



Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School

Murdered. Twenty children ages six and seven. Six adults. All brutally shot multiple times. We shake our heads in disbelief and horror. As we create this special issue of FAITHLINK, the funerals and memorial services are underway.

The shooter, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, began the massacre by killing his own mother and ended it with suicide. The vicious killings of children, teachers, the principal, and the school psychologist occurred in what was considered to be a safe place—an elementary school. How do we grapple with such horror?

People all over the world are shocked and saddened by the shooting of innocent victims in Sandy Hook Elementary School. The horrific shooting evokes our compassion for the victims, and it ignites our anger and our fear. The event also ignites soul-searching on personal, social, and political levels. What is wrong with us? Can we fix it? Where is God in this event? What questions are emerging from this tragedy? What support can we gain from our Christian faith? How does Christian faith inspire and generate meaningful responses that make a difference in our world? The questions can be overwhelming. And sometimes, there are no answers.

As we mourn with the families of Newtown, Connecticut, the FAITHLINK team prepares this special issue. It relies heavily on insights drawn from past issues about mass shootings. We pray that it will offer help for you as you reflect on this tragedy in the light of Christian faith.

— *Pamela Dilmore, Lead Editor, FAITHLINK*

What Issues Emerge From Mass Shootings?

Some of us immediately turn to big-picture questions about our culture, our policies, or our theology. Everyone seems to have an opinion on the source of the problem that leads to mass shootings: the availability of powerful guns, our care for people with mental illness, media portrayal of violence, or creeping secularism. Anyone who broaches any of these topics may be met with cries of “Too soon! Too soon!” either because people genuinely want space to grieve and resent bringing politics and religion into discussions of the event or because they simply don’t ever want their own opinions challenged. While many issues emerge for families and communities who suffer due to mass shootings, some general themes have emerged in several of the events.

Gun Control: Sales of firearms spiked after news of the shooting became widespread. Similar spikes in gun sales happened after Gabrielle Giffords was shot in 2010 and after the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007. William Bigelow, a writer for Breitbart.com, interprets the data this way: “Americans feel that the best people to defend them are themselves.” Yet is the rush to purchase new guns a rational response of people to protect themselves from violence, a knee-jerk

reaction to an out-of-control culture, or a financial investment anticipating stricter legislation and limited supply? Some pro-gun advocates argue that if more people had been carrying guns in the theater in Aurora, Colorado, they would have been safer. Yet data collected by the Brady Campaign indicates that guns are 22 times more likely to be used for suicide, homicide, or in unintentional shooting than for self defense.

Gun control is a contentious issue for many Americans. Those who favor stricter laws, like the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence, cite a number of gun-related statistics. These include: In one year, on average in the United States, almost 100,000 people are shot with a gun; of those injured, 31,224 died and 66,769 survived. In addition, they note, guns are used to threaten and intimidate four to six times more often than they are used to prevent crime. Those who oppose stricter gun control point to their constitutional right in the Second Amendment, which reads, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." They maintain that the risks of guns are exaggerated.

Mental Health: News accounts of shootings at Fort Hood, in Tucson, in Aurora, and in Newtown raise questions about mental health. Some political leaders and mental health professionals are hoping that such questions will draw renewed attention to challenges facing the country's mental health system. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that more than 25 percent of Americans suffer from some kind of diagnosable mental disorder. According to Dr. David Shern on the website healthaffairs.org, "Half of all people with a mental health diagnosis first experience it by age 14, but will not receive treatment until age 24. Less than one-third of teens who need mental health care receive help." Reform in the field of health care for those with mental illness seems critical, but experts such as criminologist Paul Heroux believe that a single approach will not work. Rather, a sustained, comprehensive approach to the nuances and complexities of mental illness is called for. Mental health counselor Dr. David Barnhart of Huntsville, Alabama, says that it's important to put events such as mass shootings in perspective. Obsessing about whatever is on the news colors our view of the world. In addition, he says, "We need to take a much larger interest in the mental health of the people around us. Everything we do supports our mental and spiritual health: our physical care, our relationships, how we think about things. If you don't have good mental health, you just don't have much quality in your life."

Civil Discourse in the Public Arena: While there is no sense of direct cause and effect, many Americans are also questioning the role of mean-spirited, bipartisan, vitriolic debate in the political and media arenas. In a culture of demonizing the other that has developed over the past 30 years, people ranging from Pima County Sheriff Clarence W. Dupnik to Rabbi David Saperstein are voicing concern over the unintended damage harsh words can inflict. Dupnik said that when the rhetoric about hatred, about mistrust of government, about paranoia of how government operates is used "to inflame the public on a daily basis, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, it has impact on people especially those with unbalanced personalities." Others, like the Reverend Jim Wallis of Sojourners, are calling on people of faith to sign a Peace and Civility Pledge. "We start with ourselves," said Wallis, who explained that the pledge "outlines the higher standards that scripture calls us to in how we are to treat one another and act in community."

Blaming Violence on Differing Religious Perspectives: A similarly polarizing reaction has come from religious groups and leaders who blame such violence on such things as the teaching of evolution and restrictions on religious instruction in public school. Brian Fischer of

the American Family Association argued that such tragedies are the effect of removing prayer from schools and teaching evolution. Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas echoed the sentiment, saying, “What have we done with God? We told him that we don’t want him around.”

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible reminds us that God loves us. In 2007, 32 people were killed in a mass shooting at Virginia Tech. When asked about Scripture passages that sustained him in the aftermath of the shooting, Glenn Tyndall, campus minister at Virginia Tech, had this to say: “I’ve been thinking of the psalmist litany that God’s steadfast love endures forever [**Psalm 136**]. And I know that God’s love means that as we shed tears here, God has a tear in his eye. I’ve also been thinking about how Paul tells us ‘to bear one another’s burdens’ [**Galatians 6:2**]. The students have been doing that, ministering to each other. Not just the students involved in the Wesley Foundation, but students all over campus have been bearing each other’s burdens. It’s ministry even though they may not call it that.” Glenn also said that others have been bearing his burdens through their prayers and messages of comfort. At Blacksburg United Methodist Church, the congregation heard **Romans 8:35-39**, which reminds us that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. In that same service, Bishop Charlene P. Kammerer recounted the story in **John 20:11-18** in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning.

While the Bible is full of images of destruction, its overall narrative points to hope and the promise of redemption. **Psalm 23** describes a God who walks with us even “through the darkest valley” (**verse 4**). In **Joel 3:9-10**, the nations are summoned to beat their farm implements into weapons. Yet weapons ultimately fail in God’s saving project. The prophet Isaiah tells the returning exiles that “no weapon fashioned against you will succeed” (**Isaiah 54:17**); and in contrast to the image of shaping weapons in **Joel 3:9-10**, **Isaiah 2:4** says that weapons will be beaten back “into iron plows” and “pruning tools.” **Luke 13:1-5** records Jesus’ response to a mass murder. Pilate apparently killed some Galileans while they were at worship. Some religious leaders speculated that perhaps the murder was punishment for the Galileans’ sins. Jesus responded with a barbed warning: “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did” (**verses 2-3**). In the story of Jesus’ arrest in **Matthew 26:47-56**, Jesus rebukes a disciple for using his weapon in self defense, admonishing him that the one who lives by the sword will die by the sword (**verse 52**). For Jesus, violence and spiritual death are inextricably linked in those who put their faith in violence to save them.

When a culture faces a tragedy, people of faith often take time for soul-searching. In **Genesis 28:11-19** we find a soul-searching motif in the story of Jacob’s dream of angels traveling up and down a ladder to heaven. One interpretation of this story is that souls are meant to experience spiritual highs and lows but should avoid allowing themselves to stay disconnected from God on the bottom rungs. As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg points out, “If we dwell only in the reality, we forget to imagine that our lives and the world can look different than they do. But, at the same time, if we dwell only in the dream, we forget to get our hands dirty working to repair the reality. The angels travelling up and down come to symbolize the authenticity of both the reality and the dream, and the fluidity between the two. Our challenge is to be able to bridge the division between the two, and, like the angels, to work to bring our reality closer to the world we dream of and long for.” In their soul-searching, Christians often find solace in parables like the

mustard seed in **Mark 4:30-34**, the lost coin in **Luke 15:8-10**, and the hidden treasure in **Matthew 13:44**. From these stories they claim the grace to proclaim, along with Jacob, “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (**Genesis 28:16**, NRSV).

The Bible also addresses strong feelings such as anger and fear that often emerge from tragic events. When such events occur, it is okay to be angry. The **Book of Psalms** provides ample evidence of human anger and fear. As these psalms articulate and work through such emotions, they move toward ultimate trust in God. **Psalm 22** is the classic example of a cry from one who feels abandoned by God. Jesus quoted the opening words of this psalm at the moment of his death on the cross. Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:26-27**, “*Be angry without sinning. Don’t let the sun set on your anger. Don’t provide an opportunity for the devil.*” **Second Timothy 1:6-7** addresses fear. It reads, “I’m reminding you to revive God’s gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.” Timothy was from Lystra, a place where Paul had been stoned by his opponents. Timothy would have felt fear at the prospect of preaching the gospel in an environment where Christians had been harmed or killed. Paul reminds him that God’s Spirit gives us what we need to overcome fear. The expression “the fear of the LORD” occurs frequently in the Bible. The phrase connects with **Deuteronomy 10:12-13**: “What does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being” (NRSV). Thus, “fear of the LORD” is much more than being afraid, it is a combination of worship, service, and wisdom. According to *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. V* (Abingdon, 1997), the phrase expresses “the total claim of God upon humans and the total life response of humans to God. . . . All human activities are undertaken in the light of God’s presence and purposes in the world.”

How Can Christians Respond in Ways That Will Make a Difference?

People of faith are people who pray. Churches across the nation have gathered to pray for the victims, for the shooter and his mother, and for some kind of answers to the questions about their faith in God in the aftermath of such a horrific event. Such response is typical after tragedies of this magnitude. Joe Lenow, a United Methodist student at the University of Virginia with a brother at Virginia Tech, said the tragedy brought the two schools closer together. That connection was strengthened by the faith community’s response, which included gatherings and vigils sponsored by Christian fellowships. “The only place to turn is prayer,” Lenow says. “It’s really been a comfort. People don’t know what to say and what to feel. I’ve seen us Christians take this opportunity to step up and say who we are, to pray for the perpetrator as well as the victims, to pray for the healing of everyone.”

Immediately following the shooting, churches in Newtown were opened so that people could come inside to reflect, pray, or just sit in silence. Churches often open their doors in response to tragic events. For example, immediately upon learning of the Fort Hood shooting, First United Methodist in Killeen, Texas, opened its chapel for prayer and kept it open the following day. “When a tragedy like this occurs, the whole family comes together,” said the Reverend E. F. “Skip” Blancett, pastor of First United Methodist and a former Navy chaplain. President Obama reminded those gathered for the memorial service about the important value of religious freedom in this country. “And instead of claiming God for our side,” he said, “we remember Lincoln’s words, and always pray to be on the side of God.” Bishop Minerva Carcaño

of the desert Southwest Conference lent her voice to the many worship services that followed the shooting in Tucson that injured Gabrielle Giffords, killed six people, and injured 14 others. Carcaño spoke about how children covered the sidewalk outside Giffords' office in colorful drawings. "Colored chalk is the medium, love is the heart, but hope is the message," She encouraged United Methodists to "be agents of hope by working for reconciliation knowing that we are all children of God in need of love and hope. . . . Let us be agents of hope by committing to work for justice, that peace, God's own peace, may come upon us. Our children expect no less of us."

Some churches become advocates for political action. At the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley expressed sympathy for the families of the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre. He also called for a ban on assault rifles and improvements in mental health care.

The strong feelings of pain, fear, confusion, and anger continue as an important part of the healing process. It will take time to sort through such strong feelings. As the investigations of the Newtown shooting continue, we hope to understand better the reasons for this tragedy, though some questions may never be answered. Such shootings remind Christians that during the healing process, people can benefit from the nurturing care of the church. We can respond to this tragic loss by seeking ways to help those who are hurting and by embracing the healing power of God.

How to Send Donations and Messages of Support

As important as prayer is, it may not seem to be enough. Many seek concrete ways to respond, and financial gifts are a viable option. United Way of Western Connecticut set up the Sandy Hook School Support Fund to provide support services to the families and community affected by the shooting. See this website for more information on how to give:

<https://newtown.uwwesternct.org/>. Check donations may be mailed to:

Sandy Hook School Support Fund
c/o Newtown Savings Bank
39 Main Street
Newtown, CT 06470

WPTV in West Palm Beach, Florida, published a list of ways to donate in families' names and ways to send messages of support and condolences. See <http://tiny.cc/6bcopw> to send condolences and memorial offerings.

Suggestions for Group Reflection and Discussion

Due to the emotional nature of the moment, it may be best to spend your time together as an open forum for people to share feelings and ask questions; however, answers may not come. The activities below provide just a few options to guide your time together and help your group process the shooting with support from our Christian faith.

OPEN the Session

Sing Hymns and Reflect

You may want to consider using a number of hymns in your session today. Jeanne Torrence Finley, co-writer of the issue dealing with the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007, reported that her congregation at Blacksburg United Methodist Church had a powerful time of singing on the Wednesday evening following the service. She said the singing “connected them to other faith communities in other places and times saying there is a life beyond this one.” They sang the following “This Is My Song” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 437); “Here I Am, Lord” (593); “Be Still, My Soul” (534); “In Unity We Lift Our Song” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2221); and “A Prayer for Our Children” by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (found at <http://www.umcworship.org>). Another song with a powerful text by former archbishop Desmond Tutu is “Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil” (*TFWS*, 2219).

EXPLORE the Topic

List the Questions

Invite participants in your group to name the faith questions that emerge for them as a result of the shooting. List these on a markerboard for all to see. At this point, naming the questions is sufficient. As mentioned above, answers may not be possible

Talk About the Power of Prayer

Ask: What do we believe about prayer? In what ways have you experienced God’s presence in times of tragedy through prayer? What sorts of things should we offer to God in our prayers?

Study the Scriptures

Review highlights of the section “What Does the Bible Say?” Choose Scriptures and assign them to teams of two or three. Have the teams discuss the following questions: What do these passages tell us about the character of God? What do they affirm about life? What other passages help sustain you through troubled times?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Allow extra time for the closing prayer. Perhaps one of the most powerful witnesses Christians can make in a time such as this is to pray for not only the victims of the shooting but also for the gunman and his family. This may be challenging for some in your group, but remind

them of God's grace and challenge to love even those who would harm us. Pray for the Sandy Hook school, for the victims and their families, for all who are grieving, for everyone in Newtown, Connecticut, for the churches in that community, for first responders, for teachers, and for all parents and their children everywhere.

Dave Barnhart, Jeanne Torrence Finley, Alex Joyner, Melissa Lauber, Andrew Schleicher, and Paul Stroble contributed research and writing used in the original FAITHLINK issues that provided content for this article.

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