

PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE



A resource for churches provided by:



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Introductory Letter | 3 |
| Violence Prevention Strategy | 4 |
| Homily Resources | |
| Sermon Starters | 6 |
| Prayers for Worship | 17 |
| Hymn Suggestions | 18 |
| Additional Resources | 19 |
| Appendix | 20 |
| Bulletin Insert: Violence as a Public Health Issue | 22 |
| Please print and share this insert with your congregation. | |

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INTRODUCTORY LETTER

Dear Colleague,

The prevalence of violence in our nation is overwhelming. As leaders we struggle against the rising tide of pain and fear and admittedly become disillusioned by the increasing occurrence of its many forms. The communities most affected are caught in a seemingly endless and increasing cycle of violence, coupled with the fact that all communities are affected by the prevalence of fear, heightened aggressive political rhetoric, and a culture of resistance to gun legislation.

Dr. Karen Hacker of The Allegheny Health Department and her team are partnering with community leaders, local institutions, and the faith community to address violence in a different way. Dr. Hacker has researched the option of centering violence as a *public health* issue as opposed to the traditional way of thinking of violence as a public safety issue. This positional change focuses on community and personal trauma that, left unaddressed, has significant effects across many facets of society. Violence as a public health issue will engage a wider range of services for the treatment, prevention, and cultural shift necessary to change the current climate of violence in our region and across our nation.

To begin, all the partnering agencies involved are asking for your participation. In the faith community, we have a wide range of influence and voice to begin to shift the presence of trauma within ourselves and the communities we serve. We have the power to educate, enlighten, and create movement toward healing that is sustainable. On **Sun., June 19, 2016**, we are asking you to lift your voices, your influence, and your power to speak against violence and trauma. We are providing resources for you to design sermons, liturgy, and other valuable materials to be able to begin this movement. These resources will help you reflect and preach on gun violence on that particular Sunday.

The movement will not end on that Sunday. There will be many other opportunities for you to participate in creating the shift to positioning violence as a public health issue. Please keep watch for more information to come.

In the African American community, June 19th is known as "Juneteenth," which is the celebration of the emancipation of the last remaining enslaved Africans in the United States. We strongly believe it is by divine Providence that we are poised to begin a new chapter in the fight against traumatic devastation brought on by senseless violence in our communities. We are clear that this culture of violence not only affects the inner city but also has negative implications in every neighborhood.

We are looking forward to your support in this timely and most needed effort.

Sincerely,

The Rev. B. De Neice Welch
Chair of the Spiritual Leaders Caucus, PIIN
Senior Pastor, Bidwell Presbyterian Church

Dr. Karen Hacker, MD, MPH
Executive Director
Allegheny County Health Department

on behalf of

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
Allegheny County Health Department
Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network
Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania



VIOLENCE PREVENTION STRATEGY

BACKGROUND

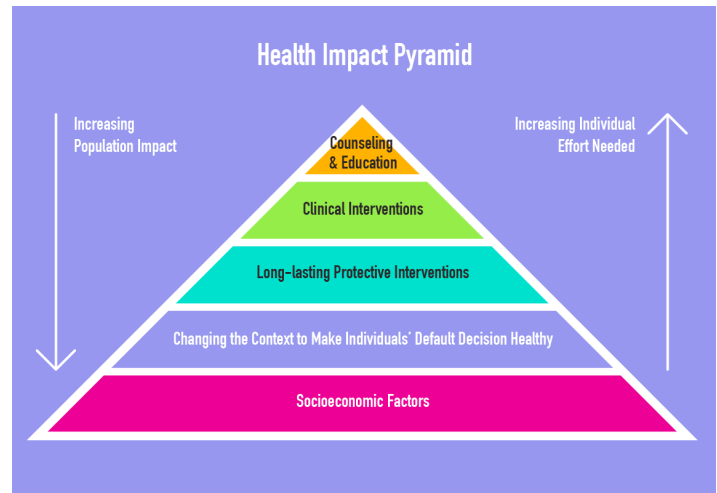
The City of Pittsburgh and the Allegheny County government are committed to working together to stop the shootings and violence that have killed and injured hundreds of people. It is time we take a public health view of the problem. The public health perspective presumes that street violence, just like an infectious disease outbreak, can be prevented, but only if we understand the contributing risk factors and then intervene with culturally appropriate, evidence-based strategies.

These strategies can be applied to those yet to experience or participate in violence, to those who are involved in risk behaviors that contribute to violence, and to those who have experienced violence as victims and perpetrators.

Addressing and preventing violence will take a community approach. The recent Public Health Commission on Preventing Violence and Promoting Community Mental Health report provides a blueprint for action that can guide us. Now we must implement the recommendations, which include the following;

- Identify best practices in violence prevention on a local, state, federal, and international level that are applicable to Allegheny County;
- Identify ways to maximize the impact of existing resources and efforts in Allegheny County aimed at reducing violence in order to gather information and data on what activities are effective;
- Identify strategies to reduce the hurdles and stigma associated with seeking mental health services that prevent individuals from getting assistance or treatment;
- Recommend means to increase community involvement in creating safe and connected neighborhoods;
- Recommend local approaches that can be utilized by community groups to engage their residents in a common goal of reducing violence and promoting mental health; and
- Recommend policies and actions to the Allegheny County Executive that the County can adopt, implement, or offer that will reduce violence and promote positive mental health.

The schematic here shows that the greatest impact to health would be to address root causes including socioeconomic factors, social injustice, and structural racism. These factors underly the reasons that violence has become commonplace in disproportionately affected communities. We remain committed to changing these factors over time within our own institutions and in collaboration with others. However, our violence prevention strategy document is aimed at expanding and launching immediate interventions that address other factors affecting violence in our communities.



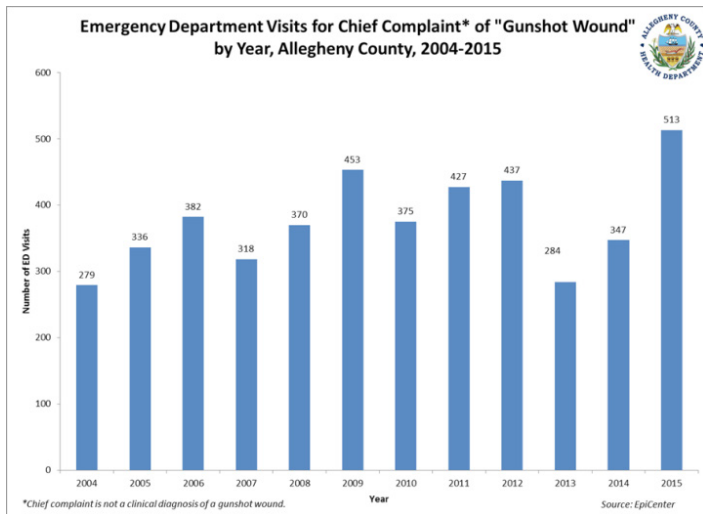
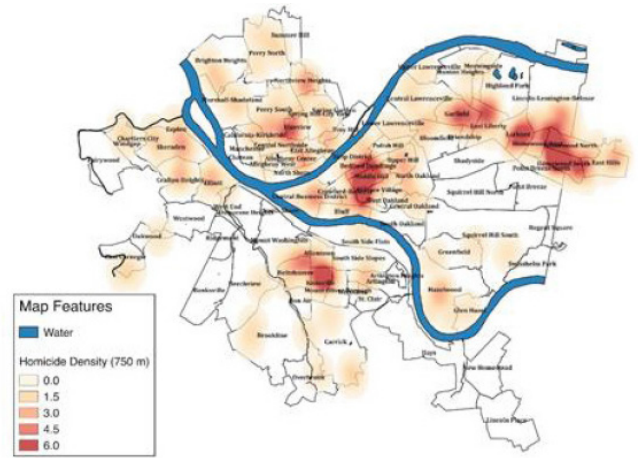
We have carefully selected funding and program strategies that are worthy of our hope and hard work, for these are rooted in evidence demonstrating measurable effects on violence and allow us to act now. To achieve the strategies identified will take community collaboration, including multiple community- and faith-based organizations, government, police, and schools.

DATA

In 2013, the homicide rate in the United States was 4.5 per 100,000, while the rate in Allegheny County was 7.4 per 100,000 (Collins et al.). Nationally, homicide rates tend to be higher in urban areas as compared to other areas. The number of homicides inside the City (56) almost matched those in the rest of the County (57), and the majority of them were related to gun violence. In the City of Pittsburgh, the homicide rate in 2013 was 14.6 per 100,000. The grim statistics in the greater Pittsburgh area show a concentrated and disproportionate impact on specific communities. This is particularly true for young African American men in Pittsburgh, whose homicide rate (over the years 2010-2014) was 65 times the national average (City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police).

In addition to homicides, other forms of violence significantly affect individuals and communities in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. That emergency-department visits related to gun violence have risen steadily since 2013 affects the City and a group of communities bordering the City. During 2010-2014 in Pittsburgh, there were more than three shootings, five aggravated assaults with a gun, and 50 calls for shots fired for every homicide. From 2010 through 2014 in Pittsburgh, 87 percent of homicides were committed with a firearm (City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police).

See the full-sized images in the Appendix, page 20.



Where

The proportion of Allegheny County homicides occurring outside of the City of Pittsburgh increased throughout the 2000s, with more than half of all homicides in 2015 occurring outside the City (Collins et al.). These communities included Penn Hills, McKeesport, Duquesne, Wilkinsburg, Clairton, and Homestead. From 2005 through 2011, 39 percent of county homicides occurred in just five of the 129 county municipalities. From 2005 to 2011, 54 percent of city homicides occurred in just 21 of the City's 92 neighborhoods (City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police).

References:

City of Pittsburgh Bureau of Police (2015). *Violence in the City of Pittsburgh: 2010 through 2014*. Pittsburgh: Bureau of Police.

Collins, K., Dalton, E., & Odah, C. (2013). *Homicides in Allegheny County, 1997 through 2012*. Pittsburgh: Department of Human Services.

Victims

Recently published analysis for the City of Pittsburgh from 2010 through 2014 found that, of homicide victims:

- 86 percent were men;
- 85 percent were African Americans;
- 33 percent were ages 18-24 and 26 percent were ages 25-34.

In Allegheny County (Collins et al.), from 1997-2012, the numbers were similar:

- 86 percent were men;
- 86 percent were African Americans;
- 48 percent had been involved with the juvenile justice system or the jail; and
- 48 percent had involvement with a DHS service or other supportive human or income maintenance service.

HOMILY RESOURCES

For 200 years there has been a consistent mode of reflection and response to the plethora of human calamities that persist in our world. Christian proclamation – more commonly known as preaching – continues to detect how God is present and active in our daily experiences of profound sadness, irrepressible joy, utter confusion, and divine purpose. The type of violence that plagues our 21st-century urban context is not unusual to the human experience because, as the biblical text informs us, “there is nothing new under the sun.” But, if we are truly to embody the characteristics of “salt” and “light” in our urban context, our preaching must seriously, hopefully, and critically address issues of joy, pain, theodicy, comfort, and grace. It is in our preaching, the proclamation of God’s power and hope for this world, that we may be the necessary light that beams radiantly into darkened hearts and the needed measure of salt to preserve those whose humanity is at risk of needlessly wasting away.

The sermon starters that follow reflect how a group of preachers at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary who vary in age, denominational affiliation, gender, preaching experience, social location, and theological perspective are taking the biblical text and the text of everyday life and proclaiming a faithful message of challenge and hope to their local communities. Their overarching belief in God is evident in their persisting hope in the feeble and fleeting currency of words and their ability to influence the larger world. Allow these short sermons and homilies to inspire and challenge you. The sermons creatively proclaim the Word in different approaches.

It is our deepest desire that pastors and preachers who live in the midst of the swirling tides of urban violence, and those whose parishes are perched in suburban churches, will find themselves reflective about their role in making our world a safer, more humane, and, ultimately, a more just space. We hope that everyone who is exposed to this resource is inspired to work toward God’s greater work among humanity.

We also hope that these words provoke and challenge every Christian to take seriously the work of being “peacemakers” in a world where peace is often misunderstood as fervently advocating the status quo. It is our deepest desire to be counted as those who commit to the work of peace so that we can fully embrace the promise that stretches before us like the western Pennsylvania landscape—the simple promise that we may be seen and known by humanity as children of God.

This resource is arranged according to the Revised Common Lectionary texts for the day (June 19)—1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7) 8-15a; Psalm 22:19-28; Psalm 42 and Psalm 43; Isaiah 65: 1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; and Luke 8:26-39. We hope that, in the diversity of voices and opinions presented, new ways of approaching the biblical text will develop and new ways of highlighting the contextual condition of the Pittsburgh community will be further cultivated. For the sake of the

gospel and for those who are affected by gun violence—all of us—let us bring our best gifts to bear on some of the most pernicious problems of our time.

SCRIPTURE AND SERMON STARTERS

1 KINGS 19:1-4 (5-7) 8-15A (NRSV)

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” 3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

4 But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” 5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” 6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7 The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” 8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10 He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

11 He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14 He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” 15 Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

PSALM 22:19-28

- 19 But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
- 20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
- 21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
- 22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
- 23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
- 24 For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.
- 25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
- 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!
- 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
- 28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.

David Ackerman, Conference Minister, The United Church of Christ in the Penn West Conference

From the cross, Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christians over the centuries have wondered what he meant. Some say that "God turned God's back on Jesus because he was carrying the sins of the world." Others say that "Jesus was showing his humanness and accusing God of leaving him." But perhaps a better way of seeing this cry is to look at the totality of Psalm 22. When Jesus quotes the first verse, he calls us to look at the whole psalm. And in this psalm, we see an example of someone who suffers greatly. "Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion" (v. 12). In the midst of this intense suffering, the psalmist cries out, "But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!" (v. 19). This plea is followed by words of rescue, "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me" (v. 21b). And after that come words of praise, "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you"

(v. 22). The rest of the psalm extends these words of praise for God's deliverance.

When we consider the suffering and anguish of those affected by gun violence, it may be hard for us to connect with these words. Perhaps those we love have not been rescued, and we are left with the stark reality of the loss of their lives. All we have is the jumble of emotions that we feel at such times of intense grief. But when we consider that these words are placed on the lips of Jesus, who suffered and died, we find hope in an Easter message about a rescue that transcends what we might imagine in this life. As we continue to work for justice and peace in this world, may we also find hope in knowing that we believe in a God who works for these things in ways that are beyond our understanding, that are ultimate and eternal.

PSALM 42

- 1 As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
- 2 My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
- 3 My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"
- 4 These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.
- 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help 6 and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.

- 7 Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.
- 8 By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
- 9 I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?"

Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"

10 As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"

11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

PSALM 43

1 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!

2 For you are the God in whom I take refuge;
why have you cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?

3 O send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me;
let them bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling.

4 Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God.

5 Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Stephanie Martin, PTS MDiv Student

Time, I think, can be a funny thing. When we sit in classes or stand in line at the DMV it seems like time passes painfully slowly. When we get a massage or we are at an enjoyable concert it seems like time flies by. I have found that sometimes when I sit down to do some task in the evenings, whether that is doing homework or watching TV or hanging out with friends, the clock seems to skip a few hours and all of a sudden it is midnight. And when that happens, late night hunger rears its ugly head. My stomach growls and I crave the unhealthiest foods possible. But logically, I know that I shouldn't eat that late at night . . . and I can't really be hungry. I always find myself caught in this tension where I feel something very strongly but at the same time know that I shouldn't feel that way. How I actually feel and what I think I should feel do not actually match up. And the psalmist in our

passage today is having this exact problem. Put simply, the psalmist wants to feel the joyful presence of God . . . but he can't. Instead he feels God's absence.

Though he is not entirely clear about what is happening, we know that the things going on around the psalmist are not good. He feels poured out and downcast. He says his bones suffer mortal agony and his foes are taunting him. Our psalmist is depressed and sad, beaten down by the situations in his life. He tries to talk himself out of it and feel better by remembering times when he would worship God along with a festive group of friends. But when he realizes that his happy memories could not change his current reality, he returns to his state of despair. He tells us that he is repeatedly taunted by the words of his enemies asking, "Where is your God?" And I think that we often ask ourselves the same thing.

The unfortunate truth is that we live in a world where violence is the norm. One statistic notes that living in Pittsburgh you have a 1 in 120 chance of being the victim of a violent crime. As of today, April 6th, in Pittsburgh alone there have been 28 murders, and 24 of those are from shootings. We as a society are plagued by gun violence. And this plague has spread to the point where each of us probably knows someone who has been affected by gun violence in some way. It feels like we cannot escape it. The fear, anxiety, and pain caused by guns presses in on us from all sides. We are overwhelmed with sorrow. And we know that life, especially the Christian life, is not supposed to be easy, but does it have to be this painful?

Like a deer lost in the desert we thirst for God's presence—just one drip of his presence to cool our tongues, just a reminder of what his presence tastes like. But instead our tongues are met with the salty tastes of our own tears in our mouths. Tears of sorrow, of grief, of fear. We look around at

the violence closing in on us and ask ourselves, "Where is our God?" Like the psalmist we long for the refreshing waters of God's presence to wash over us and nourish the arid grounds of our souls, to soothe the heat of anger and violence around us, but instead floods and waves crashing all around us overwhelm us. And we ask ourselves, "Where is our God?" But the psalmist does not succumb to the taunting questions of his foes. Instead, he remembers the presence of God in his life. Holding these memories in his mind he urges his inmost being, he urges his soul to wait—to wait expectantly—for the presence of God to return to him, for he knows that he will again praise God. Like the psalmist we also must strive to hold in our memories those times when we felt God closest to us. We may be discouraged when we look around and see so much brokenness and pain in the world, so much violence, so many deaths caused by triggers and hatred. It feels like enemies are pressing in from every side, taunting us and questioning where our God is now.

But God is still here. Even in the midst of tidal waves of sorrow we must hold tight to the knowledge that the living God is present with us right now. And not only is he with us now but he is also already reigning in our futures. Amidst

these floods of sorrow we must hold on for dear life to that knowledge. With this knowledge we can tell our souls to wait . . . to wait expectantly, to feel again the comforting presence of God.

Debra Sims, PTS MATM Student

The Sons of Korah are credited with writing the 42nd and 43rd psalms. These men are described in First Chronicles 26 as ministering gatekeepers in the temple of the LORD. These two psalms are connected. They share a common theme, common language and phrases: “Where is your God?” “Why are you downcast, O my soul?” and “Hope in God.” The hurrah or turnaround in this lament happens in the last verse of psalm 43. This is a psalm/song about moving from desperation to hope.

Because scholars have dated these psalms to the Exile/or post-exilic period, it is believed that the psalmist is downcast because he cannot enter the temple. Others say that perhaps it is sickness or disease that is keeping him from the temple. Because the temple is where the Israelites met with the living God, we can see why he has lost his joy.

The song begins with a poetic illustration meant to describe how the writer feels. “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.” For me, the NRSV does not fully capture the psalmist’s thirsting soul. For me, the NIV does: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” Can you imagine the deer searching for its life source with tongue lagging and labored, shallow breaths as it is in desperate need for . . . *water*. All living things require it—plants, animals, and especially humankind. Without water they dry up and cease to exist.

Can you sense this man’s desperation, his emptiness, his thirst because of his separation from God, or as he claims in chapter 43 his forsakenness by God? Have you ever been there? I am not ashamed to admit that I have been there. Even Jesus has been in this place—remember the cross, when the crucified Christ cried out in lament, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!”

Not being able to connect with God is not a good place to be. Not being able to get into the presence of the LORD is a dangerous place to be. Can’t get a prayer through; can’t feel his presence; can’t hear his voice. And I know theologically that God is omnipresent. I accept it and believe it to be so. But . . . I have been where the psalmist is, and I say if you haven’t been there yet, just live a while longer.

There are many lurking dangers in being *thirsty* for God and feeling like you can’t get through to him. And it is dehydration and not starvation that kills wanderers in the desert; thirst is the most terrible of all human sufferings. Dehydration can drive people to do almost anything—even things that will harm them—to quench the terrible thirst. The psalmist is experiencing spiritual thirst. This man was in a

bad way. His tears were his food, night and day. His spiritual gas tank was empty, riding on fumes. He was thirsting for God. He hadn’t heard what Paul tells us in Romans 8:38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” His thirst set in before Jesus became incarnate and told the woman at the well that he was the Living Water: “Those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty.”

But he did have some memories. He remembered the joy, the thanksgiving and praise on his way to the LORD’s temple. But even with his memories, he was still thirsting. His soul was still cast down, thirsty for God. He internalizes his feelings by having a conversation with his soul—he talks to himself. And once he begins to encourage himself to hope in God, he turns a corner. His focus moves from himself to his God. He remembers God, his Rock. He remembers God’s steadfast love. Now the psalmist is talking to God. Never mind the haters who taunt, “Where is your God?” Remember God for who He is! His turning point poses a challenge to us to turn our conversation outward and upward to the God who is able to return to us the joy of our salvation. He is our refuge and strength. He is a very present help in the time of trouble. When the psalmist turned his complaint to prayer, it turned him around. Prayer changes things.

I can’t even imagine the myriad of emotions felt by families of murder victims from gun violence in this country. Think about what happened in Wilkinsburg just three months ago—the pain, anger, outrage, and questions. In times like this I ask, “Where are you, God?” People have the tendency to speculate why something happens where it happens and the way it happens. The blame game begins. But all I know is that gun violence must stop. I don’t know how to stop it. But I do believe that God responds to prayer. I also believe that on that sad day in Wilkinsburg God was there to receive the souls of those victims—an unborn baby, a single working mother of five, sisters and cousins—unto himself. I also know that the Jesus still lives, and I know that because he lives we can face tomorrow. This same God offers peace, comfort, love, and salvation to those left behind. The psalmist’s solution for his thirsting soul is our solution even today: “Hope in God.”

Brenda Henry, PTS MDiv Student

As we look around our communities and see the continued depravity caused by gun violence it is easy to ask the question, “Where is God?” Is God present in the mass shooting of the victims in Wilkinsburg or East Hills? Is God present in the tragic shootings on the campuses of colleges, high schools, or elementary schools? Is God present in the deaths of those killed in the interactions with law enforcement? And the list goes on and on.

Notice that I asked, “Is God present?” and not, “Was God present?” For the pain and anguish from these atrocities is still present with us today. Families are still mourning over the loss of a nephew, son, and grandson in the case of the East Hills shooting from two years ago. In Wilkinsburg it is the loss of siblings, mothers, and an unborn child just a month ago. Where is God? Why would a God who is all knowing, all powerful, who is supposed to be a loving God allow these things to happen?

We hear these cries of lament—pain, mourning, anger, doubt, mistrust in the words of the psalmist who wrote Psalms 42-43, our text for today. In chapter 42 verse 3 the psalmist cries,

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”

In verse 9-10 the psalmist cries,

I say to God my Rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the
enemy?”

My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

The natural tendency may be to question ourselves. “What did I do wrong?” “What did my family, my community do to deserve this? Why me? Why us? Why here? Why now?”

It begs the question why we should continue to trust God when what is around us makes no sense. The platitudes, “God will not give you more than you can bear,” and “It is all in God’s will” feel like nothing more than meaningless justification for unexplainable situations. Even then in our pain we feel guilty for questioning God. After all, as Christians we are supposed to be the example to others. Like we are, the psalmist is wondering, “Where is the God I place my trust in?” and is beginning to turn the questions inward. But he chastises himself for feeling this way, as shown in the repeated refrain in 42:5a, 11a and 43:5a, “Why, my soul, are you downcast?” “Why so disturbed within me?” Why, we ask, are we feeling this way?

Because, the violence is unjust and senseless! Too many have been hurt and are in pain. What can be done?

If we examine the passage a little closer, we will see that the psalmist is an individual who, in spite of feeling disconnected or removed from God and being taunted by those surrounding him for continuing to place his trust in God, realizes that in the midst of the pain, and even the uncertainty of where God is in his situation, knows that God has not left. The psalmist turns to God in prayer. He asks God to fight for him; he asks for God’s light to lead him.

How can the psalmist, in spite of all his emotions, doubts, and questions, still turn to God? The answer is found in the second half of the refrain of chapter 42 verses 5 and 11, and again in chapter 43 verse 5:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise him,
my Savior and my God.

Hope . . . In Hebrew hope means to wait for an expected good (*Interpreter’s Bible*, 885-86). What is this good? God! God, who will vindicate wrongs! God, whose faithfulness and steadfast love for us became incarnate in the human form of Jesus and sacrificed himself on our behalf! God, who tells us to trust in him, for he will never leave us nor forsake us!

This hope does not mean to sit idly by and do nothing. In fact this hope is challenging us to call upon the God who made us, who redeemed us and sanctified us, to be the guiding light in the charge for healing. Not retribution, not continued violence, but the kind of healing that starts with love for one another. A love that respects the sanctity of life, embraces the uniqueness of our diversity, and treasures the oneness of our unity as sons and daughters of our creator.

Yes, it seems very difficult to place trust in God in the midst of all that seems so unnatural and unjust. It will not be easy. In fact it requires the kind of faith that says “I hurt,” but as the songwriter says, “I trust you Lord!” It is a trust that comes from the deepest recesses of our beings. It is a desperate faith that says, “I have nowhere else to turn, because none of this makes sense!” It is a trust that says, “God, you have seen me through before, and I need you to see me through again!”

And like the psalmist, who remembers what it means to be in the presence of God—who remembers what it was like to worship and praise God at the temple, who received an inner joy and peace when he was in communion with God, who had the courage to continue trusting in God in spite of his situation—like that psalmist, if we too have the courage to trust God in the midst of what seems so wrong, God desires to give us the same joy and peace that the psalmist remembers. Not because that joy and peace explain away the things that are happening, but because God’s mercies are new each day, because God grants us the strength and courage to move through each day despite life’s circumstances, because God is the only true source of our healing.

The songwriter Richard Smallwood reminds of the power of this healing with these words:

Don’t be discouraged—
Joy comes in the morning.
Know that God is nigh;
Stand still and look up.
God is going to show up—
He is standing by.
There’s healing for your sorrow,
Healing for your pain,

Healing for your spirit,
There's shelter from the rain.
Lord send a healing,
For this we know,
There is a balm in Gilead—
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the soul.

Despite what seems to make no sense, I am here to remind you that God is in the midst of the unexplainable situations. God hears our cries, sees our pain, and knows our struggles. God has not forgotten us. God desires to heal us, our families, our communities. Where is God? God is here! God is in us! God is ready, willing, and able to use us to bring healing! Are you willing to be used by God?

Britney Vokish, PTS MDiv Student

Psalm 42—these are the words of an anxious soul. Words like these pierce our hearts when we hear them because they are able to describe our experiences. Naming our realities is hard work; it is painful work. It is unlike everything that we have been taught in Sunday School as a child. We are better at naming God's blessings and the goodness of God than naming the suffering and brokenness of our world. Psalm 42 is not a song that most choir directors would include in the worship service on any given Sunday. For Sunday is not a time to sing about our less-than-favorable circumstances—Sunday is a day to forget them. Psalm 42 is ugly. It is depressing. It is real.

Real scares us. It threatens everything we know and everything we believe. A threat to our faith causes doubt and fear. Speaking the truth of our circumstances may cause some to think we doubt who God is. It is unbelievable to me that a church, a Christian podcast, and a Christian radio station will continue week after week to sing joyful songs of praise and preach messages of hope without addressing our collective suffering when every week there is another shooting, another life taken, another community torn apart, and another soul murdered by the firing of a gun. In the United States, a gun shooting occurs every 16 minutes. In fact, a recent Washington Post article read: "Gun Deaths Outnumber Car Deaths in 21 States Plus D.C." Today alone, 36 Americans will die by a bullet. In the past 10 years, 301,797 Americans were killed by gun violence; 71 Americans were killed by acts of terrorism.

The fact is, this is the reality of our world. For many Americans, those who live in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, gun violence is not just a possible threat—it is has become the way of life. Why can't we, the Church, the body of Christ, say more about this suffering than just a line in the Prayers of the People? Our Bible, a witness of the history of our faith, is full of lament, complaint, and the "realness" of life. It includes an entire book dedicated to complaining!

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann contests this idea that "psalms of darkness" such as Psalm 42 are acts of unfaith and failure. In fact, the psalmist in Psalm 42 is demonstrating bold faith! Brueggemann calls these songs "Psalms of Disorientation." Psalm 42 is a fitting cry for the disorienting world in which we wake up every day. It is disorienting to know that the classroom of an elementary school is not a safe place for young children anymore, that a movie theater can be a scene of a mass murder, that anger about a car accident could lead to eight shots fired into a man's back. "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'"

Those words "bring to speech" the confusion, disbelief, and evils of our world. Psalm 42 exposes the darkness by putting into words our fears, doubts, and questions. "Bringing to speech," as Walter Brueggemann calls it, liberates us from the grip of the violence that consumes us and floods our newsfeeds, television screens, and communities.

The writer of Psalm 42 is speaking on behalf of his congregation, as we see in verse 4:

These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

The writer is reminded of the congregation in the House of God. He is reminding them of the blessings God had poured out upon his people and how the people responded with praise. When the enemy or evil taunts by asking, "Where is your God?" this question is addressed to the whole congregation. The problem of evil does not affect only one person but all people. This Psalm, most likely written during the period of the Exile, is for those experiencing loss of family, a sense of identity, and security. Can we not claim that all three of these losses are the same for the families, communities, and cities affected by gun violence? Because of the slayings of six individuals, we do not recognize our city anymore. Not only did families in our city lose loved ones, but an entire community in Wilkinsburg also had its narrative rewritten by the headline, "Six Lives Lost in Wilkinsburg," and now our city awaits with fear and trembling for the next shooting.

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

Speaking the truth of our realities not only frees us from the fear and doubt, but it also liberates us as communities of faith to talk about the violence that plagues our city. It gives us the freedom to discuss the terror, the sadness, and the lack of resources to combat this problem. As people of Christ, we are able to imagine what our community can be, what it was created to be. As believers in the kingdom to come, we affirm, just like the psalmist, that nothing is beyond the realm of God. God is present even in the midst of gun violence.

By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

Can we as a congregation affirm the presence of God in our communities filled with violence? Can we let ourselves imagine what our community can be—a place of love, connections, support, and prevention? Can we enter into that violent, uncertain space as the body of Christ and be doers of our faith, practitioners of the divine, and be present with those who suffer? Our faith and the world are not separate.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

We are encouraged by the words of Paul in Romans 8,

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We who hope in God are liberated from our fear, doubts, and the violence of this world. We who hope in the Holy Spirit can imagine a world in which we will again praise God with shouts of thanksgiving. We who hope in Christ know in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. As Paul continues to say in Romans 8,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We who hope in the one true God can imagine the world yet to come and can enter our communities to work for the elimination of evil and suffering, to be comforters to those who know loss, and to be builders of shalom.

Shawnta Taylor, Participant, HOPE Pre-Release Program, Allegheny County Jail

A week before Christmas my 16-year-old daughter experienced the death by gun violence of her 16-year-old boyfriend. Psalm 42, "Yearning for God in the midst of distress," reflects my daughter's boyfriend because of his lost soul. To my understanding he experienced a lack of support from his parents. I am not sure why. I do know that he lived

with his grandma after moving out of his mother's house. He left that house to live with his brother and his girlfriend. Both of them were in their early 20s. He spoke about going back to live with his grandma, but too soon his life was taken to be with God. My daughter mentioned how he always talked highly about his grandfather, who had passed away about six months earlier. He missed him severely. He wanted to return school, move back in with his grandma, and change his street mentality and habits into positivity.

I can understand this chapter of life, because my daughter's boyfriend realized he was lost and wanted to change. He was hurting day and night (like the tears that have been the psalmist's food day and night, while they continually say to him, "Where is your God?"). These verses describe how much the writer wants God, how his prayers seem unanswered and his cry unheard, and also how his prayers seem to be unanswered and his cry unheard. At that point, the enemy (evil) appears again. The enemy speaks, asking "Where is your God?" Then God appears. God brought my daughter's boyfriend home. He is safe, he is worry free, his tears are no longer tears of pain but tears of joy and peace.

ISAIAH 65:1-9

1 I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask,
to be found by those who did not seek me.
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"
to a nation that did not call on my name.
2 I held out my hands all day long
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;
3 a people who provoke me
to my face continually,
sacrificing in gardens
and offering incense on bricks;
4 who sit inside tombs,
and spend the night in secret places;
who eat swine's flesh,
with broth of abominable things in their vessels;
5 who say, "Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am too holy for you."
These are a smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that burns all day long.
6 See, it is written before me:
I will not keep silent, but I will repay;
I will indeed repay into their laps
7 their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together,
says the Lord;
because they offered incense on the mountains
and reviled me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
full payment for their actions.
8 Thus says the Lord:
As the wine is found in the cluster,
and they say, "Do not destroy it,
for there is a blessing in it,"

so I will do for my servants' sake,
and not destroy them all.
9 I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah inheritors of my mountains;
my chosen shall inherit it,
and my servants shall settle there.

Taylor Barner, PTS MDiv Student

Two years ago, during my first year of seminary, I encountered two distinct yet similar situations. One was when I was invited by some fellow students involved with the Metro-Urban Institute to go on a prayer walk. While we walked we would stop and greet those we met on the street and inquire about what we might pray about for and with them. Having never done such a thing before, I was intrigued and jumped at the opportunity. Besides, MUI director Kimberly Gonxhe can be pretty persuasive. I soon found myself with three other students and a guide from a local church walking through the neighborhood of Homewood. Some people we met were open and receptive to praying with us, and some were less than amiable. We ended up stopping outside a local bar and praying with a man who had just exited the building. He asked us to pray for his brother, who had been shot and killed the next block down merely three days prior.

During that first year of seminary, I was also working as a youth director. One morning I woke up to a slew of texts and phone calls regarding my senior high school, Franklin Regional. Some of you may recall the day when a young man, suffering from delusions and constant bullying, had come to the school with two knives and stabbed 20 people, all of whom, praise God, miraculously survived. I knew so many that were there that day, including two of my own students. And I thought to myself, "How? How in Murrysville? How in a small town where nothing ever happens?"

Our passage from Isaiah today comes after Isaiah's cry to the Lord in the previous chapter. Isaiah cries out, "Lord where are you?" and "Look and come down to us," in reference to the people of Israel. Isaiah prophesied regarding the coming fall of Israel to a people set in their ways of sin and rebellion. In our passage, God responds, "I have been here all along! Ready to be sought and found but you are a rebellious people who do not walk in goodness." This rebellion and apostasy is smoke in God's nostrils causing displeasure and anger. And this rebellion is systematic and consumes not only the current generation but also those before them. But the Lord promises salvation to the land of Judah, to those who have remained servants of the Lord, and they will not be overtaken and scattered as Israel will. There is this beautiful blending of both divine judgment and merciful salvation.

This message is one that is sorely needed in our society today as well. We look around and see mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and domestic violence throughout the world, and quite recently in our own neighborhoods of Wilksburg and Homewood. Many of us are asking, "Lord have mercy," and

others may be uttering the words of the psalmist, "How long O Lord?" Many of us are asking the same question Isaiah asked, "Where are you, God?" Yet God's answer remains the same. The Lord is here, in each and every occurrence of violence. We need only to seek and find.

When I heard the news of the shooting in Wilksburg, I was reminded of the man outside the bar that day—reminded of the sorrow, the shock, and the loss of loved ones. We cannot believe that violence is simply an urban issue alone—we also recognize those places that are suffering from a systemization of violence. Violence exists around the world, wherever there is fear and hatred, and violence only begets further violence. Violence is real; it is in our towns, it is in our cities, it is in Murrysville, and it is in Wilksburg. It is in Homewood and Homestead and throughout our city of Pittsburgh, and it is apparent across the nation and across the planet.

So what is our response to such violence? We cannot sit idly by and allow shooting after shooting after stabbing after abuse after rape after homicide to become the norm for our society. I look at verse 1 of our passage for today and see not just God's being ready to be sought and found, but also an example for us to follow, hopefully before but also after and during such crises. And we pray that God may intercede, but we ourselves need to be agents of change who strive to break the vicious cycle of systemization. We need to promote peace while simultaneously promoting justice. For if we are all one body in Jesus Christ, then we must take care of our various members. We must remember the salvation given to us in Christ and spread that message of salvation to the world, especially to those places steeped in violence. For there is new wine in the cluster, there are new lives and new blessings that are being destroyed. Yes, Lord, have mercy—but also, Lord, here we are. Here we are. Amen.

GALATIANS 3:23-29

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Teresa Armor, PTS MA Student

The categories that divide us today may be different from those in Paul's day, but divisions persist in congregations, in the broader church, and in our many communities—divisions that run along lines of ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, political affiliation,

and any number of other factors. Paul reminds us that whatever human categories may describe us, they do not define us, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” All human categories and subcategories are subordinate and ultimately irrelevant to our primary identity as members, as brothers and sisters, in the body of Christ.

Recently a fellow congregant who was trying to pin down my stand on the issue of crime and people who have been incarcerated for homicide questioned me. They know that I have an interest in post-incarceration ministry because of the Diaconal Ministry project I am doing for candidacy. But basically this person wanted to determine whether I am a “conservative” or “liberal.” Refusing to be labeled, I merely responded by saying, “I am a child of God. That is what matters.” My interrogator was left flustered and speechless and essentially disgusted with this answer . . . and walked away angry. Our continued attempts to categorize and label one another in the church, and to diminish one another on the basis of those categories and labels, are signs of our spiritual immaturity. Paul reminds us that since Christ has come, we are no longer enslaved to those old divisions. All are justified solely by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Through baptism into Christ, we belong to him and to one another. All share fully and equally in the inheritance of God’s promises and in the mission to which God has called us.

At the heart is Paul’s picture of his pre-Christian life: all God’s people were held tight, guarded and supervised by God’s word precisely so that they would be prepared to recognize God’s faithfulness and God’s faithful One at the proper time. The Revised Standard Version uses the term “custodian”; the New Revised Standard Version uses the term “disciplinarian”; the New International Version uses the term “guardian.” When paired with the verbs from verse 23, “imprisoned and guarded” (NRSV) or “under restraint” (RSV), the meaning takes on a slightly different nuance. If you look at the Greek, “under restraint” or “imprisoned and guarded” is *sugkekkeismenoi* or “locked up together.” Faith takes over where the Law used to be our custodian or guardian, and since faith must have an object (for us it must be Jesus Christ), all is well.

But imagine people who have no faith, or only faith in themselves or in their dreams, or worldly goods, or friends, or in a particular group? Would a person who is leaving the Law behind, who is becoming an “out-Law,” no longer be confined to any moral codes? Would such a person not then lose that “custodian” or “disciplinarian” and with that loss also lose all control of anything beyond his or her own covetous nature? The world teaches us first and foremost to look out for number one. It teaches us to have a “what’s-mine-is-mine” attitude and to place a priority in our possessions over our relationships with each other, but *especially* over our relationship with God. This philosophy “grows” people who also subject the needs and wants of others to their *own* actions and wishes, does it not? How far a stretch is it, then, for such people to take up arms—guns

and other weapons—to ensure that their wishes and desires are met? We see and hear about it almost daily. It’s here in Pittsburgh, in our communities and neighborhoods, it’s in our towns and cities across the country, and it’s in the countries and nations around the world. But through baptism into Christ, we belong to him and to one another. Remember, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Before Jesus, then, God’s people, for all the protection of the Law, did not enjoy God’s rescue from the age of evil. Only by God’s help did they endure. Paul reminds us that the Law was provisional and can never justify or save us. In fact, it can only imprison us. It is only Christ who frees us from the curse of the Law and makes us children and heirs of God. This truth does not mean that “anything goes” in terms of how we live. We are still bound by moral codes and our personal value systems to hold all life dear and precious, and to treat each other with kindness and dignity. Yes, Paul has plenty to say about how we are to live out our freedom in Christ, yet Paul’s message to the Galatians cautions us against allowing the Law to annul the promise and destroy the freedom, unity, and mission to which God has called us in Christ. God’s mission to bless “all the families of the earth,” beginning with the promise to Abraham and bequeathed to us as children and heirs, takes priority over all human agendas. For all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And through baptism into Christ, we belong to him and to one another.

LUKE 8:26-39

26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— 29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 30 Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. 31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35 Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. 36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been

healed. 37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. 38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39 "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Darren Rogers, PTS MDiv Student

"The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

There are places within the city that outsiders will not venture into for fear of physical harm. These perceptions are sometimes valid and other times far from the base of reality. Nonetheless there are areas that, because of the stigma of poverty, violence, or the present racial demographic, are bypassed from one's normal network of places to dine or shop. In fact, some people may drive miles out of their way to avoid even driving through these particular places in the city.

However, though there is a perception of an undesirable element to be avoided (the demoniac), there are good people who are isolated from the mainstream of society simply because of the zip code or census tract in which they reside. There are not many people who are trying to move into the Wilkinsburg school district these days because of the perception of danger that lingers over their reputation. The realtors are not making huge commissions selling residential properties because families are beating down their doors to move into Beltzhoover. Yet the majority of people who live in these areas are afraid of their own neighborhood children, who seem to be oppressed or even possessed with a mindset to do harm to others.

Gennesaret was a place much like our city. It was a place where families care for one another and do their best to make a living with what they have. The basic needs of those in Gennesaret are not so radically different from our own. The people wanted to make a living for their families, they looked for opportunities to prosper, and they desired a safe and secure environment to live in.

But within their context was something lurking in the shadows of their space that disrupted their peace of mind and limited their quality of life. There was something that brought fear upon all the inhabitants of the land, and that terror came from the demoniac who lived in the tombs and roamed the countryside invoking terror and committing acts of random violence throughout the land.

Those who lived there refused to go near the place where this evil threat was looming. No one went anywhere close to the tombs. They would pass by on the other side of the street.

They would avoid going near where the violence was, but sometimes the senseless violence would find its way to their street, thus making their feeling of helplessness even more acute.

Jesus went all the way off of the beaten path, into the margins—into Gentile territory to deal with this problem that no one wanted to deal with. Jesus went so far into the margins to find this man that there is scholarly debate concerning the exact location of where the visit took place.

The problem in the neighborhood of Gennesaret was not significant enough for either the Jews or the Romans to concern themselves with. Gennesaret was out of sight and out of mind. Those from the outside really didn't care about the issues taking place in Gennesaret.

But what is the theological significance of this story in the light of what is taking place in our context today? And why does Jesus even bother going down to this place anyway? Who were these people who didn't look or act like the first-century Jews?

They were Gentiles. To the Jews, they were dogs, unclean, infidels, less than human. This man represented everyone who suffers, directly or indirectly, at the hands of random violence and who is helpless to do anything about it. He represents the child who has lost a parent to violence either through death or incarceration and doesn't have a voice and no one hears her cry. He represents the addict in the dark pit of despair, caught so tightly in the grip of addiction, that he's willing to rob his own family members in order to get his next fix. The demoniac represents all who live in fear and are afraid to walk the streets of their own neighborhood because of the threat of gun violence, drugs, incarceration, and human trafficking. They have been conditioned to fear, wounded by loss, and written off by everyone on the outside. They don't matter.

The Gentiles were marginalized by the Jews, but this guy was even marginalized by his own people. His marginalization reveals how far he had fallen away from the community. The townspeople were content to leave him to destroy himself. But we cannot treat people the way they treated him. We must be careful and make certain that we do not marginalize our brothers and sisters who are suffering.

Jesus shows us how to do so in his compassionate treatment of the demoniac, named Legion. But after exorcising the demons from the tormented man, Jesus is met by a crowd of townspeople. The text says that they were seized with fear and therefore begged Jesus to leave their land. But why didn't their fear at Jesus' power produce a reverent faith and desire to know more about Jesus instead of the dread that they felt at his presence? The man himself, delivered of the demons, asks Jesus if he can come with him, but Jesus turns him down and gives him, instead, the important task of telling the good news of what Jesus did for him to those same people who were afraid to have Jesus around.

Imagine what it must have been like to be trusted enough by Jesus to be the first non-Jew to receive the call into ministry by the Lord himself? When he and Jesus parted ways, he immediately began telling everyone about the transformation that only Jesus can bring to a life that is broken. The story ends with Jesus' getting in a boat and heading to Galilee while the man begins his evangelistic campaign for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus brought transformation to the demoniac in order to bring transformation to the city. God brings transformation to individual people in order to bring transformation to our city, our space, and our context.

I believe that God does in fact intervene in the affairs of humanity and that he is able to bring change in our world like he did then. What we must do is bring Christ into the context of our world so that he can invoke change by his Spirit. God has not forgotten the marginalized and has not written them off. Jesus has not forsaken those whom society does not value or deem worthy. He uses the most unlikely persons and methods to bring about radical change. God will use the same people who have terrorized the city to transform the city.

Allan Irizarry-Graves, PTS MDiv Student

What happens when Hope enters hopeless spaces? In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, we see what hope can do. The land of the Gerasenes (of uncertain origins in Greek)¹ can be interpreted as the place where you don't want to get caught at night. A hopeless place. The 'hood.' The ghetto. Where "they" stay. It's the other side of the tracks. It is opposite to Galilee. It is a place many of us do not want to be associated with because it is simply a hopeless place.

As soon as Jesus and his disciples arrive in the land of the Gerasenes, they are met by a demon-possessed man who was naked, homeless, and residing in a hopeless place (the tombs). And how did the demoniac react? He yelled at Jesus saying, "What are you doing here? Please do not come here bothering me. I do not want to deal with you." Perhaps Jesus and this man had a previous encounter of some sort during which Jesus attempted to help set this man free. Many times the demons had seized the man; many times he was bound with chains and shackles. Every now and then, though, this man would break those chains and be driven back into the wild by the demons. It seemed as though when this man had hope, the vicious cycle would start again and render him hopeless. But Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" The demoniac answered, "Legion." Many demons had taken up residence inside the man. He did not even recognize his own identity outside this hopeless condition.

How many of you have heard stories similar to this one? What if the demoniac is actually more than just one person?

What if the demoniac could be seen to represent the Black community in this country? The name "Gerasene" comes from "pilgrimage" or "fight";² indeed, this name speaks to the experience of the Black community, originating from involuntary pilgrimage and fight. What if this community is suffering in such hopeless conditions for reasons that have nothing to do with them? What if the unclean spirit that many do not want to address is actually institutional racism? Could it be that the Black community is apprehensive when hope arrives because racism has been perpetuated by those who come in the name of hope? Could it be that the Black community is continuously seized and bound by issues of menacing murder rates, intimidating incarceration rates, and eerie educational attainment rates that cause hopelessness because of the spirit of racism in America? Could it be that, though individuals in this group occasionally advance by breaking free from the chains of systemic racism, the group as a whole is still in a hopeless state because of the condition? Could it be that many Blacks have accepted their place in the world because they get tired of fighting a seemingly already lost fight? Could it be that the Black community has accepted this condition in place of its identity because its members have lost hope of being free from their condition?

Many in the Black community no longer want to be bothered by the church or organized religion, but they are still in need of hope. But where does it come from? It comes when we engage in real relationship with Jesus. Not religion, not church, but Jesus. Jesus is the hope that will always meet us in the midst of our hopeless situations. And what happens when he does? Verse 33 tells us that the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, who drowned themselves. When hope enters hopeless spaces, things have got to change. Lives begin to change. People no longer operate out of their given conditions but their God-given value.

What happens when hope enters hopeless spaces? When Jesus who is our hope comes and meets us in the midst of our hopeless situations, deliverance happens. Chains begin to crack. Bondage is broken. Deliverance becomes our destiny, and the spirit of oppression is obliterated.

What happens when hope enters hopeless places? You are changed, and as a result of that change you should tell everyone you know, near and far, that Jesus, who is our hope, came into our hopeless situation to give us a new, joyous life.

What happens when hope enters our hopeless spaces? When our Hope, Jesus, enters into the muck and mire of our hopeless spaces, we put our hope in the Lord. And because our hope is in the Lord and Savior, Jesus, you matter, we

¹ "Strong's Greek: 1086. (*Gerasénos*)—Gerasene, of Gerasa, a City East of the Jordan." Accessed April 12, 2016. <http://biblehub.com/greek/1086.htm>.

² "Gergesenes—Hitchcock's Bible Names Dictionary Online." Bible Study Tools. Accessed April 12, 2016. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/hitchcocks-bible-names/gergesenes.html>.

matter, Black lives matter, and we do not have to fight alone. This is what happens when Hope enters hopeless spaces.

Jamilah Pulliam, Participant, HOPE Pre-Release Program, Allegheny County Jail

I can remember years ago first hearing the passage about Jesus healing the man with demons, or unclean spirits. But today as I read it I can relate to that “certain man” that the Bible mentions. Now instead of reading a “certain man” I replace those words with my own name. Luke 8:26-39 tells how Jesus healed a man by taking out everything that was unclean and not of God. For many years he lived in darkness, wore no clothes, lived in no house, and lived among the dead. I imagine him being violent and lonely. No friends or family. For many years he was tormented by his ways and he had probably tried throughout the years to change but just could not do it on his own. But one day he crossed paths with Jesus and the scripture says he bowed down, fell down, and with a loud voice cried out for Jesus to save him, deliver him from his ways (demons) and to heal him. And just as he believed, Jesus healed him.

One of my favorite songs is called “Break Every Chain” by Tasha Cobbs. She sings about how there is so much power in Jesus’ name that it will break every chain. Believe in Jesus, confess it with your mouth and believe it in your heart, and Jesus will heal you. I myself am a witness. I had my own demons I was battling against—my own spirits I had to overcome. I had so much evil, hatred, guilt, violence, anger, and death in me. I never cared about my life or the people around me. The Bible tells me that the fruit of God’s spirit is love, kindness, patience, meekness, etc. My own spirit was the opposite of the word. I lived a lonely life at points. I was hanging out all night with the man I believed to be my boyfriend. First there were drugs and then alcohol. Then out of nowhere there was anger, violence, and a gun was pulled out and pointed at me. I was so exhausted from my past, but now I am in another situation. When does it end? When the gun was pulled out on me I whispered, “Lord, I am tired.” Like that “certain man” I had to cry out. Unfortunately it took a situation like that one, but eventually you will find yourself getting tired of the streets, violence, drugs, and gangs. The day after this incident I was arrested, but when I walked into this jail I felt God’s presence on me, cleansing me. Every night I pray and ask God to create in me a clean heart and renew the right spirit within me. Every day I wake up feeling changed, and feeling stronger. One thing I realized reading this passage: for whatever we need, all we have to do is believe and ask. The good news is that Jesus will heal us, save us, and lay down his life for us, and all that he asks is that we tell someone—that we tell the world of things he can and will do.

PRAYERS FOR WORSHIP

Liddy Barlow, Executive Minister, Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Go out and stand on the mountain, for the Lord is about to pass by.

Many: We hear a great wind, but the Lord is not in the wind.

One: We feel a mighty earthquake, but the Lord is not in the earthquake.

Many: We see a raging fire, but the Lord is not in the fire.

One: We watch a rain of bullets, but the Lord is not in the gunfight.

Many: Our Lord will speak in a still, small voice. We are standing on the mountain, ready to listen.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so we long for you, Holy One. Come alongside us as we worship, and remind us of your constant presence. Quiet our busy minds so we can hear your still small voice. Even as we turn our thoughts this morning to the realities of our violent world, comfort us and empower us to bring your love and compassion to our neighbors by serving them in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CALL TO CONFESSION

Jesus calls unclean spirits out from us. This morning, Jesus calls us to confess our sins, to name that which is unclean within us. We pray that we might be cleansed, restored, and readied to love and serve God with our whole hearts, minds, and strength. Let us make our confession.

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Liberating God, we confess that we are bound by chains of sin. We are shackled to violence. We live amid the tombs, choose the ways of death, and surround ourselves with weapons of war. We know that we live in a nation with more guns than people. We confess that we have grown numb to news of shootings. We confess that often we find it hard to care about victims of violence when they do not look like us or live in neighborhoods like ours. We confess that we have lost hope of finding solutions and that we have resigned ourselves to continued pain. Cast out from us the spirits of violence and despair. Help us remember that we are all children of God through faith, victims and perpetrators, bystanders and neighbors alike. Open us to new and creative ways to live with one another in peace. Unbind us, Lord.

Break our chains, burst our shackles, and set us free, for the sake of your great Love, Jesus Christ. Amen.

DECLARATION OF PARDON

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” Again let us praise God together, for God is merciful and kind, forgiving all our sins and leading us into renewed and strengthened life. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God.

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

Go forth as a people set free from the demons of violence, inspired to do for others what God has done for you. Be blessed this day in the powerful name of the one who breaks every chain, the one who does even more than we can ask or imagine—in the name of God: Creator, Holy Spirit, and Jesus the Christ. Amen.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

All Who Love and Serve Your City

Text: Erik Routley; Music: The United States Sacred Harmony

Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ) – 670
Evangelical Lutheran Worship – 724
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 351
The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal) – 570
Moravian Book of Worship – 697
Presbyterian Hymnal: hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs – 413
The United Methodist Hymnal – 433

Come! Live in the Light! (We Are Called)

Text and Music: David Haas

Evangelical Lutheran Worship – 720
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 749
Lift Up Your Hearts (CRC/RCA) – 296
Sing the Faith (PCUSA) – 2172
The Faith We Sing (UMC) – 2172

For the Troubles and the Sufferings (Pelas dores deste mundo)

Text and Music: Rodolfo Gaede Neto

Glory to God (PCUSA) – 764
Lift Up Your Hearts (CRC/RCA) – 663

Goodness Is Stronger than Evil

Text: Desmond Tutu; Music: John Bell

Evangelical Lutheran Worship – 721
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 750
Lift Up Your Hearts (CRC/RCA) – 707
Sing the Faith (PCUSA) – 2219
The Faith We Sing (UMC) – 2219

Hope of the World

Text: Georgia Harkness; Music: Genevan Psalte

Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ) – 538
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 734
The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal) – 472
Lutheran Service Book – 690
New Century Hymnal (UCC) – 46
Presbyterian Hymnal: hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs – 360
The United Methodist Hymnal – 178

I'll Overcome Someday

Text and Music: Charles Albert Tindley

African American Heritage Hymnal – 544

Lord, Make Us Servants of Your Peace

Text: James Quinn; Music: O WALY WALY (English folk melody)

The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal) – 593
Lift Up Your Hearts (CRC/RCA) – 904
Moravian Book of Worship – 693
Presbyterian Hymnal: hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs – 374

The Lord Now Sends Us Forth (Enviado soy de Dios)

Text: José Aguiar; Music: Pedro Infante

Evangelical Lutheran Worship – 538
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 747

Salaam/Peace

Text and Music: Manal Samir (Egypt)

Lift Up Your Hearts (CRC/RCA) – 298

Satan, We're Gonna Tear Your Kingdom Down

Text: Traditional; Music: KINGDOM DOWN

African American Heritage Hymnal – 485

What a Mighty God We Serve

Text and Music: African folk song

African American Heritage Hymnal – 478
Baptist Hymnal 2008 – 64
Sing the Faith (PCUSA) – 2021
The Faith We Sing (UMC) – 2021

Where Charity and Love Prevail

Text: Latin, 8th cent.; Music: Lucius Chapin

Evangelical Lutheran Worship – 359
Glory to God (PCUSA) – 316
The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal) – 581
Lutheran Service Book – 845
Moravian Book of Worship – 785
The United Methodist Hymnal – 549

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://padisciples.org/gunviolenceprevention>

The Pennsylvania Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) provides a site with a number of helpful links, which include brief descriptors.

<http://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence/resources#.Vwk-iyifOfT>

The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship site has one of the best resource toolkits available, including some additional worship resources. The PC(USA) 2010 General Assembly passed a resolution, "Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call," that resourced similar resolutions in other denominations.

<http://faithsagainstgunviolence.org/>

Among other initiatives to monitor and generate activism against gun violence, Faith Leaders United to Prevent Gun Violence also co-sponsors Gun Violence Sabbath Weekends. The third annual one is planned for Dec. 14-18, 2016. The resource for this Sabbath can be found at <http://www.decembersabbath.org/>; other faith-tradition resources are available there.

<http://heedinggodscall.org>

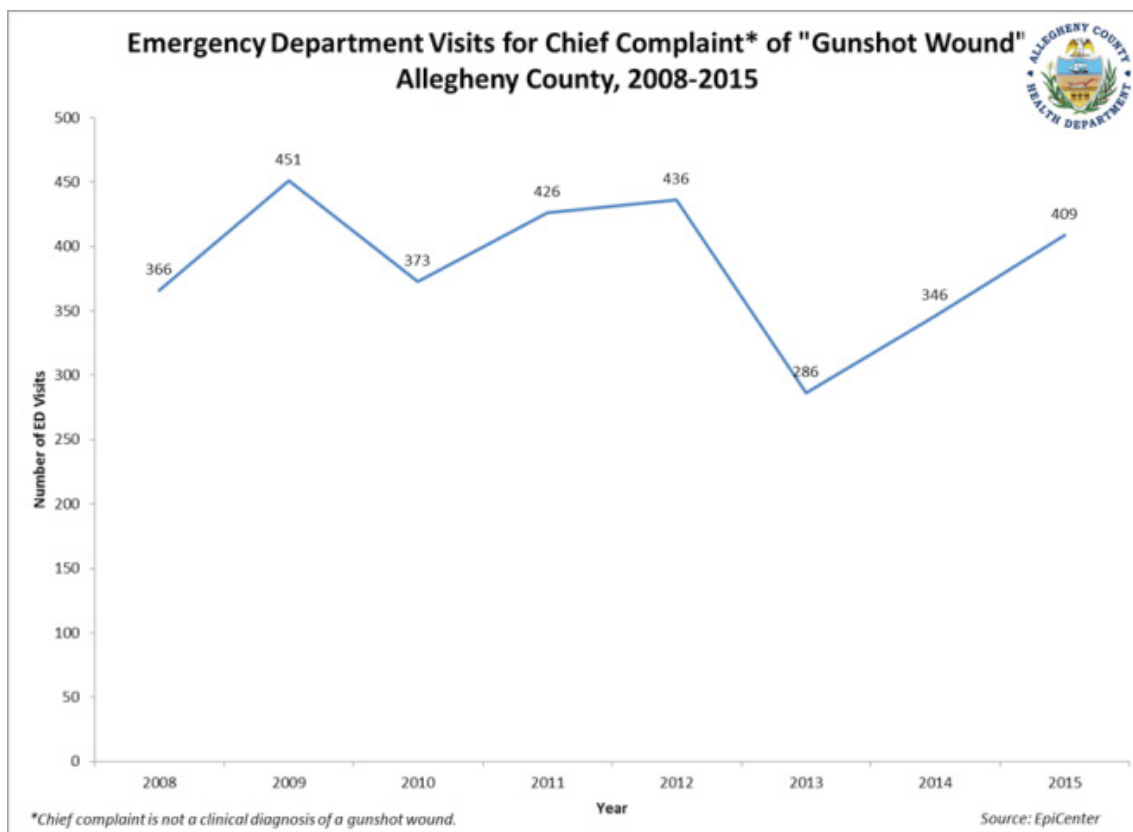
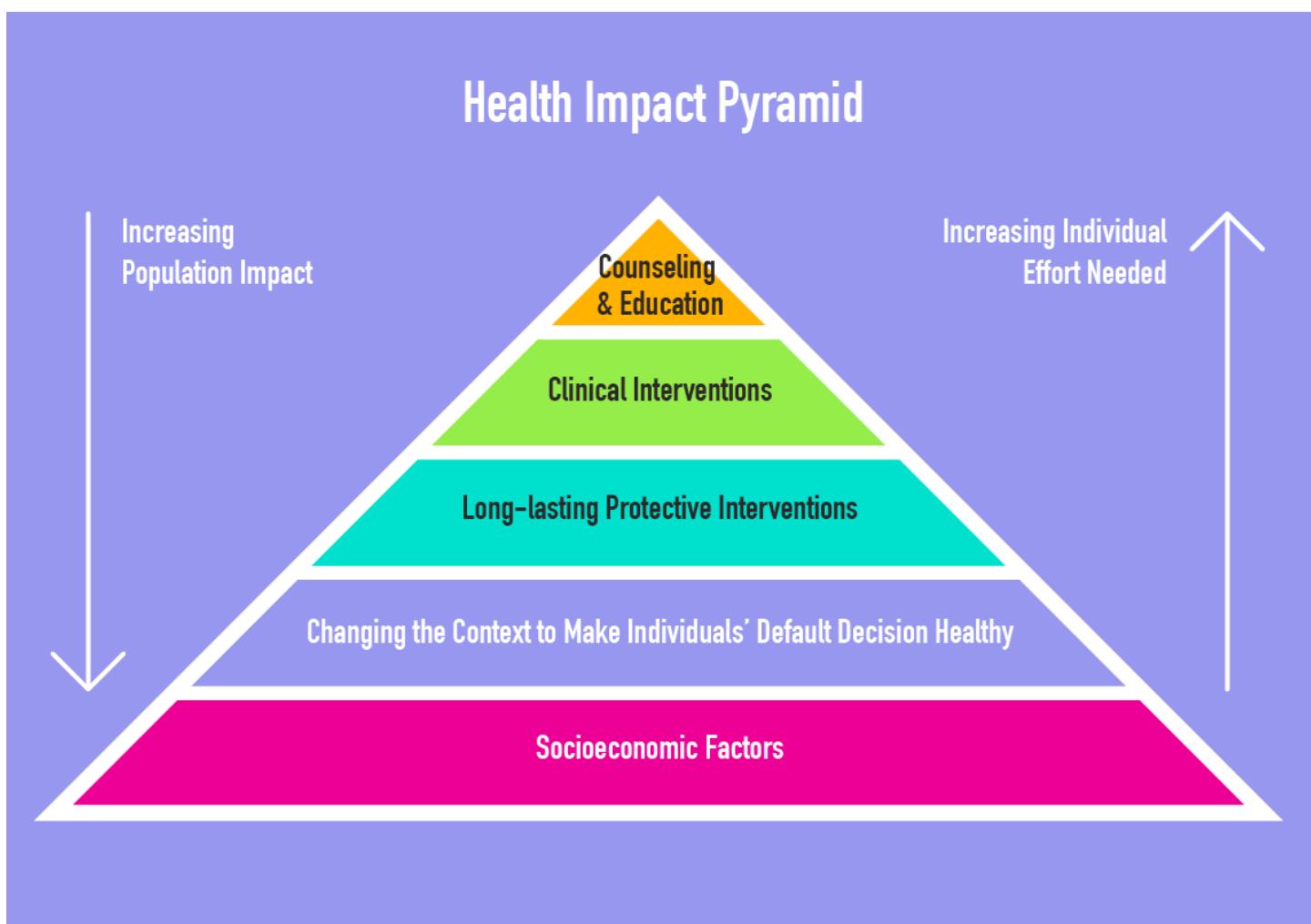
Heeding God's Call is a Philadelphia-based faith coalition of congregations addressing gun violence. The group holds vigils and memorial installations, and organizes advocacy campaigns to end illegal purchasing and trafficking of handguns. The coalition's website includes a resource center with a congregational toolkit.

<http://bishopsagainstgunviolence.org>

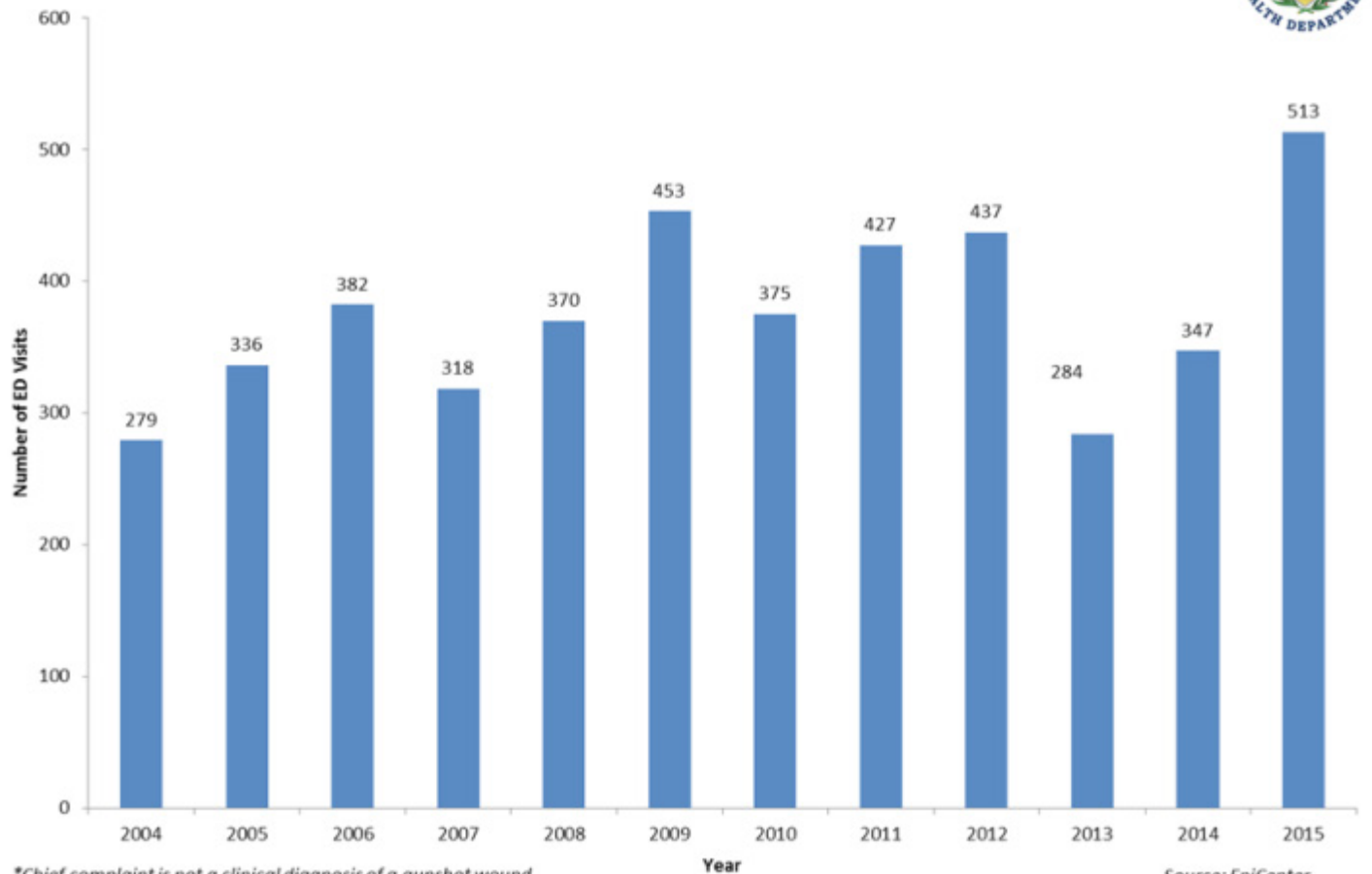
Bishops Against Gun Violence is an advocacy group of more than 60 Episcopal bishops. The organization's website includes liturgical resources with links to prayers and sermons.

<http://www.ucc.org/gun-violence>

The United Church of Christ offers General Synod resolutions and commentary on gun violence, including words from the senior pastor of Newtown Congregational Church, UCC, in Newtown, Conn.

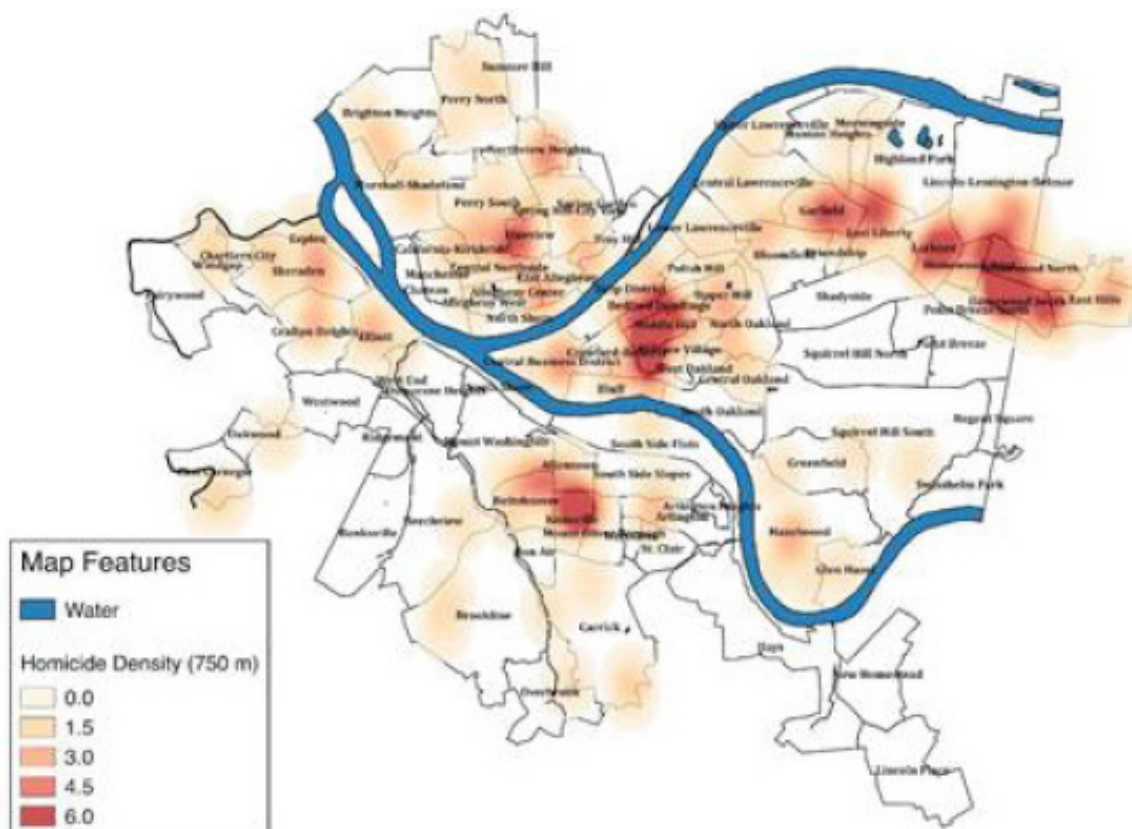


Emergency Department Visits for Chief Complaint* of "Gunshot Wound" by Year, Allegheny County, 2004-2015



*Chief complaint is not a clinical diagnosis of a gunshot wound.

Source: EpiCenter

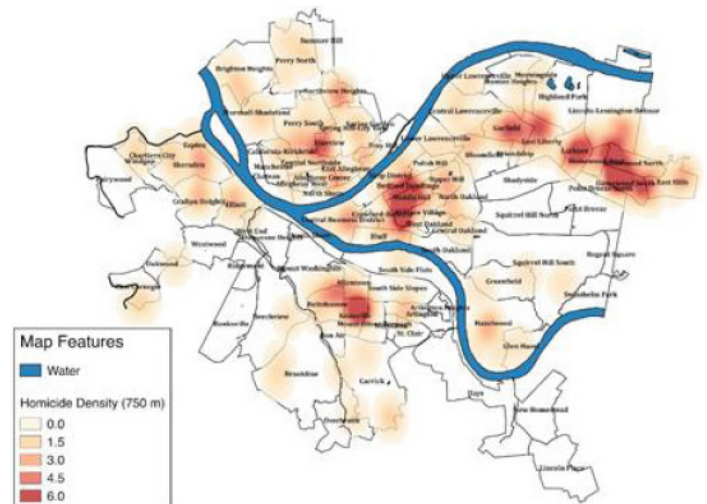
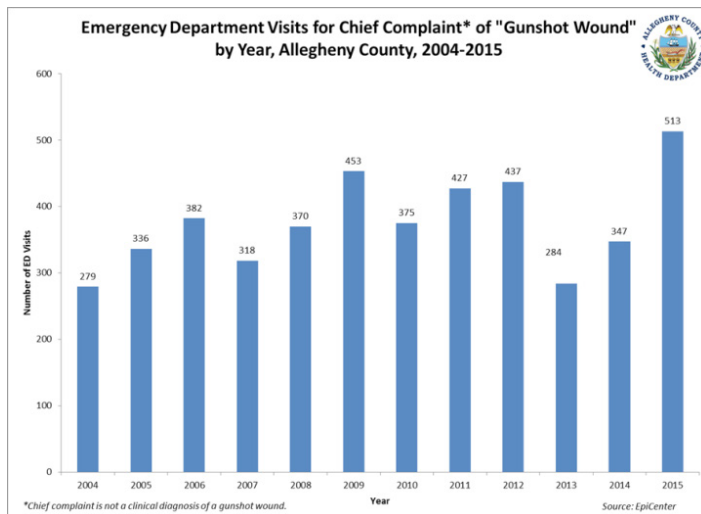


VIOLENCE AS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

Violence poses a serious threat to the health and well-being of Allegheny County's children, youth, and families. Hundreds of people have been killed and injured, and many are left traumatized. It is time we take a public health view of the problem. The public health perspective presumes that street violence, just like an infectious disease outbreak, can be prevented. To prevent it, we must understand the factors that lead to violence and then intervene with culturally appropriate, evidence-based strategies. These strategies can be applied to those yet to experience or participate in violence, to those who are involved in risk behaviors that contribute to violence, and to those who have experienced violence as victims and perpetrators.

THE FACTS IN PITTSBURGH

- In 2013, the homicide rate in Allegheny County was 7.4 per 100,000, higher than the national average.
- The number of homicides inside the City (56) almost matched those in the rest of the County (57) and the majority of them were related to gun violence.
- The homicide rate from 2010-2104 for African American men in Pittsburgh was 65 times the national average.
- There are only a few communities in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh that contribute to the level of violence.



RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Violence Prevention / <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/index.html>
- The Community Guide: Violence Prevention / <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/violence/index.html>
- Center for Victims (crisis response, assistance with victim compensation, trauma-informed therapists, support groups for kids and teens, legal support, and more) / 24-Hour Crisis Hotline 1-866-644-2882 / 5916 Penn Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15206 / 412-482-3240
- Re:solve Crisis Network (round-the-clock, mental health crisis intervention and stabilization services; anyone can call for any reason to talk to a trained counselor) / 1-888-7-YOU CAN (1-888-796-8226)
- Center for Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents (serves children and families who experience traumatic or stressful events in their lives) / 412-330-4328 / East Commons Professional Building (Four Allegheny Center) Eighth Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15212
- Foundation of HOPE (chaplaincy and faith-based pre- and post-release care for incarcerated and released individuals) / Executive Director Susan Orr / 950 Second Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15219 / 412-688-9070 / sorr@foundationofhope.org

