

Christian Arguments for Gun Violence Prevention: Reflections on Moral Claims in the Context of Advocacy

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I AM STANDING OUTSIDE A MASSIVE WOODEN DOOR IN THE marble hallway of Georgia's state capitol building with four other women in red t-shirts. The woman in charge of our group is reading notes about the representative we are getting ready to visit during Advocacy Day for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. She tells us his party affiliation and what he has voted for and against recently, and then she says: "Oh, he's active in his church. He's ... um ... Methodist." Another woman in the group enthusiastically chimes in: "Well, Ellen should lead this one. She teaches at a Methodist seminary!" All heads swivel to me and nod their encouragement. Doubtful I could make the impact they hoped, I respond, "Well, given how conservative he is, I doubt a liberal female professor would be our strongest way to start." It was a persuasive point, and one of our more seasoned legislative advocates took the lead in speaking with the administrative assistant who graciously received our materials and told us that the representative was currently out of the office.

A few weeks after Advocacy Day, I was sitting in a Starbucks in midtown Atlanta with two women from our group and two other women who were joining us for the first time. We listened as a Moms Demand Action volunteer explained to us that this chapter of Moms is interested in developing an interfaith dimension. "We need to involve the religious community," she said. She told us a story about faith leaders in another state who took a visible stand against open carry legislation there. "The vote went through anyway, but it was important to have religious leaders speaking out against it." Together, we brainstormed a list of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders vocal about gun reform who could be effective partners.

I have been an occasional volunteer with Moms Demand Action since 2014. I have attended meetings of two chapters in the Atlanta area, signed petitions, made phone calls, mailed postcards, sent emails, and participated in public events like Advocacy Day, demonstrations, and vigils. In 2018, I conducted text and web-based

research for an article that explored Sara Ruddick's maternal thinking in connection with Moms Demand Action and Mothers of the Movement.¹ One of my observations was an apparent disconnect between the secular, policy-oriented language of the organization and the presence of spirituality and faith in the stories told by survivors and volunteer orientation. I had been considering a deeper dive into the religious worldviews of volunteers, but Advocacy Day and the Starbucks conversation prompted me to revise my plans.

I settled into my identity as a volunteer with expertise in Christian moral argumentation rather than a researcher gathering data on the religious views of others. That turn produced this article. The first part of the article describes two places where Christian moral arguments surface in the context of gun violence prevention advocacy. The second part of the article considers three dominant arguments that surface to varying degrees in these contexts of activism: the sacredness of all life, the sin of idolatry, and a call to nonviolence. Running through these arguments are references to vulnerability that, I argue, bring significant moral confusion. Is vulnerability something to be redressed as a social problem, accepted as existentially inevitable, or embraced as a sign of faithfulness? The third part of the article returns to the contexts of activism to introduce a third space, the vigil. In the vigil, the moral arguments continue to surface, but one also finds a practice that clarifies the moral confusion over vulnerability. When participants in the vigil read the names of victims and hear the stories of survivors, we are reminded that gun violence prevention necessitates a distinction between actual vulnerability to gun violence, existential vulnerability as finite creatures in a fragile creation, and a virtuous vulnerability that voluntarily assumes risk as a sign of faith in God. The vigil not only reminds participants of these distinctions, but holds those vulnerable to gun violence at the center of concern around which one organizes a moral and political response that approaches vulnerability as a problem to address and not a virtue to commend.

CHRISTIAN MORAL ARGUMENT FOR GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION: CONVEYANCE AND CONTENT

This descriptive portion of the article considers Christian moral arguments for gun violence prevention that surface in two places. "The Presser" refers to public events in which high profile religious leaders lend their voice to the cause of gun violence prevention. "The PDF" refers to the many downloadable resources from denominational

¹ Ellen Ott Marshall, "Maternal Thinking in US Contexts of Gun Violence and Policy Brutality," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40, no. 2 (2020): 363–379.

bodies and religious organizations intending to equip Christians to study, pray, and act. I offer one example of a press event and a few examples from the PDF category before turning to three arguments that run through them.

The Presser

On May 12, 2020, Everytown for Gun Safety issued a press release to announce an “initiative with faith leaders and faith organizations across the country who are pledging to mobilize faith communities to elect gun sense candidates up and down the ballot in the 2020 elections.”² The press release included quotes from eighteen individuals described as available to speak to the press. The list included clergy well-known for activism related to gun violence and police brutality, prominent evangelical leaders, representatives of peace groups from the Protestant mainline and Catholic social justice traditions, and victims/survivors. They represent the wide-ranging coalition that organizations hope to achieve as leaders with different theological orientations find enough common ground to exercise their influence on behalf of the cause.³

The press release featured a variety of activist Christian clergy, ordained ministers from across the theological spectrum recognized as leaders in current social movements. Four of these clergy leaders represent Black church traditions. Reverend Michael McBride (“Pastor Mike”) is the Lead Pastor of The Way Christian Center in Berkeley, California. As the Director of the Live Free Campaign of Faith in Action, he focuses on “addressing gun violence and mass incarceration of young people of color.”⁴ Reverend Traci Blackmon rose to national prominence during the Ferguson protests. Serving then as Senior Pastor of Christ the King United Church of Christ, she joined the protests, hosted and moderated meetings between activists and police, and remains a sought-after speaker for The Movement for Black Lives. In December 2020, she left Christ the King to serve full time as executive minister of Justice and Witness Ministries for the UCC.⁵ Reverend Jason Carson Wilson is also a minister in the United Church of Christ. As founding director of the Bayard Rustin Liberation Initiative, he focuses on “angelic troublemaking that helps create a just world for same-gender loving people of color and

² Everytown for Gun Safety, “Everytown Announces New Initiative with Interfaith Leaders and Organizations to Mobilize People of Faith around Gun Safety in 2020,” May 12, 2020, everytown.org/press/everytown-announces-new-initiative-with-interfaith-leaders-and-organizations-to-mobilize-people-of-faith-around-gun-safety-in-2020/.

³ While the list also includes Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu leaders, I am only naming the Christians given the focus of this article on Christian activism and arguments.

⁴ Pastor Mike McBride, “About,” pastormikemcbride.com/about.

⁵ Christ the King UCC, “Our Ministers,” ctk-ucc.org/about-us.html.

LGBTQIA people of color.”⁶ Reverend Sharon Risher was serving Rice Chapel AME church as Associate Pastor for Congregational Care when she received the call that her mother, two cousins, and a childhood friend had been killed at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 17, 2015.⁷ She published a book about her experience and is an outspoken advocate for gun reform and against the death penalty.⁸ She is one of the national spokespeople for Everytown USA and Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America.

Everytown’s initiative also included three white men whose names regularly appear in materials and gatherings about gun violence prevention now: Shane Claiborne, Rob Schenck, and Michael Austin. I draw from the writing of Claiborne and Austin and will introduce them later in this article. Rob Schenck was an outspoken leader of the pro-life movement whose journey to extend his pro-life position to nonviolence and gun control is chronicled in the documentary *Armor of Light*. In the documentary and his speaking and writing, Schenck frames gun reform as the faithful and reasonable thing to do, given the sanctity of life and the data on gun violence. In his quote for the press release, he referenced Isaiah 1:18, saying, “God invites us to reason with Him” and “use our capability to develop reasonable policies and practices when it comes to firearms.” He insisted that we “honor the Creator of us all” by identifying and pursuing “common-sense gun regulations.”⁹

Everytown also included two people who represent long-standing peace groups in the mainline Protestant and Catholic social justice traditions. Reverend Deanna Hollis was ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA as a gun violence prevention minister in July 2019.¹⁰ She serves as the Gun Violence Prevention Ministry Coordinator with Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, which produced one of the most robust PDF resources we will consider in the next section. Johnny Zokovitch became the executive director of Pax Christi in August 2019. Pax Christi is a fifty-year old peace, justice, and nonviolence organization “grounded in the Gospel and Catholic social teaching.”¹¹ His quote for the press release integrated moral value and legislative

⁶ Bayard Rustin Liberation Initiative, “Mission, Vision, and Purpose,” angelictroublemakers.org.

⁷ Sharon Risher, “Sharon Risher Speaks,” sharonrisherspeaks.com/bio.

⁸ Sharon Risher and Sherri Wood Emmons, *For Such a Time as This: Hope and Forgiveness after the Charleston Massacre* (Des Peres, MO: Chalice, 2019).

⁹ Everytown, “Everytown Announces New Initiative.”

¹⁰ Leah Asmelash and Katherine Dillinger, “The Largest Presbyterian Denomination in the US Has Ordained a Minister of Gun Violence Prevention,” *CNN*, July 30, 2019, cnn.com/2019/07/30/us/gun-violence-prevention-minister-deanna-hollis-trnd.

¹¹ Pax Christi, “Our Vision,” paxchristiusa.org/about/our-vision/.

appeal: “At the heart of Catholic social teaching is the fundamental belief in the dignity of every human being—that each and every person is sacred, a creation of God. ... It’s time we honor the dignity of our children by putting concrete action behind all those ‘thoughts and prayers.’”¹²

Participating in this kind of initiative and the publicity surrounding it is not new for these Christian leaders. They are regularly in front of cameras, offering interviews and editorials, and speaking to fellow Christians through the lens of the media in order to advocate for this cause and others as well. In the context of “the Presser,” their aim is to persuade fellow Christians to join the effort for legislative or electoral change. They do so by highlighting the alignment between core Christian values and the aims of the organization. The quotes confirm that reducing gun violence is a faithful expression of Christian commitments to uphold dignity, love the neighbor, exercise God-given reason, and affirm the value of human life. These leaders are performing the function that the Moms Demand Action volunteers in Starbucks hoped for: demonstrating Christian support for gun violence prevention and persuading more Christians that this legislative activity is the faithful and moral thing to do.

The PDF

I offer “The PDF” as the label for a second space where we find Christian moral arguments in the context of gun violence prevention. This space includes resources prepared by ecclesial bodies and faith-related organizations intended to help Christians study, pray, and act. There are many. “The Gun Violence Congregational Toolkit” prepared by Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) is a particularly robust example of this genre. Not a denominational entity, PPF is “a wide network of peacemakers” who strive to be “movers and shakers within the PCUSA and beyond.”¹³ The Toolkit is divided into three sections that reflect the study, pray, act approach. Section one, “Educational Resources,” begins with pages of suggestions for documentaries, films, study group materials, articles, and books. It then provides a six-session study guide using *America and Its Guns* by Rev. James Atwood, a Presbyterian minister and long-time gun violence prevention advocate. This six-session study guide is followed by a five-session curriculum created by Reverend Margaret Leonard and revised by the PPF Gun Violence Prevention Working Group. This curriculum emphasizes basic knowledge about the availability of guns in US society, focuses on firearm-caused suicide, and concludes

¹² Everytown, “Everytown Announces New Initiative.”

¹³ Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, “Our Mission,” presbypeacefellowship.org/about/.

with a review of gun violence prevention statements passed by the General Assembly of PCUSA.

The second section, “Pastoral Resources,” begins with materials intended to help congregations and pastors deal with trauma and the aftermath of community violence. It then provides a list of “Scripture Passages for Addressing Gun Violence” and a list of “Hymns Relating to Gun Violence.” Before listing additional worship resources, the Toolkit includes a link to a resource for dealing with conflict in the church. “Seeking to Be Faithful: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement” was created by the Presbyterian Peace-making Program (a denominational entity), adopted by the General Assembly in 1992, and has been available ever since as a resource for congregations experiencing conflict due to social issues or congregational processes. The Worship Resources begin with a “Sample Vigil to Comfort Those Who Grieve,” created by Reverend Margaret Rossi and drawing on resources from the “God not Guns” program of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. The Toolkit also includes a “Litany on the Tragedy of Gun Violence” and pastoral care resources related to mental health, suicide, and “supporting those who grieve.”

The third section, “Take Action,” includes materials, suggestions, and concrete instructions for making public the church’s gun violence prevention work. This includes signs that declare the church a gun-free zone, buttons, logos, prayer cards, and bookmarks listing action steps. The Toolkit also offers instructions for letter-writing campaigns, information about other forms of nonviolent direct action, and materials for voter education and election advocacy. Ten pages of this “Take Action” section include case studies from Presbyterian congregations describing the actions and programs taken to prevent gun violence in their local communities. The Toolkit concludes with another five pages listing state and national organizations that are part of the gun violence prevention network.

Other Protestant denominations have similar materials available online, and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and Pax Christi have a number of statements and resources on their respective websites as well. For example, the USCCB created and posted a “Backgrounder on Gun Violence” in January 2020, titled “A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence,” which references relevant pastoral letters and statements and lists legislation and programs the US Bishops have supported to reduce gun violence.¹⁴

¹⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, Office of Domestic Social Development, “A Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence,” January 2020, usccb.org/resources/backgrounder-gun-violence-mercy-and-peacebuilding-approach-gun-violence-january-2020.

One of the most oft-cited documents in the list is the 1994 Bishops Statement, “Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action.” In its six parts, this statement follows the pattern of other ecclesial materials. It describes the problem of violence at all levels of society, locates a foundational claim from the tradition in which to anchor the call for action (“respect for life”), puts forth a framework for action, recognizes the work being done, and calls the church to more. In keeping with the emphasis on the sacredness of life, the Bishops insist that “respect for human life is the starting point for confronting a culture of violence.”¹⁵

“Confronting a Culture of Violence” was cited most recently in a statement to Congress from four US Bishops in the wake of the Uvalde School shooting in May 2022. In their June 3 letter, the Bishops write: “There is something deeply wrong with a culture where these acts of violence are increasingly common.” Citing Pope Francis’s call to “say ‘no more’ to the indiscriminate trafficking of weapons,” the US Bishops call for background checks, extreme risk protection orders, a ban on assault weapons, and programs to strengthen mental health services.¹⁶ This statement stands in a tradition of letters from US Catholic Bishops (at state and federal levels) calling for reasonable and effective legislative change to reduce gun violence. Indeed, the USCCB website, which houses all of these statements confirms an observation by Thomas Reese in a recent editorial: the US Catholic Bishops have a “strong and comprehensive position on gun control” and yet it remains a secret. “Bishops rarely talk about it. Catholics don’t hear about it from the pulpit in church. The media does not report on it.”¹⁷

While these statements provide ecclesial authority for gun violence prevention and place such activism in a broader context of theology and tradition, Pax Christi offers more concrete resources for training in nonviolence and nonviolent resistance. Pax Christi does not offer, however, resources solely focused on gun violence prevention. Rather, in keeping with the organization’s historic focus on militarism, their materials address gun violence as part of a larger system of cultural

¹⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action,” 1994, usccb.org/resources/confronting-culture-violence-catholic-framework-action-0.

¹⁶ Paul S. Coakley, Salvatore J. Cordileone, Thomas A. Daly, and William E. Lori, “Letter to Congress on Gun Violence, June 3, 2022,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 3, 2022, usccb.org/resources/letter-congress-gun-violence-june-3-2022.

¹⁷ Thomas Reese, “The Catholic Bishops Support Gun Control. Why Don’t We Hear More about it?,” *National Catholic Reporter*, June 14, 2022, nronline.org/news/opinion/catholic-bishops-support-gun-control-why-dont-we-hear-more-about-it.

and structural violence in the US. For example, the agenda for the 2022 National Conference celebrating the organization's fiftieth anniversary of Pax Christi does not include a workshop addressing gun violence, and the only item specifically addressing gun violence on the website points to the May 2020 press event cited earlier in this article. And yet, the workshop offerings and materials on the Pax Christi website provide a tradition and network for resisting violence and pursuing peace, which then inform education and activism related to gun violence.

These Catholic resources highlight a shared space between the PDF and the Presser in so far as documents on the websites might be intended for a public audience. And yet, even the Bishops' Statements explicitly intended for a public audience perform an important internal function: namely, to remind Catholics that a particular legislative appeal reflects a comprehensive ethic and tradition of respect for life. Similarly, the Protestant PDF materials have an internal focus, helping fellow Presbyterians (or Methodists or Mennonites) to understand the issue and the ways their faith tradition compels them to respond to it. The persuasive dimension is geared toward bringing fellow Christians and congregants into the cause, but is most often a soft sell inviting them to study, reflect, pray, and then act. Most of the Protestant online resources include materials for, or at least reference to, conflict in the congregation. They consistently note the divisive nature of the subject of guns and try to prepare participants for working constructively with those who disagree with them. I observed less mention of disagreement in the Catholic materials; rather, the consistent gesture to foundational commitments and ecclesial authority communicates shared tradition to the reader.

As this survey suggests, the PDF is a varied space that includes downloadable materials for learning, anchoring in tradition, addressing disagreement, integrating worship and social concern, and equipping for action. For this article, I surveyed sixteen different resources from seven different Protestant denominations, two Roman Catholic bodies, two ecumenical organizations, and one nondenominational group. Across these materials, my research assistant and I catalogued twenty-five different theological claims and thirty-two different scripture passages used to anchor arguments for gun violence prevention advocacy.¹⁸ While the streamlined communication of the Presser encourages focused and succinct appeal using a few key claims, the PDF offers a dizzying array of concepts, texts, and traditions so that the study is thorough, the prayers well resourced, and the action well-grounded. The three themes I discuss below do not

¹⁸ I remained indebted to Kathryn Harper-Spellings for organizing these findings.

capture all the variety within the PDF genre, but they do constitute dominant themes coursing through all the materials I examined. One of these three themes, the sacredness of life, is also prominent at press events like the one described above. The other two themes, idolatry and nonviolence, are equally prominent at public events when Christian leaders and clergy are speaking to fellow Christians, but less pronounced in pluralistic (interfaith) or explicitly political events.

Sacredness of Life

In the Presser and throughout the PDFs, one hears insistence on the sacredness of life. The particular theological language varies a bit, suggesting deeper differences below the surface, but the affirmation of life as sacred cuts across these different contexts of Christian argument and reflection. One important difference, which deserves mention even though examination is beyond the scope of this article, is the presence of pro-life and pro-choice advocates within the gun violence prevention activism space. As illustrated in the Everytown press event, some Christians understand gun violence prevention to be an extension of their pro-life position or comprehensive ethic of life stance. Joel Hunter, for example, introduces himself “as an evangelical leader who cares deeply about the value of life [and] a comprehensive pro-life view.”¹⁹ In the PDF materials, one finds resources for building on pro-life commitments as well. For example, several documents encourage participants to watch and discuss the documentary *Armor of Light* and discuss the question it raises: “Is it possible to be both pro-gun and pro-life?”²⁰ The 1994 Bishops’ Statement includes abortion in its list of examples of violence along with proliferation of guns, rising crime, domestic abuse, and violence in media. Other speakers and materials affirm the gift of life or the dignity of the person as core convictions, but do not mention a broader pro-life, comprehensive ethic of life, or pacifist commitment. While these differences persist, public advocacy focuses on the shared argument that Christians who believe that life is sacred must also do whatever they can to stop gun violence.

Quotations from the press event insist that Christians who affirm the sacredness of life must also vote for officials who will pass common sense gun laws that save lives. The electoral activity is an extension of their theological conviction. One of the perhaps lesser-known speakers at the Everytown press event was Michael Austin, a philosophy professor at Eastern Kentucky University. His writing

¹⁹ Everytown, “Everytown Announces New Initiative.”

²⁰ Lindsey Long Joyce, “Gun Violence 101 Cheat Sheet: Responding to the Call to Prevent Gun Violence” (General Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church), 4.

surfaces frequently as a resource for Christians reflecting on gun violence. In the opening line of his recent book, *God and Guns in America*, Austin describes himself as “a Christian, a gun owner, and a professor ... concerned about violence.”²¹ Drawing on the range of moral sources in Christian ethics, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, Austin makes a moral case for rethinking our “use of weapons, guns included” and a legislative case for reforming gun laws.²² His quote for the press event reflects his sense of alignment between moral value and legislative change. “Common sense gun laws will reduce the level of gun violence, literally saving human lives. As Christians decide whom to cast our vote for, we must remember this fact.” In the Presser, affirming the value, dignity, and sacredness of human life features prominently because it provides common ground across religious traditions and easily connects in a succinct and straightforward way to a legislative agenda designed to reduce killing and harm.

This conviction (or cluster of related assertions) also appears as an anchor point in the PDF, where it functions as a central conviction in which participants are invited to root their study, prayer, and action for gun violence prevention. For example, in materials prepared by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the detailed recommendations for gun violence legislation and programs consistently reference the sanctity of life. “As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, human life is sacred, and we need to address the threat to life posed by gun violence with the full strength of our tradition,” insists Bishop Frank J. Dewane.²³ Especially in the pastoral resources included in the PDF category, references to the sacredness of life often open the prayers or litanies. For example, the “Pastoral Letter on Violence” issued by the bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America begins with the claim that “every person wounded or killed is a precious child of God.”²⁴ The many liturgical resources created by the Episcopal Bishops United against Gun Violence also affirm those killed in gun violence as “precious children of God.”²⁵ In his oft-cited book, *America and its Guns: A Theological Exposé*, James Atwood anchors his argument to this central assertion of the sacredness of life, as people created in the image of God and claimed as children of God.

²¹ Michael Austin, *God and Guns in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), xv.

²² Austin, *God and Guns*, xvi.

²³ Frank J. Dewane, “Responses to the Plague of Gun Violence,” General Assembly of Bishops, November 11, 2019, usccb.org/resources/responses-plague-gun-violence.

²⁴ Lutheran Peace Fellowship, “Pastoral Letter on Violence,” March 11, 2013, lutheranpeace.org/pastoral-letter-on-violence/.

²⁵ Episcopal Bishops United against Gun Violence, “Litany in the Wake of a Mass Shooting,” November 2018, bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/liturgical_resource/litany-in-the-wake-of-a-mass-shooting/.

Many of the PDF materials cite Atwood's work, including a guide first published in 2014 by the interfaith group "Faiths against Gun Violence." In the section offering a "theological basis for gun violence prevention," Atwood's writing takes the form of a list of theological assertions including: "Each of us is created in the image of God" and "Each of us is a child of God."²⁶ While the precise theological assertions vary across the materials (image of God, children of God, human dignity, sanctity of life), the shared point is that Christians should resist gun violence because all human life has sacred value.

Sin of Idolatry

References to the sin of idolatry are less prevalent in the public sphere of press events, but idolatry is a persistent theme in the materials that comprise the PDF category. Indeed, nearly every publication I collected cautions against the idolatry of guns. In our fear, these materials suggest, we turn to guns to make us feel safe. Like the anxious people at the base of Mount Sinai pleading with Aaron to make gods to go before them, people turn to weapons and pro-gun legislation to secure themselves (Exodus 32:1–6). They make an "idol of safety" and turn to guns to provide it.²⁷ For example, one of the suggestions offered in the Mennonite publication, "A Loaded Conversation: An Invitation to Talk about Guns," is to preach a sermon that "focuses directly on how one's desire for safety and the confidence we put in guns can be idolatrous."²⁸ As this invitation suggests, the materials do not necessarily claim that all guns are idols and all gun owners are idolatrous. Drawing on James Atwood, Michael Austin makes this distinction explicit in *God and Guns in America* arguing that guns become idolatrous when people believe they offer power and security. "If we *need* guns to make us believe that we are in control, to protect us from harm, to make us feel secure, then our guns have become idols." Guns become idols when people imbue them with power and treat gun rights as "sacrosanct and nonnegotiable."²⁹

Other resources take the idolatry argument even deeper. For example, the United Church of Christ offers a five-part Bible study titled "Faith vs. Fear." Part Three, "The Gun as Idol," was contributed by Reverend Matthew Crebbin, senior minister of Newtown Congre-

²⁶ Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, "Gun Violence Prevention Faith Leaders Guide," September 2014, 9.

²⁷ Jon Huckins, "Worshipping the Idol of Safety," *Sojourners*, March 24, 2016, sojo.net/articles/worshipping-idol-safety.

²⁸ Mennonite Central Committee US Gun Violence Prevention Network, "A Loaded Conversation: An Invitation to Talk about Guns," 8, mcc.org/media/resources/8279.

²⁹ Austin, *God and Guns*, 109.

gational Church in Newtown, Connecticut, the site of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. In his reflection on Exodus 20:4–5, Reverend Crebbin adapts a piece from Gary Willis that describes guns as more than idols in which we place our trust. They are also gods to which we sacrifice our children, he argues. The horror of Sandy Hook “was the sacrifice we as a culture made, and continually make, to our demonic god. ... The gun is not a mere tool, a bit of technology, a political issue, a point of debate. It is an object of reverence.” Reverend Crebbin invites participants to reflect on the relationship between the second commandment and the second amendment, and closes the Bible study with a prayer, “O God, open our eyes to our hidden idolatry.”³⁰

In the PDF category, another oft-cited passage, Micah 4:1–4, constitutes a response to idolatry. When people awaken to the idolatry of the gun, they are able to see it as a weapon that can and should be transformed in a life dedicated to nonviolence and peace. Micah’s call to beat swords into plowshares offers a metaphorical path forward in this journey from idolatry to faith. We give up reliance on weapons that destroy and take up tools of construction and creation. We relinquish the idolatrous reliance on weapons for safety and place our trust in God. In 2014, the United Methodist Church produced “Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities,” which integrates a study of Micah 4:1–4 with reflections on gun violence.³¹ This text tells of a people struggling with threats inside, such as anxious awareness that they are separated from God, and threats outside from “powerful nations [that] lie in wait.” In this context, Micah calls for repentance and offers a vision of “great promise.”³² “The transformation that occurs,” insists this UMC resource, “is not only in the weapons but in those who wield them. It is a holistic and total transformation.”³³ Turning away from idolatry involves much more than resistance to guns and the false security they provide; it is a call toward a new way of living.

Call to Nonviolence

The vision of transformation Micah describes has also inspired gun violence prevention activists to enact a literal practice of changing guns into tools. RAWTools, Inc., turns guns into gardening tools as a

³⁰ Matthew Crebbin, “Part Three: The Gun as Idol,” in *Faith vs. Fear: A Faith Response to Gun Violence*, United Church of Christ, 6, uccfiles.com/pdf/faith-vs-fear-bible-study.pdf.

³¹ Jeania Ree V. Moore, *Kingdom Dreams, Violent Realities*, revised edition (Washington, DC: General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church, 2016).

³² Moore, *Kingdom Dreams*, 11.

³³ Moore, *Kingdom Dreams*, 18.

central feature of its broader organizational focus on nonviolence training and community gun violence prevention.³⁴ Their work and the broader symbolism of transformation from destruction to construction shapes the book *Beating Guns*, co-authored by Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, the founder of RAWtools. They open their book with Isaiah 2:4, which also offers the vision of beating “swords into iron plows and spears into pruning tools” (CEB). The transformation of weapons into garden tools is a concrete practice of nonviolent resistance and also a symbol of “transforming our way of life,” they write. “We want to live in a way that moves the world toward love and away from fear. We want to live in patterns that generate life rather than exploit it, that see people and creatures as precious instead of disposable.”³⁵

This call to nonviolence persists through the PDF materials, grounded in a variety of claims and texts. “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9) appears in nearly every resource I studied, as do references to other passages from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1–12). Some resources center their call to nonviolence on love of neighbor (Matthew 5:43–44, Luke 6:27, John 13:31–35), not returning evil for evil, or turning the other cheek (1 Peter 3:9 or Matthew 5:38–40). Several cite Jesus’s caution against living by the sword (Matthew 26:52b or Luke 22:51). While these sources may well anchor a comprehensive ethic of life or pacifist commitment, the PDF category offers them in a more focused way as theological and scriptural grounding for resisting gun violence. For example, “Engage: Lutherans for Gun Violence Prevention” cites Matthew 5:9 as the centering text for their mission: “to meditate on, educate about, and advocate for gun violence prevention in the non-violent Spirit of Jesus.”³⁶ In the document “Gun Violence: Faith and Facts,” the United Methodist Church offers Micah 4:2–3 along with Matthew 5:9 and Matthew 5:43–44 as a response to the question, “What does the Bible say?”³⁷ While there are nuances and differences across these materials, there also is a common assertion that gun violence prevention is consistent with Jesus’s call to a life of love and nonviolence. As Victoria Wilgocki writes in the “Faith versus Fear” Bible study, “Difficult as it may be to resist the way of the gun, we are

³⁴ Rawtools, Inc., rawtools.org.

³⁵ Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019), 22–23.

³⁶ Engage: Lutherans for Gun Violence Prevention, “Home,” engageelca.org.

³⁷ General Board of Church and Society, “Gun Violence: Faith and Facts,” umcjustice.org.

called to follow the way of Jesus: *love one another*.³⁸ This call to nonviolence reminds Christian activists that their resistance to gun violence is more than a policy position; it is a biblically informed way of life that transcends the particular context of any singular issue.

As suggested above, this emphasis on a nonviolent way of living is a central feature of *Beating Guns*, which has become a major resource for Christians in the contemporary gun violence prevention movement. It appears on resource lists in PDF materials, Claiborne is a sought-after speaker, and Martin's RAWTools organization is active and growing. Published in 2019, *Beating Guns* provides helpful overviews of data and history, includes "memorials to the lost" that draw attention to the victims of gun violence, and commends community violence prevention programs as well as legislative efforts. In addition to the call to nonviolence, it also contains the moral claims about idolatry and sacredness of life mentioned above. Indeed, Claiborne and Martin connect the sacredness of life, the sin of idolatry, and the call to nonviolence to an understanding of vulnerability as a mark of faith. That is, part of living a nonviolent life means eschewing the protection of a weapon and thus accepting vulnerability. In the context of gun violence, they argue that it is more faithful to resist nonviolently and suffer than to succumb to the temptation to take up guns for protection. Indeed, they insist that arming ourselves with weapons distances us from God. "When we are too strong and armed," they write, "we tend to lose our faith in God to deliver us. We rely on our guns and bombs, the idols that are easier to see and trust in than an invisible God who can at times feel distant. That's why living an unarmed life takes faith, and courage, and trust in God."³⁹ As in the earlier references, Claiborne and Martin understand reliance on weapons to be a form of idolatry, placing trust and faith in something other than God. Pulling on a thread deeply woven into Christian pacifism, they insist that vulnerability to violence is a mark of faith and brings us closer to God. In their words, following Jesus means choosing to be a "soft target" rather than a hard heart.⁴⁰

Although this line of argument is more overt, it resonates with concerns about fear and idolatry in some of the materials discussed above. Like Claiborne and Martin, many of the materials in the PDF category construe protection and security as problematic and suggest that a willingness to be vulnerable to violence is thus a mark of faith. Rather than succumb to fear, Christians should place faith in God and

³⁸ Victoria Wilgoeki, "Part One: Love One Another," in *Faith vs. Fear: A Faith Response to Gun Violence*, United Church of Christ, 1, uccfiles.com/pdf/faith-vs-fear-bible-study.pdf.

³⁹ Claiborne and Martin, *Beating Guns*, 169.

⁴⁰ Claiborne and Martin, *Beating Guns*, 158.

respond to the call to nonviolence. The materials conveyed through the Presser and the PDF persistently direct one's attention to fear. Indeed, fear of guns, fear of violence, fear of legislation, and fear of disagreement and conflict often occupy the center of moral concern. With attention directed toward fear, the materials counsel faithfulness. The faithful resist the temptation to make idols of guns and seek their own security. The faithful do not succumb to fear by taking up weapons. The faithful consent to vulnerability and commend it.

ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE

This line of thinking is a familiar groove for pacifists and nonviolent resisters, but it signals some moral confusion in the context of gun violence prevention advocacy. By moral confusion, I am not paternalistically suggesting that the activists themselves are confused. Rather, by moral confusion, I mean that in the materials and events where Christian moral arguments for gun violence prevention surface we find a tangle of meaning and value ascribed to forms of vulnerability. This is not a situation unique to gun violence prevention. Vulnerability is currently a rather contentious term that hosts a variety of meanings and values. My intention here is not to wade into the burgeoning and dynamic literature on vulnerability, but rather to highlight a kind of moral confusion that surrounds references to vulnerability in the context of gun violence prevention advocacy by Christians.⁴¹

First, one finds a mixture of descriptions of vulnerability. Particularly in the wake of mass shootings, press events communicate a sense of existential vulnerability. Mass shootings can (and do) happen anywhere: schools, grocery stores, workplaces, outdoor concerts, indoor movie theaters, houses of worship, small town parades. Given the intention of the press event, to mobilize for action, cultivating the feeling that the threat of gun violence is everywhere—that all are vulnerable—is strategic. It makes use of fear to build a sense of urgency and demand action. Public speakers and educational materials also regularly clarify that some are more vulnerable than others. 60 percent of gun deaths are suicides, primarily by white men.⁴² Recent studies document a correspondence between prevalence of guns in the home in rural areas, gun stores in urban areas, poverty,

⁴¹ I am particularly grateful to Jennifer Ayres and Gabrielle Thomas, whose work has brought clarity to these distinctions on vulnerability. Jennifer Ayres, "Embracing Vulnerability: Religious Education, Embodiment, and the Ecological Affections," *Religious Education* 115, no. 1 (2020): 15–26; Gabrielle Thomas, "The Status of Vulnerability in a Theology of the Christian Life: Gregory of Nyssa on the 'Wound of Love' in Conversation with Sarah Coakley," *Modern Theology* 38, no. 4 (2022): 1–19.

⁴² Giffords Law Center, "Statistics," giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-violence-statistics/.

and mental health as contributing factors to firearm-caused suicide.⁴³ 35 percent of gun deaths result from homicide, and 50 percent of firearm-caused homicide victims are Black men.⁴⁴ According to Everytown, Black men and women combined constitute 68 percent of gun homicides.⁴⁵ Also according to Everytown, “gun homicides and assaults occur at high rates within cities, and have disproportionate impact in historically underfunded neighborhoods within our cities.” The disparity increases along with the numbers when we consider non-lethal gun violence as well.⁴⁶ The category of firearm-caused homicide also includes killing by intimate partners, which increased 26 percent between 2010 and 2017.⁴⁷ Research published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine Studies* in 2019 documents a correspondence between firearm ownership and domestic violence homicide, meaning that the presence of guns in the home makes intimate partner homicide more likely. Dr. Aaron Kivesto, lead author of the study, puts it succinctly: “Guns are a real risk factor.”⁴⁸

Thus, in addition to a feeling of existential vulnerability related to the seeming randomness and pervasiveness of gun violence, one also finds statistics that make a distinction between this general awareness of vulnerability and particular circumstances that increase one’s risk for gun violence. To these two forms of vulnerability, some who voice the call to nonviolence add a third, what Claiborne and Martin provocatively refer to as being a “soft target.” Materials in the PDF category may not frame this argument so provocatively, but they too communicate the moral argument that the faithful Christian resists the idolatry of the gun by securing themselves in faith to God rather than taking up weapons. In refusing to take up arms, one chooses a form of vulnerability. In the familiar grooves of pacifism and nonviolent resistance, this form of vulnerability is virtuous.

The presence of these three different forms of vulnerability and the different values assigned to them contributes to moral confusion in the context of gun violence prevention. The materials and actors

⁴³ Erin Schumaker, “Prevalence of Gun Stores Linked to Higher Suicide Rates, Study Finds,” *The Trace*, thetrace.org/2019/09/prevalence-of-gun-stores-linked-to-higher-suicide-rates-study-finds/.

⁴⁴ Giffords Law Center, “Statistics,” giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-violence-statistics/.

⁴⁵ Everytown for Gun Safety, “Impact of Gun Violence on Black Americans,” everytownresearch.org/issue/gun-violence-black-americans/.

⁴⁶ Everytown for Gun Safety, “Violence Intervention Programs,” everytownresearch.org/solution/violence-intervention-programs/.

⁴⁷ Madeleine Carlisle and Melissa Chan, “Here’s Why Domestic Violence Kills so Many Women and Children in America,” *Time*, October 17, 2019, time.com/5702435/domestic-violence-gun-violence/.

⁴⁸ Sarah Mervosh, “Gun Ownership Rates Tied to Domestic Homicides, but Not Other Killings, Study Finds,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2019, nytimes.com/2019/07/22/us/gun-ownership-violence-statistics.html.

themselves do not make clear distinctions between existential vulnerability, statistical vulnerability, and virtuous vulnerability. That is, references to these three wind through speeches and materials and become tangled up with different assessments of value. Is vulnerability a virtue to commend, an existential reality to accept, or a social problem to mitigate? In the mixture of public events, educational materials, and moral claims, it is all of these things, and that generates moral confusion.

Given the scope of gun violence prevention activism, a mixture of meaning and value is inevitable. However, the “soft target” argument crystallizes a concern about this mixture that must be addressed. This line of moral argument reflects a tradition that focuses attention on the character of the moral agent. How one responds to violence and the fear of violence is a matter of character. Does one succumb to the idolatry of the weapon or remain faithful to God? Firmly attached to this focus on character is an assumption that faithfulness may not be effective according to the metrics of culture. Resisting idolatrous violence puts one at risk. Refusing to take up arms renders oneself and others vulnerable to attack. The nonviolent choice may not be the effective choice, but it is faithful to the Gospel. This character-focused and dichotomous framing are deeply woven into the tradition of Christian pacifism and nonviolence.⁴⁹ There is nothing new about it, nor is it new for even fellow pacifists like me to be troubled by its implications for vulnerable people. Commending vulnerability as a mark of faith in the context of gun violence carries the same pastoral and ethical dangers as commending meekness to the marginalized and simplicity to the poor. It makes a virtue out of a situation instead of challenging the systemic and cultural realities that perpetuate it. When it surfaces in the context of gun violence prevention, two problems arise. First, the dichotomous framing of faithfulness and effectiveness is contextually inaccurate and unnecessarily limits the field of faithful responses to gun violence. Second, the false and unnecessary dichotomy not only keeps the focus on the moral character of the activist, but also pits the latter against the needs of those statistically vulnerable to gun violence.

The perception that the nonviolent alternative is ineffective in a violent society runs deep, and opponents to gun control lean heavily on it. However, as indicated by the statistics cited above, the prevalence of guns increases actual vulnerability to gun violence. The availability of guns makes mental illness, systemic racism, and domestic violence more deadly. The vulnerability of people struggling with mental illness, systemic racism, and domestic violence is

⁴⁹ I explore this dichotomy and challenge it in the article, “Pacifism and the Question of Responsibility,” *Political Theology* 21, no. 3 (2020): 192–206.

increased when guns are readily available. Guns do not cause these problems, but they do make the circumstances more dangerous and deadly. Guns increase the vulnerability. They are a risk factor. This reality disrupts the faithfulness-effectiveness dichotomy. In the particular context of gun violence prevention activism, resisting the idolatry of the gun is both effective and faithful.

However, attention to actual vulnerability—the circumstances of those most at-risk for gun violence—also suggests that gun violence prevention requires much more than gun control. It also requires community-based programs to address intersecting forms of violence and provide comprehensive support for the vulnerable, wounded, and grieving. In other words, it requires a shift in attention from one's own moral claims about guns to the needs of those who have experienced and are most likely to experience gun violence.

I recognize that the line from data to argument is never straightforward. Differing viewpoints have their own studies to cite and people can come to different conclusions using the same evidence. However, I agree with Michael Austin's assertion that "there are many things we can and should do that are supported by research and experts from many fields, including law, medicine, public health, public safety, philosophy, and theology."⁵⁰ Keeping the needs of the vulnerable at the center of moral concern and action leads me to support legislation that requires background checks, restricts access to guns by persons deemed a danger to themselves and others, repeals stand-your-ground laws, funds research on gun violence and gun violence prevention, prohibits assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, and prevents guns on campuses. These proposals also align with my own commitments to pacifism and nonviolence. Because firearms are already in homes and communities, I also support firearm education and programs like "Be SMART," which educates families about gun storage.⁵¹ As a pacifist, I feel some ambivalence about firearms remaining in homes and communities, but centering actual vulnerability to gun violence clarifies the need for firearm education given the data on gun violence caused by accidental shootings. It directs my attention to the victims and survivors and orients my action around responding to their needs, rather than debating about guns and focusing on moral character.

This intentional shift to center those most vulnerable to gun violence in moral reflection is not unique to me.⁵² Indeed, it reflects an intentional and strategic effort in gun violence prevention activism

⁵⁰ Austin, *God and Guns*, 129.

⁵¹ Be SMART, besmartforkids.org.

⁵² Teal Rothschild, *An Ethnography of Gun Violence Prevention Activists: "We Are Thinking People"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019).

to focus on victims and survivors rather than guns. Centering survivors is a concrete expression of a development in gun violence prevention advocacy. Even in the years I have been volunteering with Moms Demand Action, I have noticed a change in language. Initially, the guidance from Moms was to use language of gun reform rather than gun control so that our advocacy would be less easily dismissed by gun rights supporters. They wanted to communicate an emphasis on reforming gun laws, not controlling the guns. In recent years, any reference to gun reform has also fallen out of messaging. Moms uses “gun violence prevention” language now in order to keep the focus on the victims and survivors rather than guns. Implemented by many advocacy groups, this change in language from gun control to gun reform to gun violence prevention is about changing the frame from a focus on guns to a focus on victims: “To enact policies that reduce gun violence, we are changing the issue ‘frame’ from one centered on taking guns away from people, to one centered on saving people’s lives.”⁵³

This intentional re-framing of activism has been strengthened by regular practice of hearing from and supporting survivors. In 2015, Everytown for Gun Safety launched the Survivor Fellowship Program, which partners “with survivors as they share their stories with the public and give audiences a way to become involved in and connect with the gun violence prevention movement.”⁵⁴ Fellows receive public speaking and media training and serve as resource people for two years for Everytown and their local Moms Demand chapter. After serving this term, they remain part of the Everytown Survivor Network. This is undoubtedly strategic, and not only because it helps to set a new frame. In the case of Moms Demand Action, foregrounding people who have experienced loss due to gun violence is also an important shift for an organization started by a white woman not personally affected by gun violence.⁵⁵ It has been crucial to their growth and mission to center survivors in their storytelling and

⁵³ Erika Soto Lamb, “Reframing the Gun Debate,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 29, 2018, ssir.org/articles/entry/reframing_the_gun_debate. One finds similar advice in some of the PDF materials as well. For example, the United Methodist Church publication “Gun Violence 101 Cheat Sheet” advises participants to say “gun violence prevention” instead of “gun control” in order to “avoid trigger words.” This same document also encourages people to use the word “violence” when starting the conversation in order to “focus on people who are impacted in your community” (Joyce, “Gun Violence 101 Cheat Sheet,” 2, 4).

⁵⁴ Everytown for Gun Safety, “Everytown Survivor Network,” everytownsupportfund.org/everytown-survivor-network/.

⁵⁵ Shannon Watts, *Fight Like a Mother: How a Grassroots Movement Took on the Gun Lobby and Why Women Will Change the World* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 3.

leadership. In Georgia, where I have attended events, this has also increased involvement from and leadership by women of color. For example, Sharmaine Brown is one of the religious leaders announced in the Everytown press event. Ms. Brown's son was killed by a stray bullet in 2015, and she is a member of the Everytown Survivor Network. She is also a leader in the Georgia chapter of Moms Demand Action and moderated the vigil for the Georgia chapter during Gun Violence Survivors Week.⁵⁶

Centering victims, survivors, and those most vulnerable to gun violence is clearly strategic for advocacy groups like Moms Demand Action, but I also find it instructive for Christians involved in gun violence prevention advocacy. As noted above, there is considerable attention given in the PDF to internal debates about guns and helping individual Christians reflect on their moral stance on weapons. Such moral discernment and ecclesial dialogue are indeed important. But they need to be accompanied by experiences that bring us into regular contact with people who have suffered the forms of violence we are debating. Therefore, in addition to the Presser and the PDF, Christian gun violence prevention activists need experiences that routinely place those actually vulnerable to gun violence at the center of moral reflection.

Centering vulnerability, in this sense, means orienting reflection, concern, and action around responding to and addressing the needs of those vulnerable to gun violence. One does not disregard all the other texts, traditions, and arguments, but brings primary attention to vulnerability as a problem to address. Anchoring reflection and practice to texts like Matthew 25:34–40, Christians orient discipleship and pursuit of the kingdom around responding to need. The “least of these,” those vulnerable to violence, remain the object of focus for moral concern and action. Centering on actual vulnerability also reflects a deliberative practice Sara Ruddick describes as maternal thinking. In Ruddick's philosophy, a mother is one “committed to meeting demands that define maternal work.”⁵⁷ The preeminent demand is that of preservation or preservative growth. The distinctive feature of maternal thinking is that it understands “vulnerability as socially significant and as demanding care.” Maternal thinking involves a practice of centering vulnerability and pursuing the deliberation and action required for preservation.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Sharmaine Brown, “In Memory of Jared,” *Moments that Survive*, Everytown for Gun Safety, momentsthat survive.org/tribute/sharmaine-brown/.

⁵⁷ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 17.

⁵⁸ Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, 18.

It also centers vulnerability as something that demands a response, not as a virtue to commend. Maternal thinking, in Ruddick's philosophy, involves intentional deliberation to care for the one who is vulnerable. One practices maternal thinking not by commending vulnerability, but by enacting care that preserves, nurtures, and protects the vulnerable. Although Ruddick mentions her own Protestant Christian upbringing in passing, she writes as a philosopher drawing on reason and experience to make her arguments. As a Christian feminist ethicist, I integrate Ruddick's maternal thinking with Jesus's teaching to care for the least of these. In Jesus's parables, the least of these demands a response that meets their needs. The teaching is to respond to the one who is "hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison" by taking care of them, addressing their needs. The call is to see in the "least of these" a need that demands a response.

In the context of Christian gun violence prevention advocacy, this response must presume that vulnerability is a problem, not a virtue. But this requires intentional clarification of the ways we experience and value vulnerability. In the mix of actors, intentions, texts, and traditions that share the context of gun violence prevention activism, some mixture of meaning and value is inevitable. This particular area of confusion is something that can and should be clarified. While we experience different feelings of vulnerability in relationship to gun violence, the focus for Christian activists must remain on addressing the actual vulnerability of those most at risk.

In the final portion of this article, I develop this argument by describing a third space where Christian moral claims surface, namely the vigil. Like the Presser and the PDF, the vigil also communicates the affirmation of the sacredness of life and the call to be peacemakers and practice nonviolence. Like the Presser more so than the PDF, vigils are often hybrid spaces with a mix of religious traditions and an inclusion of ecclesial and political figures; thus, the language of idolatry recedes to the edges a bit. However, the purpose of the vigil is quite distinct. Where the Presser intends to persuade and enlist, and the PDF focuses on education and dialogue, the vigil aims to remember those who have died and comfort those who mourn. In a very explicit and embodied way, vigils center those actually vulnerable to gun violence.

CENTERING THOSE VULNERABLE TO GUN VIOLENCE: THE VIGIL

"The Vigil" refers to a particularly interesting hybrid space where participants remember the dead, support survivors, and pledge or re-commit themselves to action. These spaces often include a mix of liturgical and prayer practices from different traditions and participation from both political and religious leaders. They are

sometimes public-facing events and sometimes semi-private circles of support. While the Presser and the PDF tend to unfold as one might expect, the vigil has become a rather varied and unpredictable space. I offer two examples that represent some of this variety.

In the summer of 2019, I sat holding a thick stack of 3x5 cards in the front seat of a priest's car on the way to a vigil near the capitol building in Atlanta. This priest, whom I call Catherine, had been organizing parishioners every month to read the names of fellow Georgians killed by gun violence. For two years, she stood in a circle with whomever showed up and used Episcopal liturgy and data from Gun Violence Archives to pray and read the names. They also prayed for the first responders, recognizing the toll gun violence takes on "their very being."⁵⁹ When I contacted Catherine for information about this vigil at the capitol, she offered to meet me at church and give me a ride.

When we arrived, the small treeless piece of lawn and scorching pavement were busy with Moms Demand Action volunteers in red shirts, people in religious vestments representing different traditions, two state representatives (Mary Margaret Oliver and Bee Nguyen), one US representative (Lucy McBath), and a few reporters and cameras. After prayers and comments from those on the platform, we attendees were instructed to form two lines so that we could take turns reading names of fellow Georgians killed by gun violence in 2018 and 2019. As we approached the platform, we were handed one of the 3x5 papers I had carried in Catherine's car. Each paper had five names or descriptions when names were unavailable (e.g., "unnamed 25 year-old man"). We stepped to the microphone and read the names, then returned to the end of the line to see if we needed to read a second time. Most of us did. Although I lost track of the time it took, news accounts report that we read names for thirty minutes.⁶⁰

Reading the names of victims is a central practice of the vigil. For those grounded in liturgical traditions, it is an extension of prayer and a practice easily resourced by the church. Indeed, Bishops against Gun Violence, an organization of over one hundred Episcopal Bishops across the US, offers numerous liturgical resources on their website.⁶¹ In their recent letter to President Biden and Vice-President Harris, the

⁵⁹ Catherine, interview with the author, May 18, 2020.

⁶⁰ Jill Nolin, "Lawmakers, Clergy Call for Gun Restrictions at Vigil near Capitol," *Georgia Recorder*, August 15, 2019, georgiarecorder.com/2019/08/15/lawmakers-clergy-call-for-gun-restrictions-at-vigil-near-capitol/; Ross Terrell, "'There Will Be More': Dire Warning Issued at Gun Violence Vigil," *GPB News*, August 14, 2019, gpb.org/news/2019/08/14/there-will-be-more-dire-warning-issued-at-gun-violence-vigil.

⁶¹ Episcopal Bishops United against Gun Violence, "Liturgical Resources," bishopsagainstgunviolence.org/resources/liturgical-resources/.

Bishops pledge their support for policies that address “the unholy trinity of poverty, racism, and gun violence” and identify their contributions as champions of this cause. Among these contributions is: “We hold public liturgies—vigils, processions, and prayer services—to commemorate the dead and inspire the living.”⁶² For Catherine, a liturgist, reading the names is both a spiritual practice and a political act. It is one way she enacts and remembers one of her core convictions: “God resides within each and every human being.” Reading the names of those lost to gun violence is one way she “holds all life as sacred.” It is also a reminder and enactment of the responsibilities we have to one another, she says.⁶³

Prayer vigils at church and interfaith vigils in public, political spaces are established traditions for ecclesial bodies and faith-related political organizations.⁶⁴ They have also become standard practice for gun violence prevention advocacy groups. As mentioned earlier, the Brady Campaign created a sample vigil as part of its “God not Guns” program. Moms Demand Action does not (yet) offer liturgical resources like this, but the organization does create space during in person and virtual gatherings to remember victims and hear the stories of survivors. During Gun Violence Survivors Awareness Week in February 2021, Moms Demand Action chapters organized virtual vigils throughout the week.⁶⁵ As summarized on the organization’s website, these vigils were organized by state chapters and included prayers, survivor testimonies, music and spoken word performances, and guided meditations for healing. One member of the Everytown Survivor Network, Miami Knight, is a grief counselor and spiritual healer who offers guided meditations to gun violence survivors in the context of Moms Demand gatherings and through her own company. Her approach integrates guided meditation for relaxation with candle lighting rituals, and prayers for healing and comfort.⁶⁶ During the Gun Violence Survivors Week in 2021, Moms Demand Action also launched “Moments that Survive,” “a year-round digital storytelling

⁶² Episcopal News Service, “Bishops United against Gun Violence Pledge to Work with Biden and Harris on Gun Control,” February 25, 2021, episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/02/25/bishops-united-against-gun-violence-pledge-to-work-with-biden-and-harris-on-gun-control/.

⁶³ Interview, May 18, 2020.

⁶⁴ For a robust analysis of protest liturgy, see Kyle Lambelet, *¡Presente!: Nonviolent Politics and the Resurrection of the Dead* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

⁶⁵ Moms Demand Action, “Third Annual National Gun Violence Survivors Week,” momsdemandaction.org/third-annual-national-gun-violence-survivors-week-concludes-with-thousands-of-powerful-stories-shared-across-the-country/. I attended the vigil for the Georgia chapter. However, given the intimate nature of the event, I chose to draw my description from materials available on the website.

⁶⁶ Miami Knight, miamiknightllc.com/.

site and campaign in which Americans across the country share defining details of their experiences with gun violence, in their own words.”⁶⁷ Moments that Survive is intended to continue the practice of remembering victims and telling the stories of survivors; it is also a mechanism for connecting survivors to one another so that they can offer mutual support.

The vigil is a regular feature of gun violence prevention activism now, utilized in a variety of ways. Some gatherings are more traditionally liturgical, while others integrate a variety of spiritual practices. What I find consistent across them is that they hold a space for intentional reflection on experiences of loss and pain. Whether conducted by an Episcopal priest in the church courtyard or by a spiritual healer on Zoom, the vigil offers an embodied experience that centers those most vulnerable to gun violence. Participating in vigils orients us time and again to a kind of vulnerability that makes a demand on us. These activities focus attention on those actually at risk for gun violence and frames vulnerability as a problem to address, not a virtue to commend.

CONCLUSION

Gun Violence Prevention activism is a dynamic context in which Christians are participating as featured speakers at a press event, authors and consumers of materials intended to educate and motivate, and conveners and participants in vigils. In each of these spaces, Christians voice a variety of moral claims. This article focused on three: the sacredness of life, the sin of idolatry, and the call to nonviolence. In my analysis of these arguments in the context of gun violence prevention, I note a tangle of meaning and value ascribed to vulnerability. The pervasiveness of gun violence gives the sense that all are vulnerable anytime. The statistics around gun violence provide a more nuanced picture of increased vulnerability for some. And the familiar grooves that dichotomize faith and effectiveness in Christian nonviolence surface to suggest another form of voluntary vulnerability as a mark of faith. While a general feeling of vulnerability is understandable, it does not orient the activist properly toward the work that can and should be done. A more nuanced picture of vulnerability issues a moral demand and also clarifies the kinds of legislative and programmatic responses that can actually lower the numbers of gun deaths and injuries in the United States. Virtuous vulnerability warrants explicit challenge and re-direction. In the context of gun violence, vulnerability is a problem to address and not a virtue to

⁶⁷ Moms Demand Action, “Third Annual National Gun Violence Survivors Week,” momsdemandaction.org/third-annual-national-gun-violence-survivors-week-concludes-with-thousands-of-powerful-stories-shared-across-the-country/.

commend. Vulnerability must be framed as issuing a moral demand, a response in the form of concrete actions to address the perceived need. The Presser and the PDF are filled with such concrete actions, and Christians are very busy undertaking them. In addition to those materials and actions, I underscore the value of the Vigil as a space that keeps activists properly oriented toward the vulnerable and the work they demand of us.^M

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