Draft of a Social Message
on Gun-related Violence and Trauma

Preface: Making Peace Amid Gun-related Violence and Trauma

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“For Christians peacemaking originates in the biblical vision of God’s sovereign promise of a world where violence and trauma are no more. (Is 11:9) God’s resolve for peace through nonviolent love calls us to do as God does—to never cease striving for peace. That striving takes place in many ways, through various roles and in the places of responsibility where we live. That calling comes even as we mourn that in relation to gun-related violence and trauma in the United States, there is no peace.

Indeed, there are increasing conflicts and hard questions. Most individuals in the U.S. long for an end to senseless harm and killing, even as they often disagree passionately about solutions. These differences reflect cultural and moral diversity—in society and in our churches, which are compounded by mistrust, exclusion, and alienation. Among the social crises involved, health disparities of age, class, gender, and race discrimination contribute significantly to shootings that claim nearly 50,000 lives each year. Some communities know a catastrophe of perpetual violence and trauma due to tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use. There is no peace for these or countless more.

For three decades the ELCA has addressed the complex sources and manifestations of gun-related violence and trauma in the U.S. through social messages, resolutions, statements, study materials and pastoral letters. This church has condemned gun violence that seeks to advance racism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and heterosexism. In these and other ways the ELCA has sought to restrain destructive impulses and malevolent intentions that, powered by a gun, lead to self-harm and criminal violence. And yet there is no peace.

Nevertheless, we know God’s resolve remains. Aware then that all people fall short in working for peace and because new societal trends and understandings of risk and harm call our church to witness anew, this message offers a fresh societal vision of shared responsibility for peacemaking.

What societal trends and new understandings call the ELCA to witness anew?

Growing and disparate violence amid pervasive insecurity

National gun suicide and murder rates have recently returned to near-record highs. Three hundred U.S. residents are shot every day. Over 100 perish. Though public mass shootings account for a tiny fraction of criminal homicides, they have grave effects well beyond lost individuals. Guns are now the leading cause of death among individuals under 20. Within this population and others, persisting racial...
disparities of harm cry out for attention.\textsuperscript{5} Such disparities are visible daily on the National Gun Violence Memorial website at \texttt{gunmemorial.org}.\textsuperscript{6}

Though shootings in the U.S. today occur disproportionately across populations and places, U.S. residents share a pervasive sense of insecurity.\textsuperscript{7} This insecurity takes complex forms with different sources and histories. We live in an information-saturated society that delivers instantaneous news of gun deaths and the troubles they reveal. Narratives of social unrest, constant change, and uncontrolled threat naturally provoke fear. This insecurity can be confirmed when elected officials respond to yet more carnage with “thoughts and prayers.”

\textbf{Seeing trauma and seeking protection}

Two dimensions of insecurity merit searching attention today. First, encounters with gun-related violence are increasingly understood by researchers to involve forms of trauma that have powerful, lasting effects on individuals and communities.\textsuperscript{8} The harm and risk of gun violence extend beyond gun death statistics.

Second, while traumatic experiences related to gun violence are known by some and unseen by others, one significant response is the surge in defensive gun ownership wherein people buy firearms for self-protection. Security concerns are prompting millions of previously unarmed people to join the 40\% living in households with a gun and the 75 million people who own some 400 million firearms.\textsuperscript{9}

The nature and dimensions of gun-related violence and trauma today call our church to a new search for better understanding and renewed action. This search must be undertaken with all members of our society. Christians and all people of good will should, above all, do no harm and avoid risk of harm while striving in myriad ways for peace—in our homes, our communities, and our souls.

\textbf{Part One: Seeing Trauma in Insecurity, Despair, and Mayhem}

“Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” —Jeremiah 31:15

“My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.” —Lamentations 3:17

\textbf{Why is seeing trauma morally significant?}

Peacemaking begins with understanding what is going on and what our neighbors need to flourish. Trauma research offers insight into the often-unmet needs of people and communities that experience gun violence. This research exposes the full reach and impact of tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use. It reveals that multitudes of U.S. residents have been harmed or live at risk of harm that can be mitigated and prevented. Seeing the trauma of gun-related violence, we can empathize with our neighbors and be more mindful of the complex situation today.

Gun-related trauma affects people as individuals and as members of families, communities, and society. It affects some people and communities much more profoundly than others due to disparities in health and cultural norms.\textsuperscript{10} Seeing trauma can help us to name wounds that call for care, to advance our
understanding of criminal violence and self-harm, and to embrace wiser policy that calls for violence prevention as well as restraint.

What is gun-related trauma?

Gun-related trauma includes both individual and collective responses to harmful events and threatening conditions. It stems from exposure to events or conditions that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening, with lasting, adverse effects on health. People can be traumatized at any age, but trauma can have particularly debilitating effects on childhood development.

Trauma is a subjective and socially conditioned experience. Two or more people can experience the same event or condition but may not be traumatized in the same way. Trauma varies according to one’s proximity to the event or condition, the existing resources and strengths of those affected, and the severity and persistence of the event or situation. It varies according to the amount of support needed and available to affected people.

Forms and relations of trauma

Gun-related trauma can follow an acute incident such as armed robbery. It can result from adverse childhood experiences of routine exposure to gun violence. Traumatic events can be communal as well as individual and can have a compounding effect when they happen to people coping with preexisting trauma related to such injustices as homophobia, transphobia, racism, or sexism.

Some people and groups can experience trauma as firsthand participants, whereas others may be traumatized as secondhand participants responding to wounded people. Scholars note how trauma extends in different ways through time. A traumatic event may end, but effects can linger. Persisting trauma can be transmitted across generations through families and communities. Whole societies can be traumatized by eruptions of violence such as a terrorist attack that triggers pervasive insecurity and disorientation.

Powerlessness and trauma

Human health and well-being depend upon our individual capacity to cope with normal life-altering events. People must summon courage and resilience to function as agents in relation to others. Similarly, humane societies require individuals who respect, trust, and cooperate daily with others to fulfill life-giving roles and institutions. Gun-related trauma threatens these personal and social goods.

When gun-related trauma occurs, people are wounded in body, mind, and spirit by experiences that overwhelm their resources of understanding and integration. These experiences have no place in the beliefs and values people use to understand the world and to pursue lives worthy of their humanity. In a state of trauma, the convictions upon which our lives depend are shredded by such experiences.

Gun violence threatens bodily life. The trauma that can follow threatens meaningful and purposeful agency. It can provoke emotional, existential, and spiritual crisis that has no apparent end or that may lie dormant for years. To see trauma in the lives of people affected by gun-related violence is to see suffering and powerlessness.
How do forms of gun-related trauma affect U.S. residents?

Anticipatory trauma and defensive responses
Polling research indicates that four in 10 U.S. residents fear becoming a victim of gun-related violence.

Young people are more fearful than adults. Over half expect gun violence to increase in coming years. They are evenly divided over whether gun ownership makes the country safer. Most individuals who own and buy guns today do so to defend themselves, across an increasing social diversity.

Defensive gun owners are responding to various experiences of unrest and insecurity—lawlessness, social instability, racism, xenophobia, and tyranny. They seek to protect self, family, community, cultural survival, political liberty, and other goods. Many defensive gun owners feel that government fails to keep the peace and that civilians must therefore claim their right to use lethal force in defense against death or grave bodily injury. Permissive gun rights decisions and laws of federal courts and state legislatures have strengthened defensive gun ownership today.

Though a majority of U.S. residents decline gun ownership, many are open to future ownership. Given current trends, every person will likely know at least one victim of gun violence in their social network.

Over half of adults say they or a family member has personally experienced gun-related threat, injury, or self-defense. Eight in 10 U.S. people report feeling safe in their neighborhoods, yet an equal number report that they have taken at least one precaution to protect themselves or family members from gun-related violence.

In circumstances such as these, where people adopt defensive mindsets and practices, they are exhibiting anticipatory trauma. This form of trauma has been documented among violence survivors and people and communities that take steps to avoid becoming victims.

Anticipatory trauma involves taking protective actions that are grounded in fear of sudden, life-threatening violence, a fear that people know in different ways and degrees. People buy guns and seek training. Others purchase knives or pepper spray. Parents talk to their children about mass shooters or the police. Kids go to school wearing bulletproof backpacks and practice lockdown drills. Individuals avoid large crowds. Millions anticipate trauma.

Gun suicide and survivor trauma
We see trauma not only in the consequential dread affecting U.S. individuals but also in the personal loss and pain of gun-related self-harm and suicide. Nearly 60% of gun deaths in the U.S. are self-inflicted, ending over 25,000 lives.

Firearms are a means. They do not cause suicidal thoughts. They do, however, provide a highly lethal means of ending a personal crisis characterized by desperate and impulsive thinking. Ninety percent of gun suicide attempts are completed, and these account for half of all suicides. Because these deaths can happen without warning and are violent, they can be traumatic for surviving family and friends.

Research shows that ready access is a risk factor for suicide. Firearm suicides can be reduced through safety restraints that put time and distance between the firearm and the person in crisis. Such restraints include interventional (or “red flag”) laws, educational programs, and voluntary practices.
People increasingly recognize firearm suicide as a public health crisis, marked by disparities, that calls for both prevention and restraint. Such suicides can be prevented through improved access to mental health care and reform of the social factors that determine health.

**Criminal homicide and community trauma**

Over 20,000 U.S. residents are murdered with firearms every year. This violence is concentrated among relatively few people in high-crime neighborhoods and communities. Though the U.S. has the highest rates of gun ownership and homicide among developed countries, less than 1% of U.S. gun owners harm others or themselves. Apart from mass shootings and intimate partner violence, gun violence predominantly harms people living in Black and Hispanic communities, where rates of injury and death greatly exceed national rates. Black youth and young men represent 2% of U.S. residents but sustain nearly 40% of gun homicide deaths. This gun violence inequality correlates with social inequalities of poverty, crime, drug use, unemployment, and other elements of structural racism and caste.

Threatening and deadly gun use contributes to the cycles of violence and trauma endemic to economically depressed neighborhoods. When violence keeps neighborhoods from meeting people's basic needs, community trauma follows. If needs continue to go unmet, trauma becomes intergenerational. Persisting violence erodes social capital, impairs social networks, and breeds hopelessness. Community trauma threatens investments in housing, schools, businesses, and recreational spaces. Social solidarity and responsibility suffer. People can become desensitized to violence and embrace attitudes and behaviors that engender more violence.

Policing and incarceration have historically been the primary response to community violence and trauma. Today, because more people understand the need for prevention, community-based violence intervention programs are making important gains in many affected neighborhoods and show promise for reducing gun homicide. These programs cultivate community leadership and knowledge, focusing on individuals who are most at risk of perpetrating violence.

Community-based violence intervention programs develop leaders and support services, tailored to local needs, that promote healthy alternatives to daily violence and trauma. Respected community members interrupt conflict and retaliation, ameliorating the wounds and powerlessness of trauma by building relationships between people in conflict with one another and between people and the support services they need. Community-based violence intervention programs across the United States do effective peacemaking—and create hope.

**Public mass shootings and the violence-trauma cycle**

Public mass shootings are another source of trauma. These are events where four or more people are murdered indiscriminately in public. Though these shootings receive outsized attention in the news and public opinion, they do cause immense loss, suffering, and fear. They violate spaces where community unfolds—workplaces, schools, worship places, shops, plazas, clubs, theaters. They traumatize the local community—and the nation.

Mass public shootings injure, kill, and traumatize hundreds and often thousands of people at a time—with distressing frequency. Though the risk of being shot in public remains low, we should recognize the pervasive fear of wanton murder as anticipatory trauma. Sometimes described as terrorist activity, these
This text is not official ELCA teaching; it is a draft for comment.

shootings merit societal concern for the losses sustained and the fear that follows. This fear gives everyone an opportunity to glimpse the gun-related trauma of all victims and perhaps grow in empathy.

We must also understand neighbors who kill. Mass shooters typically experience violence and trauma as children—parental suicide, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying. Without proper care such trauma can inspire teenage and adult rage, hate, and despair that can lead to angry, isolated, and retaliatory behavior, both punishing and suicidal. Trauma does not fully explain mass shootings. However, these events exhibit the violence-trauma cycle seen in other U.S. communities that are troubled by suicide and criminal homicide.

Part Two: Countering Violence and Trauma as God’s Resolve for Peace

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer.” —Matthew 5:38-9

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” —Matthew 5:43-4

Gun-related violence and trauma in the U.S. demand courageous and unremitting response. This must be undertaken peaceably to bridge disabling social and political conflict over what makes for peace. The social teaching of our church seeks to do so.

What is the social teaching of the ELCA on gun-related violence?

ELCA teaching on community violence

The 1994 social message “Community Violence” addresses a society “haunted by violence” amid “disintegrating social structures and values” affecting U.S. residents of “every class, color, and locality” while noting inequalities that continue today. It takes a countercultural stance through an ethic of prevention. and urges ELCA members “to take up the challenge to prevent violence and to attack the complex causes that make violence so pervasive.”

The message notes that countering the brokenness and injustice that contribute to violence and trauma will be an incremental and long-term process. Present threats and harms must be restrained as well. God tasks government to administer justice, maintain order, and establish security. This governance includes coercive and sometimes lethal force through policing and the military. To safeguard the public, government may enact laws that regulate gun access. This ethic of restraint supplements an ethic of prevention. Together these paired norms authorize a “more comprehensive address” of the complexity of violence and trauma than single-issue debates about solutions.

ELCA teaching on peacemaking

With the 1995 social statement For Peace in God’s World, ELCA teaching took a countercultural stance toward violence. Though the statement affirms that Christians may serve in the military and conduct just wars, it adds that this church “needs the witness of its members who in the name of Jesus Christ refuse participation in war, who commit themselves to establish peace and justice on earth by nonviolent power alone.” Accordingly, the ELCA embraces the priority of building a just peace to prevent war. The
goals of peacemaking apply to community life and it is a means to proclaim God’s resolve for social peace and well-being for all.

We undertake Christian peacemaking in a pluralistic and interdependent society where God works among all people, communities, and structures. We participate in God’s resolve for peace through the many roles, associations, and institutions that sustain human life. In all these, humans have opportunities to build a just peace, which this statement defines as “responsible difference in unity.”

Together, individuals and collectives exercise shared responsibility.

How does love of neighbor advance peacemaking today?

Living in the neighbor through love

Christian peacemakers participate in the love of God in Christ as they ameliorate the brokenness of life. In the foundational essay The Freedom of a Christian, Martin Luther pictures this participation as living in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Christians should “do nothing in this life except what is profitable, necessary, and life-giving” for the neighbor. They should “serve and help our neighbor in every possible way.” Christian love builds powerful relationships that counter the despair, enmity, and nihilism that often contribute to lethal harm and criminal homicide.

Shared responsibility beyond liberal individualism

It must be recognized that Christian love of neighbor counters a widely held stance concerning gun use that minimizes, at best, shared responsibility. People across the political spectrum embrace forms of liberal individualism that prioritize personal freedom and autonomy over the interests and needs of others. This liberal individualism tends to frame debates about gun access among both those who champion unfettered use and those who favor controlled access.

In the first view, government and other collectives should not infringe on a person’s sphere of liberty and self-determination. Individuals may do as they please so long as they do not harm others. It divides benign gun ownership and use from possession and practices that risk harm to self and others. Owners are duty-bound to avoid harm and risk to others—but not required to benefit them.

Those who favor controlled access to guns also may well accept that people are entitled to own guns and have only a minimal duty to avoid harm to others. However, access control emphasizes coercive law, enforced by police and judicial power, to restrict people at risk of harming themselves or others. They largely invest government with the responsibility for containing violence.

Shared responsibility for peacemaking, as an alternative, means that Christians and all people of goodwill should counter gun-related violence and trauma through proactive and constructive roles in their places of responsibility. Section three will speak extensively about the nature of this approach.

Can a Christian be a defensive gun owner?

Addressing defensive gun use

To date the ELCA has not addressed the question whether Christians may use guns for defensive purposes. Does the Christian call to peacemaking include a voluntary, legally authorized, and regulated role of defending a vulnerable neighbor against attack? What about self-defense in such situations? Moral discernment is needed in this church on such questions.
Affirming necessary government restraint
There is some merit to claims that public security in certain states and communities is undermined by law enforcement corruption, racial bias, understaffing, and other deficiencies. Pervasive feelings of insecurity and fear are real and harmful—whether reasonable or not. The question is whether or not mass civilian defensive gun ownership promotes personal and public safety and should become a permanent feature of U.S. society.

This message holds that gun-related violence and trauma can and should be vastly reduced through multifaceted restraint and prevention. At the same time, our church affirms that police may need to use coercive and lethal force to restrain tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use. It also affirms police reform, along with better public health and safety systems, as currently the best societal responses to gun violence and trauma in the U.S.

Nonviolence in a broken world
Disciples of Christ should ever witness to the coming reign of God where violence will pass away. This witness occurs in a broken world where violence happens and neighbors require protection. For Christians who practice a peacemaking ethic, violence must be the last resort in defense of the neighbor. Violence against an aggressor must avoid collateral harm to others and be limited to restoring peace following hostilities. In this way disciples seek to love the enemy through nonviolent action while sometimes accepting the need for violent governmental restraint.

Part Three: Toward Shared Responsibility for What Makes for Peace
“Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” —Romans 14:19

In Romans, St. Paul writes to a community divided over dietary practice. In the social division that threatens God’s work today, our church today also defines peace as “responsible difference in unity.” Disciples in the U.S. are called to embody God’s resolve for peace in a society that is divided over guns and needs to take responsibility for gun-related violence and trauma.

Few U.S. residents perpetrate gun violence and trauma against themselves or their neighbors. However, these cause immense loss and lasting harm. This message proposes that historical experience and growing research warrant multifaceted efforts toward personal and communal peace for all. This societal project needs civic-minded individuals and groups working in institutions and associations dedicated to human health and flourishing. Peacemaking should be a civic role and thus a shared responsibility of all.

How can U.S. residents share responsibility for peacemaking?

Efforts by journalists and news organizations
People’s understanding of gun-related violence and trauma is affected by news sources and firsthand experiences. Mass shootings dominate news coverage by national outlets and often communicate misunderstandings of gun violence in the U.S. News organizations have a major opportunity to inform the public through stories that consider the causes and risks of gun violence, the trauma that follows, and measures to prevent future harm. Sound information can help individuals critically evaluate their own sense of insecurity and see ways to get involved in solutions.
The ELCA calls upon journalists and news organizations to heed campaigns against copycat shootings. Gun violence perpetrators often seek validation and fame through a “performance crime.” They study news coverage of past shootings and plot a more infamous one. But resistance campaigns have developed journalistic norms for denying perpetrators the scripts they use and the glory they seek. These campaigns challenge journalists and news organizations to be responsible by minimizing attention to killers and focusing instead on the whole story.

The responsibility of thought leaders
In addition to news organizations, other information sources commonly accessed online affect the social understanding of gun-related violence and trauma. Individuals and groups use these resources to negotiate life in a changing, complex, and often perplexing society. Members of this society look to trusted analysts to make sense of mass media and their own life experience. They look to authentic and unconventional experts to propose solutions to problems. These thought leaders influence the values and behavior of the public.

As influential public voices thought leaders play an essential role in the search for responsible action. The complexity and costs of gun-related harm and death today, coupled with a public policy impasse, require changes that society must enact in concert and over time. To enable common action, thought leaders must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse. Given today’s mistrust and polarization, leaders should model an openness toward learning from others. U.S. peacemaking must bridge societal differences, which requires thought leaders who broker constructive civil and informed public dialogue.

Peacemaking of law enforcement
Federal, tribal, territorial, state, county, and local law enforcement officers confront gun-related violence and trauma daily. They labor under high demands and risks. These public servants participate in God’s providence because human society needs fair-minded protectors and keepers of order and justice.

This church gives thanks for the dedication and competence of law enforcement officers to restrain interpersonal conflict and thwart criminal behavior. Good policing is deeply relational and depends upon partnerships between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve. Public safety depends upon trust in law enforcement to respect and protect the rights of all.

Most police work diligently to serve their communities and uphold trust. However, this church has recognized that “the reputation of law enforcement has been stained by evidence of racial bias and excessive use of force.” This message extends previous ELCA calls for structural reform of police departments and for trust-building through greater public support of and investment in communities. This includes strengthening policies that engender community-oriented policing to increase support and partnership.

In addition to rebuilding aggrieved communities’ trust in their police, peacemakers across the U.S. must improve residents’ trust in government to protect them from harm. It is critical to reduce perceptions of insecurity that contribute to anticipatory trauma and defensive responses. Accordingly, the ELCA calls upon law enforcement officers and their professional associations to participate in public policy development toward strengthening public backing and trust for responsible gun ownership. Laws governing safety must safeguard all, including law enforcement officers. A comprehensive public health response needs the wisdom of policing professionals.
Peacemaking of health care providers and public health professionals
Many public health professionals frame gun-related violence and trauma in the U.S. as a public health crisis. In this they are supported by growing research that documents demographic and geographic inequalities in how violence and trauma are distributed. Likewise the research points to how inequalities have roots in both social injustice and personal irresponsibility. These inequalities lead to health disparities and should be subject to systemic remedy, such as strategies that address upstream sources of violence to lessen downstream harm.

Some 60 years ago, U.S. automobile deaths reached a level that prompted comprehensive national response. Since then fatalities have dropped dramatically, and health care providers contribute to that today: newborns do not go home from the hospital without a car seat.

Imagine, then, routine conversations between all providers and their patients about gun safety at home. Patients might report risks to themselves or others, and providers can intervene. Providers could encourage safety practices and other protective measures. This church affirms efforts by health care providers to monitor and respond to risks and harms related to gun violence and trauma.

Community development and social ministry organizations
Greater attention is needed to the social dimensions of suicide and criminal homicide. The concepts of community trauma and intergenerational trauma help to correct our individualistic notions of need and response. Research shows that community-based associations and problem-solving improve life in many ways, building trust and hope through successful cooperation. Various forms of community-based renewal have had positive effects upon the incidence of gun violence and trauma in the U.S. The ELCA affirms such peacemaking.

The social ministry organizations of the ELCA and of other faith communities play significant roles in the welfare of U.S. society, in times of both emergency and abiding need. In addition to direct service lines, these organizations cater to the social determinants of health, undertake prevention and early intervention, and seek to dismantle the many forms of injustice. They are well aligned with the Healthy People 2030 objectives of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This church values the work done by social ministry organizations to advance public health for all and thereby foster peace.

The work of gun violence researchers
To pursue restraint and prevention, our society needs willpower informed by common and sound understanding. The questions to be answered are difficult and costly to investigate. Actionable knowledge can be elusive despite rigorous inquiry. Disputes over findings can make the search for the truth seem impossible and imperil hope of preventing and restraining gun-related violence and trauma.

New studies into gun and violence data, risks and protective factors, and evidence-based strategies need to be undertaken before our society can change significantly. Current impasses over public policy contribute to inadequate research evidence as well as to polarization and distrust of knowledgeable professionals. Critical advancements toward peacemaking demands dispassionate and expert research.

Peacemaking of gun owners and shooting associations
One third of adults in the U.S. own guns. They have different interests—collecting, hunting, defense, sporting, work—and different outlooks about what ownership means and requires. Most see gun ownership as a normal lifelong activity, and many worry that other residents seek to take their guns away. They often feel misunderstood and unfairly blamed for violence.
Many gun owners see themselves as being more conscientious about gun training, storage, and use than others might think. They are therefore reluctant to get involved in gun violence prevention apart from taking responsibility for their own conduct, which typically means seeking personal safety legally. The shooting associations generally support this stance.

Gun owners and associations today should undertake a larger responsibility. By owning and using a lethal device in public, U.S. gun owners and their associations constitute a distinct community and should be accountable to the two-thirds of adults in the U.S. who do not own a gun and need to know that gun owners are trustworthy and safe members of their communities. When someone misuses a gun, it contributes to public insecurity and threatens the trust enjoyed by gun owners that permits peaceable life in a nation with more guns than people.

The ELCA calls upon U.S. gun owners and their associations to assume a collective responsibility and an active commitment to be a trustworthy community within a diverse, interdependent, and fragile society.

Since U.S. gun owners are not universally observant of high standards of public safety through proper training, storage, and use, less responsible owners need to improve their behavior. Thousands of harmful outcomes would be avoided annually if every gun had a safe owner. These standards can be codified by shooting associations and exercised voluntarily. They may need to be defined by the government and compelled by law in the absence of universal practice, as they are in many states today.

Active leadership by gun owners and shooting associations to cultivate safe U.S. gun owners would be a major step toward a peaceable society. This church commends creation and promotion of obligatory universal safety standards to support a culture of peace. In addition to saving lives, such activism would address misunderstanding and mistrust between gun owners and nonowners. U.S. norms try to limit personal freedom only when that freedom harms others; practicing safe gun ownership is a way of respecting that ideal.

Love of neighbor calls Christian gun owners to transcend self-protection and to seek peace for neighbors in need. The safety that gun owners seek for themselves and their loved ones must be secured for all people. Beyond universal safe practice, gun owners can be a cultural and political force for reducing gun-related violence and trauma for all. Collectively, such leaders could promote legal restraints to protect victims and stop perpetrators. They could encourage gun violence prevention through public health strategies and practices.

The responsibility of firearm manufacturers

U.S. firearm manufacturers should also work together and with others to prevent violence and trauma. The ELCA holds that all corporations bear a reasonable responsibility to minimize the social harm caused by their products’ design, production, marketing, and distribution. Litigation for product harm brought by aggrieved residents, as well as congressional investigation of five companies that produce AR-15-style rifles, raises doubts about whether this industry will acknowledge its responsibility.

Gun manufacturers are currently not subject to federal consumer-product safety oversight. Federal law grants them immunity from lawsuits when product misuse results in harm even though they can be sued if certain state laws are broken. States and citizen plaintiffs, along with gun control and gun rights groups, are engaged in legal actions that will define future manufacturing norms.

This church calls on firearm manufacturers to enact structures and employ practices that will prevent or reduce tragic, irresponsible, or illegal use of their products. Protecting them from litigation and
exempting them from oversight for product safety undermines their accountability. However, like other industries that face scrutiny over their products' safety, gun manufacturers may embrace peacemaking when pressed by public opinion and legal norms.

**Particular concerns about the AR-15-style rifle at the time of this writing**

Among questions raised by congressional investigation, the most troubling concerns the failure of five companies producing AR-15-style rifles to monitor or analyze injuries or deaths related to these military-style guns. Companies are involved in tracing used by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in criminal investigations but do not utilize this information themselves. Five percent of U.S. residents own an AR-15-style rifle, yet five manufacturers claim no processes for understanding how their firearms are used or the consequences.

Shared responsibility means that the public should expect manufacturers to join societal conversations about what makes for restraint and prevention. These companies should ask themselves whether their products and practices make America safe or insecure. They should ask what they can do to support safety, both in product design and marketing. Currently, a majority of U.S. people want to outlaw further sale of AR-15-style rifles. The ELCA has supported strictly controlling or banning military-style firearms since 1989.

Many are rightly horrified by the physical and psychological trauma that AR-15-style rifles inflict on victims, survivors, families, first responders, and the public. There is debate whether this firearm should be legal for defensive, hunting, and sporting uses when it is a modified military weapon. The critical question posed by this message is whether the trauma and risks of illegal use today warrant banning gun sales, even as over 20 million U.S. residents own and use this firearm safely for defensive and other purposes.

**Peacemaking of gun control and gun rights advocacy groups**

U.S. residents are evenly divided over whether permissive and mass gun ownership diminishes or increases public safety. Two opposing groups of advocacy associations reflect and propagate this division. Both groups seek to restrain violence, albeit in different ways and with differing visions of human flourishing and peace.

Gun control associations seek to regulate and restrict access to decrease risks of gun misuse—accidents, homicides, and suicides. They seek government regulation to affirm critical societal norms and mitigate harmful behavior that perpetuates human brokenness.

Gun rights associations seek to liberalize access to guns through minimal infringement by government. They argue that the risks of gun ownership can be addressed by minimal regulation, rigorous enforcement, and responsible voluntary practices.

Both gun control and gun rights groups command significant membership, financial support, and political power. Christians in the U.S., including in our church, identify with one group or the other and participate in its gains and setbacks. Despite vigorous advocacy, a complex and costly societal stalemate over guns and safety persists, with no end in sight.

The ELCA commends the good-faith intentions and efforts of both gun control and gun rights groups to create a political center that enables U.S. society to exercise shared responsibility for cessation of gun-related violence and trauma. However, given this society’s abiding polarization, it is important to ask
whether there is need for a third group of associations. This group would focus upon brokering a peaceable political center of cooperation in difference. This church urges the formation of associations that seek to understand the cultural and political divide over guns and safety that builds a political center through reconciling dialogue.

**Peacemaking of civic engagement**

U.S. residents view gun violence and the inability of major political parties to work together as being among the nation’s top five problems. They disagree strongly, along party lines, about the effects of gun ownership on public safety. State and federal laws on gun policy are frequently decided by party-line voting. People generally doubt that such laws will bring needed change as polarization disables civic life and the functioning of democracy.

Our church teaches that all people are called to civic engagement. Political engagement means caring for the neighbor in numerous public ways—informed voting, community organizing, partisan politics, attending public meetings, and holding public office, among others. Healthy governmental institutions require vigorous movement toward a political center of cooperation in difference that serves everyone’s needs.

Gun-related violence and trauma cannot be restrained or prevented without sound and effective governmental action. Sustained reduction will require stronger cooperation by lawmakers and those they represent. Christians practicing civic engagement should try to discourage polarization and restore public trust in government to protect the neighbor from gun-related harm. Such trust can be restored only by change that disrupts public pessimism.

What are the distinctive responsibilities of faith communities in peacemaking?

Faith communities cultivate experiences, beliefs, values, and practices to welcome all, connect differences, and engage members with stories of transcendence. Faith communities intercede in the brokenness of life—ministering to pain, speaking truth to power, reconciling conflict, and modeling nonviolence and justice. Given the uncertainty, mistrust, and polarization in U.S. society, our church’s peacemaking must include building shared humanity and community to unify difference and support purposeful cooperation.

Bridging divides

To achieve shared responsibility, we must bridge the cultural divide between those who own guns and those who do not. This divide exists within and across faith communities as well as U.S. society generally. Faith communities are uniquely prepared to bring together different people and perspectives about guns and safety.

Cultivating grace

Mindful of St. Paul’s call for mutual upbuilding, faith communities should cultivate a civic grace that acknowledges human fallibility and respects the goodwill of people who disagree. Humble and accommodating love supports striving for mutual growth with the neighbor. Inclusive and generous grace means sharing power and building peaceable relations so that people can work out their moral and political differences, and personal and community needs can be met.
Building community
Reducing gun-related violence and trauma must include building relations where people feel heard, valued, and connected. Research on suicide and homicide indicates a need for trust, inclusion, and accountability among people at risk of perpetrating violence. The interpersonal ties of love and belonging that faith communities cultivate are critical to countering the isolation and alienation that lead to destructive behavior. Love of neighbor always furthers earthly peace.

Advocating policy
This message commends this church and other faith communities engaging in constructive gun-related political advocacy. Our shared responsibility for restraint and prevention expands the scope and scale of such advocacy.

This message urges congregations and synods within the ELCA to form standing peacemaking groups to learn together and witness publicly. Such ministry will support civic grace and building community. The work of these groups will depend upon social location as well as needs and opportunities at hand. As a starting place, this message outlines various callings for peacemaking and commends the use of existing social teaching documents to advance holistic and comprehensive advocacy for peace.

Concerning advocacy to control access to guns, the ELCA affirms their use for hunting, sporting, policing, and the military. Today, handguns are misused most often for crime. Since 1993 our policy documents have called for handgun controls. This policy has consistently focused on laws aimed at criminal misuse (requiring universal background checks and addressing ghost guns and lost and stolen guns) while calling for ongoing assessment of such laws’ appropriateness and effectiveness. Our teaching recognizes that we live in a broken world and favors appropriate access controls to restrain misuse of guns and encourage responsible behavior.

Healing trauma
Gun-related trauma occurs in various forms and degrees. Trauma not only harms individuals and communities; it can also contribute to cycles of violence that negatively affect future generations. People are generally unaware of the complex and lasting aspects of trauma and the need for serious care. A newer awareness of gun-related trauma would benefit from further education about such trauma’s origins and treatment. In the near term, communities of faith have institutional wisdom and members committed to increasing public awareness of this moral harm and its character. They can provide support for healing and for community interventions to reduce trauma. This message holds that the harm of gun-related trauma is often unseen. Faith communities can help people to see and reckon with it.

Conclusion: The summons to peacemaking
The ELCA recognizes that communities of faith exist because God encounters human beings with divine love as well as with divine demands, both of which shape identity and behavior. Consequently, communities of faith should deal with the way things really are and what really matters, grounded in trust of what God will bring about.

As a Christian church, the ELCA teaches that “in publicly gathering to proclaim and celebrate God’s Gospel of peace, the Church uniquely contributes to earthly peace. Its most valuable mission for peace is
Endnotes


Violence affects a wide range of outcomes and can have far-reaching consequences. Research indicates that children and youth exposed to violence may develop feelings of fear, anger, and hopelessness, which can hinder their ability to learn and thrive. This is particularly evident among Black and Hispanic youth, who may experience feelings of abandonment by adults, including parents, teachers, and police, as they navigate high exposure to violence, crime, and drug use.

A study published in *American Psychological Association* in August 2019 highlights the impact of violence on learning and development. This research, titled “One-Third of US Adults Say Fear of Mass Shootings Prevents Them From Going to Certain Places or Events,” explores how community violence and trauma impact public health and safety.

Violence can also have a significant impact on mental health, particularly in relation to suicide. A major longitudinal study of first-time handgun owners in a state with restrictive gun laws found that men who purchased handguns had a rate of suicide by firearm nearly eight times higher than male nonowners. This study focused on handguns, which are used in 75% of attempts, highlighting the alarming trends.

In view of rising rates of suicide across all populations and persistent social disparities, this church has recently given renewed attention to a tragic and preventable cause of death touching many residents. See the social message “Suicide Prevention” (1999, 2021). For a comprehensive discussion of gun suicide, see Michael D. Anestis, Allison E. Bond, and Shelby L. Bandel, “Understanding Risk and Implementing Data-Driven Solutions for Firearm Suicide,” *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 704 (November 2022): 204-219.

Suicides among women were 35 times higher, consistent with the fact that women attempt suicide more often but still represent less than 20% of gun suicides. This study focused on handguns, which are used in 75% of attempts, and concludes that handgun ownership is associated with a greatly elevated and enduring risk of suicide. See David M. Studdert, Yifan Zhang, Sonja A. Swanson, and others, “Handgun Ownership and Suicide in California,” *Injury Epidemiology* 8, 57 (2021), *injepijournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-021-00352-8*, and Madeline Drexler, “Guns & Suicide: The Hidden Toll,” Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, June 2016, *www.hsph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Guns-Suicide-PDF-.pdf*.

Older white men are at highest risk for gun suicides, which have increased over the last decade for all U.S. residents. These deaths occur most frequently among whites, followed by Indigenous, Black, Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander people. See “QuickStats: Age-adjusted Rates of Firearm-related Suicide, by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex—National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2019,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 70:1455 (October 15, 2021), *www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/pdfs/mm7041a5-H.pdf*.

Survivors can be left wondering whether this act was chosen, which begs for explanation and yet defies it. The appearance of intentionality can cause survivors to feel accountable and to second-guess their actions. They can feel anger and shame, and their sense of loss can be shattering to the point of trauma. See John R. Jordan, “Lessons Learned: Forty Years of Clinical Work With Suicide Loss Survivors,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, 766 (April 29, 2020), *www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00766/full*.

A major longitudinal study of first-time handgun owners in a state with restrictive gun laws found that men who purchased handguns had a rate of suicide by firearm nearly eight times higher than male nonowners. The rate among women was 35 times higher, consistent with the fact that women attempt suicide more often but still represent less than 20% of gun suicides. This study focused on handguns, which are used in 75% of attempts, and concludes that handgun ownership is associated with a greatly elevated and enduring risk of suicide. See David M. Studdert, Yifan Zhang, Sonja A. Swanson, and others, “Handgun Ownership and Suicide in California,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 382 (June 4, 2020): 2220-2229, *www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmsa1916744*.


Normalized violence and trauma have been shown to be harmful to the emotional, cognitive, and spiritual development and health of children, youth, and adults. Black and Hispanic youth in one study report feelings of being abandoned by adults—parents, teachers, police—as they navigate high exposure to violence, crime, and drug use. They share a pervasive social mistrust and lack of attachment to their elders. Exposure to and fear of gun violence cause these young people to give up resilience and hope. To cope with trauma and to support their...
families, they report becoming indifferent to violence and resigned to delinquent behavior. Seeing no resources to overcome the destruction posed by guns, crime, and drugs, these youth feel they must leave their community to succeed. See Ijeoma Opara, David T. Lardier Jr., Isha Metzger, and others, “‘Bullets Have No Names’: A Qualitative Exploration of Community Trauma Among Black and Latinx Youth,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 29 (August 2020): 2117-2129, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8409467/](www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8409467/).


31 Peterson and Denseley argue that mass shooters typically share four characteristics: (1) childhood trauma, (2) an identifiable crisis point, (3) a script to follow and someone to blame, and (4) opportunity. Research shows the rate of childhood trauma among U.S. mass shooters to be three times higher than in the general population.


35 *For Peace in God’s World* (1995), 11-12. The text declares, “First and foremost, love of neighbor obligates us to act to prevent wars and to seek alternatives to them. ... For this reason, this statement focuses on building a just peace and identifies tasks that create conditions for peace.” This focus coheres with “just war” principles, where war is always a mournful act of last resort. However, this moral priority of preventing war bears the influence of pacifism within the wider church.


38 Perpetrators of gun-related violence and trauma often struggle with failed and missing relations upon which human flourishing depend. Absent love can erode self-worth and accountability to the point where violence to take revenge or end the pain prevails. Christian love is profoundly relational and can advance emerging public health practices of prevention and restraint. These involve respectfully and beneficially intervening in the lives of people and populations at risk of being harmed or harming others. Intentional relations and networks that support and build trust are making a difference to chronic distress and acute crisis. These interventions repair or create bonds for health. See footnote 29 for more information.


40 This liberal individualism finds expression in the 2008 U.S. Supreme Court decision *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which granted Second Amendment rights to bear arms to private individuals. However, according to *Heller*, this entitlement is not absolute. Government can infringe upon individual liberty through laws that protect the public health and the safety of residents. Personal freedom cannot transgress harm to others. See Michael R. Ulrich, “A Public Health Approach to Gun Violence, Legally Speaking,” *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 47, S2 (2019) 114, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1073110519857332](journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1073110519857332).

41 Consistent with “just war” norms, a Christian advocate for defensive gun use can argue that individuals, like nations, have a right to life that justifies defense of self and neighbor in situations where police cannot intervene. How, then, do Christian defensive gun owners affirm nonviolence as a last resort with minimum force? Defensive use involves a weapon capable of wounding or killing instantaneously. Less lethal weapons might be used. Defensive-use Christians assume gun force may be needed to match an attack and will imagine scenarios where a decision about lethal force will occur. They will practice shooting human targets to disarm an aggressor and learn from experts about effective action in various circumstances. They will acquire skills and attitudes that police cultivate to exercise sound judgment in potentially split-second decisions. Defensive-use Christians will anticipate the trauma and self-searching that follows from possibly killing the neighbor they are called to love. These are some considerations for Christian defensive gun use. This church needs to be in dialogue about whether and under
what conditions this use may be affirmed. Since the first believers, Christians have struggled with use of lethal force because Jesus called his disciples to follow him in nonviolent love of friends and enemies alike, even unto torture and murder. Jesus lived and died as he preached in the Sermon on the Mount. While the apostolic church rejected war and embraced martyrdom, Roman soldier converts as well as Christian protection from and eventual rule over the Roman Empire brought divisions within the church over nonviolence that endure to this day. Concerning war and nonviolence in the biblical and apostolic traditions, see Roland H. Bainton, _Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation_ (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960) and John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, _Christians and the Military: The Early Experience_ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Concerning Martin Luther’s understanding of Matthew 5: 38-41, see Martin Luther, “Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed,” _Luther’s Works, The Christian in Society_, vol. 45 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1962), 81-104.  

42 _The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries_ (2013), 9.  


44 Gun-culture and gun-violence research is growing after 20 years of government-related decline, and stable resources are returning to encourage scholars to dedicate their careers to this field, such as the recently formed Research Society for the Prevention of Firearm-Related Harms. Both governmental and private funding sources are increasing, gatherings of scholars are occurring with greater frequency, and reporting systems to generate data on gun-related violence are improving. News organizations are beginning to report this research with accuracy and objectivity. In time, better empirical evidence for public policy can be expected. Meanwhile, respected institutes such as the Pew Research Center and programs such as RAND Corporation’s Gun Policy in America provide nonpartisan information that serves peacemaking today.


46 On gun owner views and safety practices, see “America’s Complex Relationship With Guns,” Pew Research Center, June 2017 (see note 9 for link).  


