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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Policy Position on Firearms and Gun Violence

Adopted by the Session on 10/21/04

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Policy Position on Firearms and Gun Violence

Introduction

In May 2003, the Session approved the Social Justice Advocacy Policy developed by the Social Justice Ministry team. This Policy guides how Westminster Presbyterian Church (WPC) formulates positions and advocates for social justice issues in our community. The Westminster community of faith can use this policy to respond to the calls of Scripture and the mission of our church to advocate for justice in the matter of the Conceal and Carry legislation that was passed by the Minnesota Legislature in 2003.

Also in May, the Social Justice Ministry Team passed a motion that the Session declare Westminster Presbyterian Church a gun-free zone and implement a policy to ensure we become a gun-free zone. The Faith in Action Council discussed this recommendation, made amendments and adopted the following motion to present to Session.

1. That Westminster Presbyterian Church declare itself a gun-free zone and to implement a policy to become a gun-free zone.
2. That Session make a public statement expressing its opposition to the “Conceal-and-Carry” law;
3. That Session seek changes in the new law in the next session of the State Legislature;
4. That Westminster join lawsuits that, upon advice of counsel, raise legitimate objections to the new law.

The Session approved #1 of the motion. Session referred the remaining three points to SJM for policy recommendations to be developed using the Social Justice Advocacy Policy. While studying this issue, we have come to realize that a Conceal and Carry Policy cannot be separated from a broader perspective on firearms and gun violence.

Background of Church’s Stance on Gun Violence

Beginning in 1968 with the 108th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U. S., General Assemblies have often called for government and citizen action to control firearms and to reduce gun violence. Attached is an appendix summarizing the historical actions and statements by the Presbyterian Church on gun control and gun violence.

Following are portions of the 1990 Resolution on gun violence and relevant scriptural passages.

Peaceable Kingdom Vision

“Gun violence is of deep, valid concern to the community of faith whose members are called to a vision of the ‘peaceable kingdom’—a society in which God’s justice reigns, where reconciliation replaces anger, where an open hand and a turned cheek replace retaliation, where love of enemies is as important as love of neighbor...The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is among those religious communions that have called for social policies and personal lifestyles to contain gun violence.” *Minutes, PCUSA 202nd G.A. pg. 60 4 ff.*

Spiritual Issue

“The church regards effective gun control and regulation to be a matter of spiritual concern,” because we have been created in the image of God. Our protection comes from treating each other as God asks us to do – “to love one another as I have loved you.” *Minutes, PCUSA 202nd G.A. pg. 604 ff.*

Common Good

“The Reformed tradition has persistently required that Christians evidence a wide-ranging concern for the common good. Among the Scriptures’ many themes, Presbyterians include in our emphases those passages that reveal God’s concern for the whole of our communal life. God places us in community, and God commands that our human activities and relationships in community shall reflect God’s justice and the promise of shalom for all. God establishes just laws that call forth equity, sustain compassionate relationships, and bind us in human community. When we ignore or defy such laws, community is destroyed.” *Minutes, PCUSA 202nd. G.A. pg. 604 ff.*

Jeremiah emphasizes this belief that we find God’s wholeness by finding wholeness for everyone not just by seeking it for ourselves. The word of God delivered by Jeremiah to the people in exile makes this clear. God’s word is given to a conquered people living in Babylon as prisoners of war who are ruled by their captors.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. *Jeremiah 9:4-7*

God’s desire is to establish shalom (wholeness/welfare) for all of creation and in particular for the human community. Shalom is a social and communal term that indicates well-being and wholeness. Shalom is a corporate condition signifying good relations among persons, families, nations and the physical environment and also between each of these and God. Not only is shalom the absence of conflict, it also includes active faith, adequate material prosperity, physical health, happiness, justice, and peace. God intends that the just peace of shalom should be the goal of our life together.

The text makes it clear that we cannot achieve wholeness individually or by working for the good only of those in our own community but only by seeking the wholeness of the entire community. Seeking wholeness for the entire community is true even when we are in the community of our enemies, just as the ancient Hebrews were in their exile. Purchasing guns to protect our own families and ourselves is not an adequate response to the protection of the whole community. Jeremiah urges us to connect the spiritual and mission elements of faith in a commitment to public ministry wherever we find ourselves. Ministry then becomes a journey of faithfulness in the world that leads us from charity to justice and from strangers to community and solidarity. It is hard to be in community and solidarity with those against whom you have armed yourself.

John Calvin advises this “In a commentary on the Sixth Commandment, ‘You shall not kill’.”

“The purpose of this commandment is, that since the Lord has bound the whole human race by a kind of unity, the safety of all ought to be considered as entrusted to each. In general, therefore, all violence and injustice, and every kind of harm from which our neighbor’s body suffers, is prohibited.

Accordingly, we are required faithfully to do what in us lies to defend the life of our neighbor, to promote whatever tends to his tranquility, to be vigilant in warding off harm, and, when danger comes, to assist in removing it.” *Book II, Chapter VIII, Number 39, Minutes, PCUSA 202nd. G.A. pg. 604 ff.*

How to Overcome the Glorification of Violence

“How, then are we to overcome [an] inclination toward the glorification of violence? Where are we to find the motivation and the discernment that will enable us to supplant these pervasive eruptions of violence with safe and sustaining community? The church is mandated to emphasize Christian love and respect for all persons; we must, as urged by the 108th General Assembly (PCUS, 1968) . . . search our hearts and take action to rid ourselves, our congregations, and our communities of all forms of hatred and violence and to bring about the reconciliation to which we have been called . . .” *Minutes, PCUSA 202nd. G.A. pg. 604 ff.*

Overall, General Assemblies' actions on firearms and gun violence affirm the right to legitimate possession and use of firearms for hunting, target shooting, subsistence lifestyle, and other recreational uses. When dealing with handguns, however, the action of the 208th General Assembly (1996) sums up the positions taken on guns that relate most directly to the Conceal and Carry Law. The 208th G.A. action "Makes clear to all its members and state and national leaders its convictions that the presence in our society of concealable handguns and assault weapons: a. has no redeemable social purpose; b. is not for legitimate sporting activity; and c. is inconsistent with our vision of the reign of Christ in which people do not hurt or destroy one another."

Response of Westminster Presbyterian Church

We reaffirm the actions taken by the Session in June 2003 declaring Westminster Presbyterian Church to be a gun-free zone and establishing the Task Force to work on the wording and design of signage. This Task Force completed its work by September when signs were posted at WPC's entrances and throughout the building stating that WPC is a gun-free zone. Consistent with the Social Justice Advocacy Policy of Westminster, the SJM Team and the Faith in Action Council recommend the following for action by the Session.

In this context, advocacy consists of activities such as presenting written and/or verbal testimony. Testimony could be given in the name of the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church in a variety of ways: 1) to elected officials, 2) before legislative hearings, 3) in newspaper and newsletter articles, and 4) in other similar forums. Policy positions that are adopted by Session remain in effect until Session acts to end or to change its endorsement.

Policy on Firearms and Gun Violence

A. Carrying Guns

Our vision is that people not carry guns for purposes other than hunting, target shooting, subsistence lifestyle, and other recreational uses.

To this end, we will advocate for the following.

- A law that places the burden of proof on the individual to have a permit to carry a gun as opposed to placing the burden on law enforcement officers to say why someone should not have such a permit.
- Denial of conceal and carry permits to domestic abuse perpetrators and repeat offenders.
- Expansion of the list of places in Minnesota where guns are barred, such as, but not limited to, airports, stadiums, schools, hospitals and houses of worship.

B. Obtaining Guns

Our vision is that people understand that security and safety come from building inclusive communities rather than in arming themselves against neighbors.

To this end, we will advocate for the following.

- Closing the gun show loophole that does not require a background check to purchase a gun.
- Requiring the licensing of all gun owners and the registration of all handguns when they are purchased.
- Preventing mass purchases of handguns by designating a reasonable limit, such as one a month.

C. Safety of Equipment

Our vision is that we are responsible for the welfare of society and especially the welfare of children.

To this end, we will advocate for the following.

- Safe storage laws and owners' liability for their firearms use.

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- Applying consumer safety standards to firearms, such as an indicator of whether or not the gun is loaded and whether the safety is on or off.
 - Firearm manufacturers should be held to the same standards as other consumer manufacturers including being held accountable if they are negligent.

D. Manufacturing for Private Sale

Our vision is the elimination of the manufacture of guns and ammunition for purposes other than hunting, target shooting, subsistence lifestyle, and other recreational uses.

To this end, we will advocate for the following.

- Prohibiting further manufacture and sale of assault weapons and concealable handguns except for military and law enforcement use.
- Strict regulation of the possession of and use of existing assault weapons and concealable handguns.
- Prohibiting armor piercing and exploding bullets.

Appendix

Statistics Relevant to the Issues of Firearm Violence

An in depth study of homicide in Minneapolis found that, in most cases, the victim and the perpetrator knew each other prior to the incident, and that most homicides were impulse killings and not premeditated.

Firearms were used in the majority of these killings. *Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support, Minneapolis youth homicide study: victims and changes, 1994-95.*

Nearly half of U.S. households own a gun, and these household members are three times more likely to die by homicide than are people without guns. *Kellerman A. Suicide in the home in relation to gun ownership, New England Journal of Medicine, 1992, 327(7):476.*

A 1998 study in the Journal of Trauma showed that a gun in the home is more likely to be used against a family member than an intruder – 11 times more likely to be used in a suicide, 7 times more likely to be used in a domestic assault and 4 times more likely to unintentionally injure.

A disproportionately high number of 5-14 year olds die from suicide, homicide and unintentional firearm deaths in states and regions where guns were more prevalent. *Journal of Trauma, February 2002.*

Approximately 2/3 of intimate partner homicides in the US are committed using guns.

The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms ranks gun shows as the second leading source of illegal guns recovered by federal law enforcement. *1998 ATF report: Gun Shows: Brady Checks and Crime Gun Traces.*

Homicide is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace. In 1991, 84% of workplace murders involved a firearm.

In 2002, of the 1,331,189 murders, robberies and aggravated assaults that reported to the police about 67% of murders, 42% of robberies, and 19% of aggravated assaults were committed with a firearm. *US Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.*

According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, in 1999 about 38% of the deaths that resulted from firearms injuries were homicides, 57% were suicides, 3% were unintended, and 1% were of undetermined intent. *US Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.*

“Firearms killed 3,365 children and teens age 19 and under in 1999—that’s 9 children every day. Of these 1,990 were murdered, 1078 committed suicide, and 214 were victims of accidental shootings.” *Children’s Defense Fund, from the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime Reports in the United States, 2000: Uniform Crime Reports (October 2001): 222, 205, 215.*

The number of firearm deaths for children and teens age 19 and under decreased slightly in 2000. The Children’s Defense Fund and the National Rifle Association agree in reporting the figure as 3,012, which according to the NRA website is 8.3 children and teens every day. They also agree that the causes of these deaths were 1,776 murder/assaults, 1,007 suicides, 193 accidents and 36 unexplained.

“According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of firearm deaths among children under age 15 is almost 12 times higher in the United States than in 25 other industrialized countries combined. American children are 16 times more likely to be murdered with a gun, 11 times more likely to commit suicide with a gun, and nine times more likely to die in a firearm accident than children in these other countries.” *Children’s Defense Fund, from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Rates of Homicide, Suicide, and Firearm-Related Death Among Children-26 Industrialized Countries,” Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 46, no.5 (February 7, 1997): 101.*

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Social Justice Ministry Team of Westminster Presbyterian Church

Timeline	
2003	
April 28	Governor signs Minnesota Personal Protection Act as passed by Legislature.
May 15	WPC Session declares Westminster a Gun-Free Zone and authorizes signage to implement this decision. Session refers the development of policy recommendations to the Social Justice Ministry Team (SJMT), using the Session's Social Justice Advocacy Policy.
May 28	Minnesota Personal Protection Act becomes law.
June 26	Social Justice Ministry Team begins research on the Minnesota Personal Protection Act and on firearms issues.
August 11	Gun-Free Zone Task Force, authorized by Session to develop and post signs banning guns from Westminster, holds its first meeting.
August 17	The Task Force approves the concept for the signage and sign placement.
September 7	WPC posts signs welcoming people to Westminster and banning guns.
September 21	Rebecca Thoman, Citizen's for a Safer Minnesota, leads Sunday Forum on "Conceal and Carry."
2004	
January 18	The first draft of the policy proposal is circulated to the entire SJMT.
January - May	SJMT makes suggestions and circulates revisions for consideration. On April 22, SJMT adopts the final proposal and sends to the May 3 Faith in Action Council meeting. The FIA Council approves the policy recommendation with editorial suggestions.
June 17	The <i>Draft Policy Position on Firearms and Gun Violence</i> is presented to the Session for their study. Copies of the Draft Position distributed to the congregation after the Session meeting. Articles in the Westminster News invite people to review the proposal and comment.
September 15 and 19	SJMT schedules listening sessions to hear feedback from Westminster members. All Session members are urged to attend at least one listening session.
September 16	Session meeting - SJMT members to answer questions for information.
September 23	Revisions made by the Social Justice Ministry Team based on input from a range of responses.
October 4	FIA Council revises and adopts the Policy Proposal.
October 21	Session adopts Policy Proposal.

