

Long-planned sermons on gun violence take on new urgency

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By Peter Smith / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When a group of Christian organizations teamed with the Allegheny County Health Department in recent months to ask pastors to talk in their sermons Sunday about preventing gun violence, they were thinking mainly about the relentless beat of killings and other assaults, injuries and trauma affecting the families and neighborhoods of the victims.

Then the deadliest mass shooting in recent U.S. history, last Sunday's massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando that claimed 49 lives, only added to the urgency.

"To find that message to be much more topical than we wanted it to be is heartbreaking," said the Rev. Liddy Barlow, executive minister of Christian Associates of Southwest Pennsylvania, a coalition of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches.

The organization, along with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and the Pennsylvania Interfaith Impact Network, joined with the health department to produce a packet of resources called "Preventing Gun Violence." They spread the word through various mailing lists and other contacts, and while organizers aren't tracking how many people plan to preach on the topic, the materials have been downloaded more than 200 times, said Rev. Barlow.

The packet encourages pastors to use their sermons to inform parishioners about current trends in gun violence, including its especially fierce impact on African Americans and in particular neighborhoods of Pittsburgh and some surrounding communities.

Organizers are encouraging people to look at gun violence as a public-health issue, similar to that of an epidemic, that involves using research to find the best solutions to the crisis.

This puts the focus on "community and personal trauma that, left addressed, has significant effects across many facets of society," said an introduction to the packet by the Rev. B. De Neice Welch, pastor of Bidwell Presbyterian Church in Manchester, and Dr. Karen Hacker, executive director of the health department. "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."

Faith communities have influence to “educate, enlighten, and create movement toward healing that is sustainable,” they said.

Responses range from helping individuals cope with trauma to promoting economic and social justice on behalf of struggling communities where much of the violence is concentrated, they said.

The packet includes a series of reflections — written by area pastors, seminary students and participants in the Foundation of HOPE’s pre-release program at the Allegheny County Jail — to give preachers ideas for approaching the topic. The reflections are based on the cycle of Bible readings known as the lectionary, which many churches use.

Among them is a gospel passage on Jesus healing a demon-possessed man who had been chained to contain his rages. Rev. Barlow said the passage can serve as a reminder of “how violence is keeping our communities in chains and how Jesus enters into that and offers a way of healing, restoring this man to his community and casting out that which has caused pain and heartbreak.”

Writers of the various reflections cited incidents of gun violence, such as the killings of five adults and an unborn child at a backyard cookout in Wilkinsburg in March. They also noted that seemingly safe suburbs are not immune from violence either, citing the stabbings of 21 at Franklin Regional High School in 2014.

“Violence is real, it is in our towns, it is in our cities, it is in Murrysville, and it is in Wilkinsburg,” seminarian Taylor Barner wrote in one of the reflections. “... We pray that God may intercede, but we ourselves need to be agents of change who ... promote peace while simultaneously promoting justice.”

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