
Peacemaking Committee Holds Conversation on Gun Violence

By Phoebe Sheftel

In July 2006 the Presbytery of Philadelphia adopted a resolution presented by the Peacemaking Committee calling for statewide legislation limiting purchases of handguns to one per month.

In November 2007 the Presbytery approved another motion offered from the floor directing the Peacemaking Committee to give priority attention to identifying those churches located in neighborhoods where gun violence has been concentrated and that the committee assist member churches work with these churches to address the causes of gun violence.

Thirty Gather at Oxford

With the use of crime statistics maps the committee identified approximately 25 churches that were invited to send representatives to a luncheon meeting. Thirty clergy and lay representatives from 17 congregations and programs gathered at Oxford Presbyterian Church on April 17, 2008 to take part in a discussion around the question of how we can join together to stem the flow of blood in our streets caused by gun violence.

Clergy and lay representatives came from Calvin, First African, New Spirit, Elkins Park, Holy Trinity Bethlehem, West Kensington Ministry, Overbrook, First Germantown, Bryn Mawr, Glading, Germantown Community, Tabernacle, Chester Eastside Ministries, T.M. Thomas, Wayne, Oxford and Good Shepherd.

These are some of the stories shared about how our churches are experiencing gun violence. Everyone emphasized the fact that this affects all communities, not only urban.

- A grandmother worries that her grandson had to miss school for a day because the school had to close after a parent left a handgun in her purse that was stolen out of her car while on the school grounds.
- A teacher recalls the students she knew who were gunned down and sees teachers unprepared to deal with the inner city situation.
- Churches find they can work easily with younger children until they are about 12 or so; but after that it is much more difficult to hold their attention. Conflicts begin in school and spill over into the community.
- Economic justice is a critical factor. Many of the youth who start out in the Chester Eastside Ministries after-school program want jobs as they grow older.
- Youth feel the need for guns for protection because they are afraid when they leave their neighborhoods. Junior High students are passing around magazines telling how to order handguns over the Internet.
- Churches in the Presbytery tend to be isolated in their ministry and do not communicate with one another.

Action to confront this epidemic of violence has taken different forms in different churches:

- First African, working closely with the Police Department, created a Town Watch that is making a difference in their community. By placing adults in strategic locations within the neighborhood, the number of fights among school children returning from school has been greatly reduced. If a child feels afraid, they know that they can turn to an adult who will “pass them down the line” until they get home. Similar experiences were reported at First Germantown, in West Philly near Calvin Church, and in West Kensington around Norris Square.
- Conversations between community stakeholders and the police gave the young people a place to enter into the conversation.
- The power of prayer sustained one person when confronted with a robbery in progress at his work place. He noted that whenever we want to go to war with someone we first de-humanize them. In the same way we are de-humanizing our communities.

- Churches are helping and want to help in the city, but some feel the Presbytery is not doing enough to bring churches together. “Whatever we’re doing is not enough.”

These are some of the ideas put forward for dealing with this challenge:

- Gather in interfaith groups to create a community event that brings people together for prayer and education, but, most importantly, action on this issue.
- Join in larger coalition groups such as PATH (Pennsylvanians Against Trafficking in Handguns) to leverage our community power.
- Push legislation in Harrisburg. City Council’s recent action to enact handgun legislation for the city is seen as “courageous,” and it is hoped it will spur members of the state legislature to action – to counter the remark made by one state representative: “We just don’t care.”
- Check out the power of the [People-to-People](#) program.
- Congregations can help communities to deal with the violence they are experiencing in non-violent ways by modeling what it means to be a united peaceful community. Inspire congregations to take just one step.
- Engage teens and channel their energies in constructive ways. Empower kids to design a project and, as they are working on its development, talk to them about guns and violence, what to do if they encounter a gun at someone’s home.
- Arrange a matching program for youth within our churches who need work experience and business owners/managers in our churches.
- Encourage churches to contribute to a fund that would enable youth to volunteer at community agencies (as free staff) but get a stipend from the fund.
- Encourage the City of Philadelphia to re-institute the Summer Youth Council. The program was quite effective in the past, and it has the added advantage of allowing the youth to create and run their own programs. Express your interest in this to Mayor Nutter, who is seen as key to getting to the money.
- Work for a new bottle deposit bill that would enable young children to earn some cash by collecting and returning used plastic bottles. This could enable youth to earn money with dignity while cleaning up their neighborhoods.
- Look for ideas presented in existing resources, such as Travis Smiley’s books *The Covenant with Black America* and *The Covenant in Action*.

Next steps that came out of the meeting:

- The Peacemaking Committee will develop ways to disseminate information and serve as a catalyst to engage individual churches in partnerships for action.
- Instead of just carrying around “poles,” put the lateral piece on the cross – share with each other what we are doing. The Presbytery of Philadelphia can be the leader in this effort. We have *both* the problem *and* the solution sitting side-by-side. We only need to go out and *do something*.
- Advocacy begins small and spreads as people widen the circle of concern. The faith community is key to changing the attitudes of legislators on this issue.

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