

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

Preface: Making Peace Amid Gun-related Violence and Trauma

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’
when there is no peace.” —Jeremiah 6:14

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” —Matthew 5:9

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.¹ These differences reflect cultural and moral diversity—in society and in our churches, which are compounded by mistrust, exclusion, and alienation.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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

44 disparities of harm cry out for attention.⁵ Such disparities are visible daily on the National Gun Violence
45 Memorial website at gunmemorial.org.⁶

46
47 Though shootings in the U.S. today occur disproportionately across populations and places, U.S.
48 residents share a pervasive sense of insecurity.⁷ This insecurity takes complex forms with different
49 sources and histories. We live in an information-saturated society that delivers instantaneous news of
50 gun deaths and the troubles they reveal. Narratives of social unrest, constant change, and uncontrolled
51 threat naturally provoke fear. This insecurity can be confirmed when elected officials respond to yet
52 more carnage with “thoughts and prayers.”

53
54 **Seeing trauma and seeking protection**

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

58
59 Second, while traumatic experiences related to gun violence are known by some and unseen by others,
60 one significant response is the surge in defensive gun ownership wherein people buy firearms for self-
61 protection. Security concerns are prompting millions of previously unarmed people to join the 40% living
62 in households with a gun and the 75 million people who own some 400 million firearms.⁹

63
64 The nature and dimensions of gun-related violence and trauma today call our church to a new search for
65 better understanding and renewed action. This search must be undertaken with all members of our
66 society. Christians and all people of good will should, above all, do no harm and avoid risk of harm while
67 striving in myriad ways for peace—in our homes, our communities, and our souls.

68

69 Part One: Seeing Trauma in Insecurity, Despair, and Mayhem

70
71 “Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.
72 Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children,
73 because they are no more.” —Jeremiah 31:15

74
75 “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.” —Lamentations 3:17

76
77 *Why is seeing trauma morally significant?*

78
79 Peacemaking begins with understanding what is going on and what our neighbors need to flourish.
80 Trauma research offers insight into the often-unmet needs of people and communities that experience
81 gun violence. This research exposes the full reach and impact of tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use.
82 It reveals that multitudes of U.S. residents have been harmed or live at risk of harm that can be mitigated
83 and prevented. Seeing the trauma of gun-related violence, we can empathize with our neighbors and be
84 more mindful of the complex situation today.

85
86 Gun-related trauma affects people as individuals and as members of families, communities, and society.
87 It affects some people and communities much more profoundly than others due to disparities in health
88 and cultural norms.¹⁰ Seeing trauma can help us to name wounds that call for care, to advance our

89 understanding of criminal violence and self-harm, and to embrace wiser policy that calls for violence
90 prevention as well as restraint.

91
92 *What is gun-related trauma?*¹¹

93
94 Gun-related trauma includes both individual and collective responses to harmful events and threatening
95 conditions. It stems from exposure to events or conditions that are emotionally disturbing or life-
96 threatening, with lasting, adverse effects on health. People can be traumatized at any age, but trauma
97 can have particularly debilitating effects on childhood development.¹²

98
99 Trauma is a subjective and socially conditioned experience. Two or more people can experience the
100 same event or condition but may not be traumatized in the same way. Trauma varies according to one's
101 proximity to the event or condition, the existing resources and strengths of those affected, and the
102 severity and persistence of the event or situation. It varies according to the amount of support needed
103 and available to affected people.

104
105 **Forms and relations of trauma**

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

110
111 Some people and groups can experience trauma as firsthand participants, whereas others may be
112 traumatized as secondhand participants responding to wounded people.¹³ Scholars note how trauma
113 extends in different ways through time. A traumatic event may end, but effects can linger.¹⁴ Persisting
114 trauma can be transmitted across generations through families and communities. Whole societies can be
115 traumatized by eruptions of violence such as a terrorist attack that triggers pervasive insecurity and
116 disorientation.

117
118 **Powerlessness and trauma**

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

123
124 When gun-related trauma occurs, people are wounded in body, mind, and spirit by experiences that
125 overwhelm their resources of understanding and integration. These experiences have no place in the
126 beliefs and values people use to understand the world and to pursue lives worthy of their humanity. In a
127 state of trauma, the convictions upon which our lives depend are shredded by such experiences.

128
129 Gun violence threatens bodily life. The trauma that can follow threatens meaningful and purposeful
130 agency. It can provoke emotional, existential, and spiritual crisis that has no apparent end or that may lie
131 dormant for years. To see trauma in the lives of people affected by gun-related violence is to see
132 suffering and powerlessness.

133
134
135

136 *How do forms of gun-related trauma affect U.S. residents?*
137

138 **Anticipatory trauma and defensive responses**

139 Polling research indicates that four in 10 U.S. residents fear becoming a victim of gun-related violence.
140 Young people are more fearful than adults. Over half expect gun violence to increase in coming years.
141 They are evenly divided over whether gun ownership makes the country safer. Most individuals who own
142 and buy guns today do so to defend themselves, across an increasing social diversity.¹⁵
143

144 Defensive gun owners are responding to various experiences of unrest and insecurity—lawlessness,
145 social instability, racism, xenophobia, and tyranny. They seek to protect self, family, community, cultural
146 survival, political liberty, and other goods. Many defensive gun owners feel that government fails to keep
147 the peace and that civilians must therefore claim their right to use lethal force in defense against death
148 or grave bodily injury.¹⁶ Permissive gun rights decisions and laws of federal courts and state legislatures
149 have strengthened defensive gun ownership today.
150

151 Though a majority of U.S. residents decline gun ownership, many are open to future ownership. Given
152 current trends, every person will likely know at least one victim of gun violence in their social network.¹⁷
153 Over half of adults say they or a family member has personally experienced gun-related threat, injury, or
154 self-defense. Eight in 10 U.S. people report feeling safe in their neighborhoods, yet an equal number
155 report that they have taken at least one precaution to protect themselves or family members from gun-
156 related violence.¹⁸
157

158 In circumstances such as these, where people adopt defensive mindsets and practices, they are
159 exhibiting anticipatory trauma. This form of trauma has been documented among violence survivors and
160 people and communities that take steps to avoid becoming victims.¹⁹
161

162 Anticipatory trauma involves taking protective actions that are grounded in fear of sudden, life-
163 threatening violence, a fear that people know in different ways and degrees. People buy guns and seek
164 training. Others purchase knives or pepper spray. Parents talk to their children about mass shooters or
165 the police. Kids go to school wearing bulletproof backpacks and practice lockdown drills. Individuals
166 avoid large crowds. Millions anticipate trauma.²⁰
167

168 **Gun suicide and survivor trauma**

169 We see trauma not only in the consequential dread affecting U.S. individuals but also in the personal loss
170 and pain of gun-related self-harm and suicide. Nearly 60% of gun deaths in the U.S. are self-inflicted,
171 ending over 25,000 lives.²¹
172

173 Firearms are a means. They do not cause suicidal thoughts. They do, however, provide a highly lethal
174 means of ending a personal crisis characterized by desperate and impulsive thinking. Ninety percent of
175 gun suicide attempts are completed, and these account for half of all suicides.²² Because these deaths
176 can happen without warning and are violent, they can be traumatic for surviving family and friends.²³
177

178 Research shows that ready access is a risk factor for suicide.²⁴ Firearm suicides can be reduced through
179 safety restraints that put time and distance between the firearm and the person in crisis. Such restraints
180 include interventional (or “red flag”) laws, educational programs, and voluntary practices.
181

182 People increasingly recognize firearm suicide as a public health crisis, marked by disparities, that calls for
183 both prevention and restraint. Such suicides can be prevented through improved access to mental health
184 care and reform of the social factors that determine health.

185
186 **Criminal homicide and community trauma**

187 Over 20,000 U.S. residents are murdered with firearms every year. This violence is concentrated among
188 relatively few people in high-crime neighborhoods and communities. Though the U.S. has the highest
189 rates of gun ownership and homicide among developed countries, less than 1% of U.S. gun owners harm
190 others or themselves.²⁵

191
192 Apart from mass shootings and intimate partner violence, gun violence predominantly harms people
193 living in Black and Hispanic communities, where rates of injury and death greatly exceed national rates.
194 Black youth and young men represent 2% of U.S. residents but sustain nearly 40% of gun homicide
195 deaths.²⁶ This gun violence inequality correlates with social inequalities of poverty, crime, drug use,
196 unemployment, and other elements of structural racism and caste.

197
198 Threatening and deadly gun use contributes to the cycles of violence and trauma endemic to
199 economically depressed neighborhoods.²⁷ When violence keeps neighborhoods from meeting people’s
200 basic needs, community trauma follows. If needs continue to go unmet, trauma becomes
201 intergenerational. Persisting violence erodes social capital, impairs social networks, and breeds
202 hopelessness. Community trauma threatens investments in housing, schools, businesses, and
203 recreational spaces. Social solidarity and responsibility suffer. People can become desensitized to
204 violence and embrace attitudes and behaviors that engender more violence.²⁸

205
206 Policing and incarceration have historically been the primary response to community violence and
207 trauma. Today, because more people understand the need for prevention, community-based violence
208 intervention programs are making important gains in many affected neighborhoods and show promise
209 for reducing gun homicide.²⁹ These programs cultivate community leadership and knowledge, focusing
210 on individuals who are most at risk of perpetrating violence.

211
212 Community-based violence intervention programs develop leaders and support services, tailored to local
213 needs, that promote healthy alternatives to daily violence and trauma. Respected community members
214 interrupt conflict and retaliation, ameliorating the wounds and powerlessness of trauma by building
215 relationships between people in conflict with one another and between people and the support services
216 they need. Community-based violence intervention programs across the United States do effective
217 peacemaking—and create hope.

218
219 **Public mass shootings and the violence-trauma cycle**

220 Public mass shootings are another source of trauma. These are events where four or more people are
221 murdered indiscriminately in public.³⁰ Though these shootings receive outsized attention in the news and
222 public opinion, they do cause immense loss, suffering, and fear. They violate spaces where community
223 unfolds—workplaces, schools, worship places, shops, plazas, clubs, theaters. They traumatize the local
224 community—and the nation.

225
226 Mass public shootings injure, kill, and traumatize hundreds and often thousands of people at a time—
227 with distressing frequency. Though the risk of being shot in public remains low, we should recognize the
228 pervasive fear of wanton murder as anticipatory trauma. Sometimes described as terrorist activity, these

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

231
232 We must also understand neighbors who kill.³¹ Mass shooters typically experience violence and trauma
233 as children—parental suicide, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying. Without proper
234 care such trauma can inspire teenage and adult rage, hate, and despair that can lead to angry, isolated,
235 and retaliatory behavior, both punishing and suicidal. Trauma does not fully explain mass shootings.
236 However, these events exhibit the violence-trauma cycle seen in other U.S. communities that are
237 troubled by suicide and criminal homicide.

238

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

240

241 “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
242 resist an evildoer.” —Matthew 5:38-9

243

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

246

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

250

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

252

253 **ELCA teaching on community violence**

254 The 1994 social message “Community Violence” addresses a society “haunted by violence” amid
255 “disintegrating social structures and values” affecting U.S. residents of “every class, color, and locality”
256 while noting inequalities that continue today. It takes a countercultural stance through an ethic of
257 prevention. and urges ELCA members “to take up the challenge to prevent violence and to attack the
258 complex causes that make violence so pervasive.”³²

259

260 The message notes that countering the brokenness and injustice that contribute to violence and trauma
261 will be an incremental and long-term process. Present threats and harms must be restrained as well. God
262 tasks government to administer justice, maintain order, and establish security.³³ This governance
263 includes coercive and sometimes lethal force through policing and the military. To safeguard the public,
264 government may enact laws that regulate gun access. This ethic of restraint supplements an ethic of
265 prevention. Together these paired norms authorize a “more comprehensive address” of the complexity
266 of violence and trauma than single-issue debates about solutions.³⁴

267

268 **ELCA teaching on peacemaking**

269 With the 1995 social statement *For Peace in God’s World*, ELCA teaching took a countercultural stance
270 toward violence. Though the statement affirms that Christians may serve in the military and conduct just
271 wars, it adds that this church “needs the witness of its members who in the name of Jesus Christ refuse
272 participation in war, who commit themselves to establish peace and justice on earth by nonviolent
273 power alone.” Accordingly, the ELCA embraces the priority of building a just peace to prevent war.³⁵ The

274 aims of peacemaking apply to community life and it is a means to proclaim God’s resolve for social peace
275 and well-being for all.

276
277 We undertake Christian peacemaking in a pluralistic and interdependent society where God works
278 among all people, communities, and structures. We participate in God’s resolve for peace through the
279 many roles, associations, and institutions that sustain human life. In all these, humans have
280 opportunities to build a just peace, which this statement defines as “responsible difference in unity.”³⁶
281 Together, individuals and collectives exercise shared responsibility.

282
283 *How does love of neighbor advance peacemaking today?*

284
285 **Living in the neighbor through love**
286 Christian peacemakers participate in the love of God in Christ as they ameliorate the brokenness of life.
287 In the foundational essay *The Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther pictures this participation as living in
288 Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Christians should “do nothing in this life except
289 what is profitable, necessary, and life-giving” for the neighbor. They should “serve and help our neighbor
290 in every possible way.”³⁷ Christian love builds powerful relationships that counter the despair, enmity,
291 and nihilism that often contribute to lethal harm and criminal homicide.³⁸

292
293 **Shared responsibility beyond liberal individualism**
294 It must be recognized that Christian love of neighbor counters a widely held stance concerning gun use
295 that minimizes, at best, shared responsibility. People across the political spectrum embrace forms of
296 liberal individualism that prioritize personal freedom and autonomy over the interests and needs of
297 others. This liberal individualism tends to frame debates about gun access among both those who
298 champion unfettered use and those who favor controlled access.

299
300 In the first view, government and other collectives should not infringe on a person’s sphere of liberty and
301 self-determination. Individuals may do as they please so long as they do not harm others. It divides
302 benign gun ownership and use from possession and practices that risk harm to self and others. Owners
303 are duty-bound to avoid harm and risk to others—but not required to benefit them.³⁹

304
305 Those who favor controlled access to guns also may well accept that people are entitled to own guns and
306 have only a minimal duty to avoid harm to others.⁴⁰ However, access control emphasizes coercive law,
307 enforced by police and judicial power, to restrict people at risk of harming themselves or others. They
308 largely invest government with the responsibility for containing violence.

309
310 Shared responsibility for peacemaking, as an alternative, means that Christians and all people of
311 goodwill should counter gun-related violence and trauma through proactive and constructive roles in
312 their places of responsibility. Section three will speak extensively about the nature of this approach.

313
314 *Can a Christian be a defensive gun owner?*

315
316 **Addressing defensive gun use**
317 To date the ELCA has not addressed the question whether Christians may use guns for defensive
318 purposes. Does the Christian call to peacemaking include a voluntary, legally authorized, and regulated
319 role of defending a vulnerable neighbor against attack? What about self-defense in such situations?
320 Moral discernment is needed in this church on such questions.⁴¹

321

322 **Affirming necessary government restraint**

323 There is some merit to claims that public security in certain states and communities is undermined by
324 law enforcement corruption, racial bias, understaffing, and other deficiencies. Pervasive feelings of
325 insecurity and fear are real and harmful—whether reasonable or not. The question is whether or not
326 mass civilian defensive gun ownership promotes personal and public safety and should become a
327 permanent feature of U.S. society.

328
329 This message holds that gun-related violence and trauma can and should be vastly reduced through
330 multifaceted restraint and prevention. At the same time, our church affirms that police may need to use
331 coercive and lethal force to restrain tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use. It also affirms police reform,
332 along with better public health and safety systems, as currently the best societal responses to gun
333 violence and trauma in the U.S.

334
335 **Nonviolence in a broken world**

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

342

343 **Part Three: Toward Shared Responsibility for What Makes for Peace**

344

345 “Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” —Romans 14:19

346

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

351

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

357

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

359

360 **Efforts by journalists and news organizations**

361 People’s understanding of gun-related violence and trauma is affected by news sources and firsthand
362 experiences. Mass shootings dominate news coverage by national outlets and often communicate
363 misunderstandings of gun violence in the U.S. News organizations have a major opportunity to inform
364 the public through stories that consider the causes and risks of gun violence, the trauma that follows,
365 and measures to prevent future harm. Sound information can help individuals critically evaluate their
366 own sense of insecurity and see ways to get involved in solutions.

367

368 The ELCA calls upon journalists and news organizations to heed campaigns against copycat shootings.
369 Gun violence perpetrators often seek validation and fame through a “performance crime.” They study
370 news coverage of past shootings and plot a more infamous one. But resistance campaigns have
371 developed journalistic norms for denying perpetrators the scripts they use and the glory they seek.
372 These campaigns challenge journalists and news organizations to be responsible by minimizing attention
373 to killers and focusing instead on the whole story.

374
375 **The responsibility of thought leaders**

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

382
383 As influential public voices thought leaders play an essential role in the search for responsible action. The
384 complexity and costs of gun-related harm and death today, coupled with a public policy impasse, require
385 changes that society must enact in concert and over time. To enable common action, thought leaders
386 must renounce misleading and inflammatory discourse. Given today’s mistrust and polarization, leaders
387 should model an openness toward learning from others. U.S. peacemaking must bridge societal
388 differences, which requires thought leaders who broker constructive civil and informed public dialogue.

389
390 **Peacemaking of law enforcement**

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

394
395 This church gives thanks for the dedication and competence of law enforcement officers to restrain
396 interpersonal conflict and thwart criminal behavior. Good policing is deeply relational and depends upon
397 partnerships between law enforcement officers and the communities they serve. Public safety depends
398 upon trust in law enforcement to respect and protect the rights of all.

399
400 Most police work diligently to serve their communities and uphold trust. However, this church has
401 recognized that “the reputation of law enforcement has been stained by evidence of racial bias and
402 excessive use of force.”⁴² This message extends previous ELCA calls for structural reform of police
403 departments and for trust-building through greater public support of and investment in communities.
404 This includes strengthening policies that engender community-oriented policing to increase support and
405 partnership.

406
407 In addition to rebuilding aggrieved communities’ trust in their police, peacemakers across the U.S. must
408 improve residents’ trust in government to protect them from harm. It is critical to reduce perceptions of
409 insecurity that contribute to anticipatory trauma and defensive responses. Accordingly, the ELCA calls
410 upon law enforcement officers and their professional associations to participate in public policy
411 development toward strengthening public backing and trust for responsible gun ownership. Laws
412 governing safety must safeguard all, *including* law enforcement officers. A comprehensive public health
413 response needs the wisdom of policing professionals.

414
415

416 **Peacemaking of health care providers and public health professionals**

417 Many public health professionals frame gun-related violence and trauma in the U.S. as a public health
418 crisis. In this they are supported by growing research that documents demographic and geographic
419 inequalities in how violence and trauma are distributed. Likewise the research points to how inequalities
420 have roots in both social injustice and personal irresponsibility. These inequalities lead to health
421 disparities and should be subject to systemic remedy, such as strategies that address upstream sources
422 of violence to lessen downstream harm.

423
424 Some 60 years ago, U.S. automobile deaths reached a level that prompted comprehensive national
425 response. Since then fatalities have dropped dramatically, and health care providers contribute to that
426 today: newborns do not go home from the hospital without a car seat.

427
428 Imagine, then, routine conversations between all providers and their patients about gun safety at home.
429 Patients might report risks to themselves or others, and providers can intervene. Providers could
430 encourage safety practices and other protective measures. This church affirms efforts by health care
431 providers to monitor and respond to risks and harms related to gun violence and trauma.

432
433 **Community development and social ministry organizations**

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

440
441 The social ministry organizations of the ELCA and of other faith communities play significant roles in the
442 welfare of U.S. society, in times of both emergency and abiding need. In addition to direct service lines,
443 these organizations cater to the social determinants of health, undertake prevention and early
444 intervention, and seek to dismantle the many forms of injustice. They are well aligned with the Healthy
445 People 2030 objectives of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.⁴³ This church values the
446 work done by social ministry organizations to advance public health for all and thereby foster peace.

447
448 **The work of gun violence researchers**

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

453
454 New studies into gun and violence data, risks and protective factors, and evidence-based strategies need
455 to be undertaken before our society can change significantly. Current impasses over public policy
456 contribute to inadequate research evidence as well as to polarization and distrust of knowledgeable
457 professionals. Critical advancements toward peacemaking demands dispassionate and expert research.⁴⁴

458
459 **Peacemaking of gun owners and shooting associations**

460 One third of adults in the U.S. own guns. They have different interests—collecting, hunting, defense,
461 sporting, work—and different outlooks about what ownership means and requires. Most see gun
462 ownership as a normal lifelong activity, and many worry that other residents seek to take their guns
463 away. They often feel misunderstood and unfairly blamed for violence.⁴⁵

464 Many gun owners see themselves as being more conscientious about gun training, storage, and use than
465 others might think. They are therefore reluctant to get involved in gun violence prevention apart from
466 taking responsibility for their own conduct, which typically means seeking personal safety legally. The
467 shooting associations generally support this stance.

468
469 Gun owners and associations today should undertake a larger responsibility. By owning and using a lethal
470 device in public, U.S. gun owners and their associations constitute a distinct community and should be
471 accountable to the two-thirds of adults in the U.S. who do not own a gun and need to know that gun
472 owners are trustworthy and safe members of their communities. When someone misuses a gun, it
473 contributes to public insecurity and threatens the trust enjoyed by gun owners that permits peaceable
474 life in a nation with more guns than people.

475
476 The ELCA calls upon U.S. gun owners and their associations to assume a collective responsibility and an
477 active commitment to be a trustworthy community within a diverse, interdependent, and fragile society.

478
479 Since U.S. gun owners are not universally observant of high standards of public safety through proper
480 training, storage, and use, less responsible owners need to improve their behavior.⁴⁶ Thousands of
481 harmful outcomes would be avoided annually if every gun had a safe owner. These standards can be
482 codified by shooting associations and exercised voluntarily. They may need to be defined by the
483 government and compelled by law in the absence of universal practice, as they are in many states today.

484
485 Active leadership by gun owners and shooting associations to cultivate safe U.S. gun owners would be a
486 major step toward a peaceable society. This church commends creation and promotion of obligatory
487 universal safety standards to support a culture of peace. In addition to saving lives, such activism would
488 address misunderstanding and mistrust between gun owners and nonowners. U.S. norms try to limit
489 personal freedom only when that freedom harms others; practicing safe gun ownership is a way of
490 respecting that ideal.

491
492 Love of neighbor calls Christian gun owners to transcend self-protection and to seek peace for neighbors
493 in need. The safety that gun owners seek for themselves and their loved ones must be secured for all
494 people. Beyond universal safe practice, gun owners can be a cultural and political force for reducing gun-
495 related violence and trauma for all. Collectively, such leaders could promote legal restraints to protect
496 victims and stop perpetrators. They could encourage gun violence prevention through public health
497 strategies and practices.

498
499 **The responsibility of firearm manufacturers**

500 U.S. firearm manufacturers should also work together and with others to prevent violence and trauma.
501 The ELCA holds that all corporations bear a reasonable responsibility to minimize the social harm caused
502 by their products' design, production, marketing, and distribution. Litigation for product harm brought
503 by aggrieved residents, as well as congressional investigation of five companies that produce AR-15-style
504 rifles, raises doubts about whether this industry will acknowledge its responsibility.⁴⁷
505 Gun manufacturers are currently not subject to federal consumer-product safety oversight. Federal law
506 grants them immunity from lawsuits when product misuse results in harm even though they can be sued
507 if certain state laws are broken. States and citizen plaintiffs, along with gun control and gun rights groups,
508 are engaged in legal actions that will define future manufacturing norms.

509
510 This church calls on firearm manufacturers to enact structures and employ practices that will prevent or
511 reduce tragic, irresponsible, or illegal use of their products. Protecting them from litigation and

512 exempting them from oversight for product safety undermines their accountability. However, like other
513 industries that face scrutiny over their products' safety, gun manufacturers may embrace peacemaking
514 when pressed by public opinion and legal norms.

515
516 **Particular concerns about the AR-15-style rifle at the time of this writing**

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

523
524 Shared responsibility means that the public should expect manufacturers to join societal conversations
525 about what makes for restraint and prevention. These companies should ask themselves whether their
526 products and practices make America safe or insecure. They should ask what they can do to support
527 safety, both in product design and marketing. Currently, a majority of U.S. people want to outlaw further
528 sale of AR-15-style rifles.⁴⁸ The ELCA has supported strictly controlling or banning military-style firearms
529 since 1989.

530
531 Many are rightly horrified by the physical and psychological trauma that AR-15-style rifles inflict on
532 victims, survivors, families, first responders, and the public. There is debate whether this firearm should
533 be legal for defensive, hunting, and sporting uses when it is a modified military weapon. The critical
534 question posed by this message is whether the trauma and risks of illegal use today warrant banning gun
535 sales, even as over 20 million U.S. residents own and use this firearm safely for defensive and other
536 purposes.⁴⁹

537
538 **Peacemaking of gun control and gun rights advocacy groups**

539 U.S. residents are evenly divided over whether permissive and mass gun ownership diminishes or
540 increases public safety.⁵⁰ Two opposing groups of advocacy associations reflect and propagate this
541 division. Both groups seek to restrain violence, albeit in different ways and with differing visions of
542 human flourishing and peace.

543
544 Gun control associations seek to regulate and restrict access to decrease risks of gun misuse—accidents,
545 homicides, and suicides. They seek government regulation to affirm critical societal norms and mitigate
546 harmful behavior that perpetuates human brokenness.

547
548 Gun rights associations seek to liberalize access to guns through minimal infringement by government.
549 They argue that the risks of gun ownership can be addressed by minimal regulation, rigorous
550 enforcement, and responsible voluntary practices.

551
552 Both gun control and gun rights groups command significant membership, financial support, and political
553 power. Christians in the U.S., including in our church, identify with one group or the other and
554 participate in its gains and setbacks. Despite vigorous advocacy, a complex and costly societal stalemate
555 over guns and safety persists, with no end in sight.

556
557 The ELCA commends the good-faith intentions and efforts of both gun control and gun rights groups to
558 create a political center that enables U.S. society to exercise shared responsibility for cessation of gun-
559 related violence and trauma. However, given this society's abiding polarization, it is important to ask

560 whether there is need for a third group of associations. This group would focus upon brokering a
561 peaceable political center of cooperation in difference. This church urges the formation of associations
562 that seek to understand the cultural and political divide over guns and safety that builds a political center
563 through reconciling dialogue.

564
565 **Peacemaking of civic engagement**

566 U.S. residents view gun violence and the inability of major political parties to work together as being
567 among the nation’s top five problems.⁵¹ They disagree strongly, along party lines, about the effects of
568 gun ownership on public safety. State and federal laws on gun policy are frequently decided by party-line
569 voting. People generally doubt that such laws will bring needed change as polarization disables civic life
570 and the functioning of democracy.

571
572 Our church teaches that all people are called to civic engagement.⁵² Political engagement means caring
573 for the neighbor in numerous public ways—informed voting, community organizing, partisan politics,
574 attending public meetings, and holding public office, among others. Healthy governmental institutions
575 require vigorous movement toward a political center of cooperation in difference that serves everyone’s
576 needs.

577
578 Gun-related violence and trauma cannot be restrained or prevented without sound and effective
579 governmental action. Sustained reduction will require stronger cooperation by lawmakers and those
580 they represent. Christians practicing civic engagement should try to discourage polarization and restore
581 public trust in government to protect the neighbor from gun-related harm. Such trust can be restored
582 only by change that disrupts public pessimism.

583
584 *What are the distinctive responsibilities of faith communities in peacemaking?*

585
586 Faith communities cultivate experiences, beliefs, values, and practices to welcome all, connect
587 differences, and engage members with stories of transcendence. Faith communities intercede in the
588 brokenness of life—ministering to pain, speaking truth to power, reconciling conflict, and modeling
589 nonviolence and justice. Given the uncertainty, mistrust, and polarization in U.S. society, our church’s
590 peacemaking must include building shared humanity and community to unify difference and support
591 purposeful cooperation.

592
593 **Bridging divides**

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

598
599 **Cultivating grace**

600 Mindful of St. Paul’s call for mutual upbuilding, faith communities should cultivate a civic grace that
601 acknowledges human fallibility and respects the goodwill of people who disagree.⁵³ Humble and
602 accommodating love supports striving for mutual growth with the neighbor. Inclusive and generous
603 grace means sharing power and building peaceable relations so that people can work out their moral
604 and political differences, and personal and community needs can be met.

605
606
607

608 **Building community**

609 Reducing gun-related violence and trauma must include building relations where people feel heard,
610 valued, and connected. Research on suicide and homicide indicates a need for trust, inclusion, and
611 accountability among people at risk of perpetrating violence. The interpersonal ties of love and
612 belonging that faith communities cultivate are critical to countering the isolation and alienation that lead
613 to destructive behavior. Love of neighbor always furthers earthly peace.

614
615 **Advocating policy**

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

619
620 This message urges congregations and synods within the ELCA to form standing peacemaking groups to
621 learn together and witness publicly. Such ministry will support civic grace and building community. The
622 work of these groups will depend upon social location as well as needs and opportunities at hand. As a
623 starting place, this message outlines various callings for peacemaking and commends the use of existing
624 social teaching documents to advance holistic and comprehensive advocacy for peace.

625
626 Concerning advocacy to control access to guns, the ELCA affirms their use for hunting, sporting, policing,
627 and the military. Today, handguns are misused most often for crime. Since 1993 our policy documents
628 have called for handgun controls. This policy has consistently focused on laws aimed at criminal misuse
629 (requiring universal background checks and addressing ghost guns and lost and stolen guns) while calling
630 for ongoing assessment of such laws' appropriateness and effectiveness. Our teaching recognizes that
631 we live in a broken world and favors appropriate access controls to restrain misuse of guns and
632 encourage responsible behavior.

633
634 **Healing trauma**

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

643

644 **Conclusion: The summons to peacemaking**

645

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

650

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

653 to keep alive news of God’s resolve for peace, declaring that all are responsible to God for earthly peace
654 and announcing forgiveness, healing, and hope in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴

655
656 This social message is a fresh exploration of the claim that all people are responsible for peacemaking
657 toward the prevention and vast reduction of gun-related violence and trauma in the U.S. Our church
658 teaches that all residents are responsible for exerting strong efforts to seek and do what makes for
659 peace. For Christians, in particular, this summons renews the vow to live always in Christ and in the
660 neighbor—sustained in forgiveness, healing, and hope by the promises of God’s resolve for peace.

661 Endnotes

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⁶ The National Gun Violence Memorial is a nonprofit, voluntary organization dedicated to remembering and honoring lives lost to gun violence in the U.S. Volunteers draw on data from the Gun Violence Archive (www.gunviolencearchive.org/) to share images and stories of victims and perpetrators for the benefit of grieving family and friends. The site offers a partial picture of U.S. gun deaths that reflects tragic and troubling realities.

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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/.

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³⁰ Jillian Peterson and James Densley, *The Violence Project: How to Stop a Mass Shooting Epidemic* (New York: Abrams Press, 2021), 4-5.

³¹ Peterson and Densley 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.

³² ELCA social message “Community Violence” (1994), 1-2, 4.

³³ *The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries* (2013), 9, 21-2.

³⁴ ELCA social message, “Community Violence” (1994), 6.

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.

³⁶ *For Peace in God’s World* (1995), 7.

³⁷ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008): 82.

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.

³⁹ Daniel Callahan, “Minimalist Ethics,” *Hastings Center Report* 11 no. 5 (October 1981): 19-25.

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.

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.

⁴³ On the Healthy People 2030 program, see: health.gov/healthypeople, which includes these goals for gun-related violence: health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/browse-objectives/violence-prevention/reduce-firearm-related-deaths-ivp-13.

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.

⁴⁵ Michael B. Siegel and Claire C. Boine, "The Meaning of Guns to Gun Owners in the U.S.: The 2019 National Lawful Use of Guns Survey," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 59, no. 5 (2020): 678-685, www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749379720302397.

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).

⁴⁷ Carolyn B. Maloney, memorandum to members on investigation of gun industry practices and profits, House Committee on Oversight and Reform, July 27, 2022, docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO00/20220727/115024/HHRG-117-GO00-20220727-SD005.pdf; Adam Gabbatt, "Wave of Lawsuits Against US Gun Makers Raises Hope of End to Mass Shootings," *Guardian*, May 27, 2023, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/may/27/gun-lawsuits-manufacturer-sellers-crimes.

⁴⁸ "Views on Semiautomatic Weapons Remain Partisan," AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, May 2022, apnorc.org/projects/views-on-assault-weapons-remain-partisan/#:~:text=Fifty%2Done%20percent%20of%20Americans,additional%2018%25%20hold%20neither%20opini on.

⁴⁹ Emily Guskin, Aadit Tambe, and Jon Gerberg, "Why Do Americans Own AR-15s?" *Washington Post*, March 27, 2023, www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2023/american-ar-15-gun-owners/.

⁵⁰ "Gun Violence Widely Viewed as a Major—and Growing—National Problem," Pew Research Center, June 28, 2023.

⁵¹ "Inflation, Health Costs, Partisan Cooperation Among the Nation's Top Problems," Pew Research Center, June 21, 2023, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/06/21/inflation-health-costs-partisan-cooperation-among-the-nations-top-problems/.

⁵² ELCA social message, "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" (2020), 14-17.

⁵³ On civic grace, see Jennifer Carlson, *Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 173-175.

⁵⁴ *For Peace in God's World* (1995), 3.