his actions (John 8:3-11).⁴ Rather than reacting out of fear, or out of a vengeful desire to “get even” with those we consider our “enemies” (Luke 6:27ff), we realize they are our neighbors. We are empowered to take up the challenge to prevent violence and to attack the complex causes that make violence so pervasive.

According to Lutheran theology, society is to be ruled by the civil use of the Law. Government is responsible under God for the protection of its citizens and the maintenance of justice and public order.⁵ Just laws and their proper enforcement by police and courts are necessary to restrain violence. But laws and their enforcement are often corrupted by sin. As citizens in a democracy, we have the responsibility to join with others to hold government accountable for protecting society and ensuring justice for all, and to seek changes in policies and practices toward these ends.

PURSUING OUR COMMITMENT TO COUNTER COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

As a Community of Worship

The cross and resurrection have broken the cycle of violence, freeing us for God’s future and for one another. We confess how we have sinned and been sinned against through violence. Through prayer and absolution, the power of what God has promised is able to disarm our captivity to violence. Gathered around word and sacrament, we remember and celebrate this gift of peace given the world in Jesus Christ. We are nourished and strengthened to make peace and to embrace:

- *those who are victims of violence and often feel silenced. They need to speak of their pain and lingering fears, and to hear the word of new life in ways that are effective in healing the pain and overcoming the fears;*
- *those who have done violence to others, and their families, who often feel frozen out of the community of faith. They need to hear God’s law and gospel in their lives, so that they might turn and walk in the newness of life; and*

- *those who protect and defend society, enforce laws, settle disputes, and maintain domestic tranquillity. They need to be supported as they live out their vocation for the sake of the common good.*

As a Community of Education and Service

Communities of faith, on their own, through social ministry organizations, and in partnership with others, are called to minister to those in captivity to violence through such efforts as:

- providing a “safe place,” counselling, and other services that enable people to face and deal with the realities and fears of violence in their lives;
- mediating to achieve just and peaceful solutions to social conflicts in their communities;
- educating children and adults in how to deal with anger, disagreement, discrimination, and disappointment in nonviolent ways;
- assisting those affected by poverty, racism, family instability, domestic violence, and unemployment as they seek to deal with these challenges;
- organizing activities and programs that are effective in moving youth, especially those attracted to gangs and hate groups, from disillusionment to hope;
- supporting organizing efforts that empower communities to effect change; ministering with persons who have committed violent crimes so that they might
- be restored as productive participants in their communities;
- building relationships of trust between neighborhood residents and law enforcement officers; and
- enabling people to reclaim their violence-plagued communities, especially through community economic development.

As a Community of Advocacy

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is committed to:

work with and on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and those who suffer, using its power and influence with political and economic decision-making bodies to develop and advocate policies that seek to advance justice, peace, and the care of creation.⁶

In service of its commitment to counter violence, the ELCA publicly advocates in opposition to the death penalty because the death penalty perpetuates violence, its actual use is not fair, and it fails to make society better or safer.⁷ The ELCA also advocates in favor of gun control.⁸ These stances alone, however, cannot presume to stop the tide of violence, much less address the causes.

Violent crime and those who perpetuate it must be stopped. The challenge is to restrain violence in ways that effectively limit it, and that do not simply repay violence with more violence. Some violence is a reminder of the failure to ensure justice for all members of a society. Many people – due to race, language, economic class, gender, or sexual orientation – have not received the protection and justice necessary for human well-being. Others suffer from individual pathologies. Attention must be given to those especially vulnerable because of the breakdown of families and other communities of moral formation. Short-term measures to counter violence are needed, as well as long-term measures to counter social and economic inequalities and the brokenness that contribute to violence.

As we move toward a more comprehensive address of community violence, we join with other religious communities in anti-violence initiatives that:

- *offer vital spiritual and moral resources for replacing fear and violence with hope and reconciliation in our homes, communities, and nation;*
- *stem the proliferation of guns in our streets, schools, and homes;*
- *counter the “culture of violence” that pervades our national culture and media;*

- *build strong anti-violence coalitions in our neighborhoods and communities;*
- *develop peer mediation skills in the schools; and*
- *protect our youth from the epidemic of violence through equitable law enforcement, and the promotion of education, social programs, anti-drug programs, and real job opportunities.*⁹

We also join with others in working through government and with the advertising and media industries to find ways to respect free expression while abhorring and seeking appropriate ways to limit expressions of violence in electronic media and film.¹⁰

As a Community of Ongoing Deliberation

As a church committed to “contribute toward the up-building of the common good and the revitalizing of public life through open and inclusive processes of deliberation,”¹¹ we call for public discussions of violence that:

- *continue to examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of measures such as the death penalty and gun control;*
- *question a one-sided approach to violence, which would make persecution and punishment the primary remedies;*
- *object to the manipulation of fear of violence by some who hold or seek public office;*
- *deplore how “toughness on crime” can play into the racism infecting and affecting all in this society;*¹²
- *explore specific ways violence has shaped and influenced our history;*
- *challenge the logic of winning by destroying one’s opponents, which Scripture has sometimes been used to justify;*
- *explore how depictions of violence in the media (typically apart from the pain and anguish) affect actual violence in society; and*
- *consider not only short-term measures, but also long-term address of the recalcitrant discrimination and injustices that lie behind many expressions of violence.*

Guiding us is a vision of the age-to-come in which people are free from violence, justice is done, and the common good is realized. “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord” (Isaiah 65:25). May that promise stir us to challenge and heal violence in our day!

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Ministry to Abusive Families,” (1990, Division for Congregational Ministries), a resource on domestic violence is available from the ELCA Distribution Service (code: 34-10030-2100).
- 2 See “No Hate Allowed,” A Resource for Congregations for Action Against Racial Hate Crimes (1993, ELCA Commission for Multicultural Ministries), available from the ELCA Distribution Service (code: 69-7007).
- 3 See the ELCA social statement, “The Death Penalty,” (1991).
- 4 “The Death Penalty,” p. 2.
- 5 For example, see Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession.
- 6 ELCA Social Statement, “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective” (1991), p. 7.
- 7 See the ELCA Social Statement on “The Death Penalty” (1991).
- 8 See ELCA Social Policy Resolution “Community Violence-Gun Control” (CA93.06.10), which calls for “passage and strict enforcement of local, state, and national legislation that rigidly controls manufacture, importation, exportation, sale, purchase, transfer, receipt, possession and 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.” https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Community_Violence_GunsSPR93.pdf
- 9 These items are from a religious leaders’ letter on violence to President Clinton, December 10, 1993 (National Council of Churches of Christ, USA).
- 10 See “Violence in Electronic Media and Film,” A Policy Statement adopted by the General Board of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, November 11, 1993.
- 11 “The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective,” p. 8.
- 12 ELCA Social Statement, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture” (1993).

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