



Dear Ones of the Southeastern Iowa Synod,

We pray for the people of Perry in the wake of the gun violence at Perry High School, those who suffered injuries, and the families and friends of those who died including the 6th grade boy, the high school principal, and the perpetrator, who was a teenage boy. We pray for the community of Perry as you grieve, care for one another, determine the best way forward, and provide resources and care as each day unfolds. As the Southeastern Iowa Synod, we pray for Mount Olivet Lutheran Church and your Pastor Kimberly Belken as they gather, connect to the community, care for one another, and share the love of God through Jesus Christ. Thank you, Pastor and Mount Olivet, for your presence and love in your community.

Here we are again facing the horror of a school shooting in our country and in our state and synod again (recalling the shooting outside of East High in Des Moines in March 2022). We pray for sure. And... we grapple... and we are called to speak up about God's call to love our neighbors.

Some church members wonder, and some ask me and their pastors and deacons, "Why does the church feel the need to speak up at these times and why do we need to discuss these societal matters in church?" I believe that by the grace of God, God meets us the messiness, weariness, and complexity of life. God meets us in the reality of human life and human sin. God does not avoid suffering and pain but enters in, meets us there in Jesus life, death on the cross, burial in the tomb, descent into hell, AND promises all of creation new life in the resurrection. God indeed promises new life in the world to come and calls us to live as the body of Christ in the midst of the world and by the power of the Holy Spirit calls us to public witness of the Good News of God which is that God sent Jesus into the world to save us from sin and ourselves.

How do we do witness to God's love in the world if we protect ourselves from conversations about the reality of the world? We are well-practiced at prayer and this is a good and faithful practice. We, as a church, pray for the world, the church, those who are in harm's way. We pray for those who are injured. We pray for justice and peace. We pray for communities in need of healing. We trust that God hears our prayers, our pleas, and provides comfort, hope, forgiveness, and resurrection. We are not as well-practiced in the ELCA at talking about difficult topics in which we may not be in full agreement. I hope we can take opportunities to practice together. As God gifts us with voices and hearts and minds to engage in conversation, in advocacy, and action as we are called to love one another as God loves us. We may not all agree on the ins and outs of the 2nd Amendment, access to mental health care, access to guns, etc. but, as Lutherans, as Christians, I hope and pray we agree on God's promise of forgiveness, God's promise of love and mercy for each one of us and God's commandment to love our neighbors.



This is our call as a church, as a synod, as local congregations and specialized ministries, and baptized children of God to grapple with the reality of gun violence and our call to love our neighbors (even those we disagree with or those whom we have yet to meet.) This is not a call from your bishop about the right to bear arms or access to guns. Instead, this is a call for us, as beloved children of God, to not separate the horror, pain, trauma, complexity, and grief that is experienced when we hear stories of injuries and death because of school shootings from our daily lives of faith. Our faith life, how we understand who God is and what God does, how we interpret God's call to love God and neighbor, does indeed have something to say about how we grapple with the reality of gun violence in the world around us and how we live loving our neighbors.

As ELCA Lutherans we have been publicly wrestling with this issue for more than 30 years. At the 1993 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, our church passed a social policy resolution to call members to work for gun control and gun violence prevention.¹ Again and again, our church has brought memorials and resolutions, issued statements and advocated at local, state and national levels.² Our church has not remained silent on the harm that gun violence has caused our communities.

In 2013 the Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral letter on gun violence. In that letter, the ELCA Bishops called on us as Lutherans to:

- *The work of lament – creating safe space for naming, praying, grieving, caring for one another, and sharing the hope in God's promise of faithfulness*
- *The work of moral formation and discernment – listening to scripture, repenting, modeling conflict resolution in daily life, addressing bullying, conducting respectful conversations, and discerning constructive strategies to reduce violence*
- *The work of advocacy – acting to address the causes and effects of violence*

In 2016, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a resolution responding to gun violence and calling for a task force. In 2023, our Synod Assembly received a Resolution calling us again to continued education and advocacy related to gun violence. The Assembly voted to pass the resolution to the Synod Council to determine action. The Synod Council did not pass the resolution but instead engaged in education, gathering of educational materials, and agreed to share ELCA educational materials with the synod's congregations and ministries with encouragement to engage in learning and conversation in your local ministry contexts. Little did we know that we would do so in the wake of a school shooting in Perry.

1

https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Community_Violence_GunsSPR93.pdf?_ga=2.67182166.679886815.1653485998-2073869988.1639420147

² See 2016 resolution, 2013 letter from Conference of Bishops, 1994 statement on community violence, <https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/8096>



In fall 2023, the ELCA released a [draft social message](#) about gun-related violence and trauma. [ELCA Social Statements](#) and [Social Messages](#) are drafted by appointed task forces (ordained and lay people) who work with Churchwide staff to engage at the intersection of Lutheran Theology, Lutheran Ethics, and social matters to provide a clear message or statement from the ELCA. ([See all the resources from ELCA Faith and Society](#))

Peace in Christ,

Bishop Current

Here are opportunities for you and your congregation can dig into this important matter:

Give Feedback on the 2023 Draft Social Message on Gun Related Violence from the ELCA

As we engage this issue in Southeastern Iowa, the ELCA is currently working on a social message about gun-related violence and trauma. Social messages are ELCA teaching documents that draw from existing social teaching.

A [draft version of this social message](#) is now available for feedback. I encourage you to review this document. Take the time either alone, with a bible study group or with your whole congregation to talk about this document and share your opinions via [this survey form](#). You can also submit questions, comments, or need a printable version of the survey, please email draftsocialmessage@elca.org. Feedback is due by January 31, 2024.

Additional Resources

- ENGAGE is a gun violence prevention group created by the St. Paul Area Synod. The website contains resources, background, action items and more to help you learn more. <http://www.engageelca.org/about-us/>
- [ELCA: A 60-Day Journey Toward Justice in a Culture of Gun Violence](#), this resource includes a litany and a short study for each day that reflects on ELCA statements, letters, and scripture.
- [Women of the ELCA: Rachel's Day Women boldly standing for children](#), this is a short study, concrete actions to take, and a litany about gun violence and children
- [Bishops Against Gun Violence \(Episcopal\): Litany in the Wake of a Mass Shooting](#)
- [Diana Butler Bass: A Risk of Prayer](#), a call to use this litany this week in worship