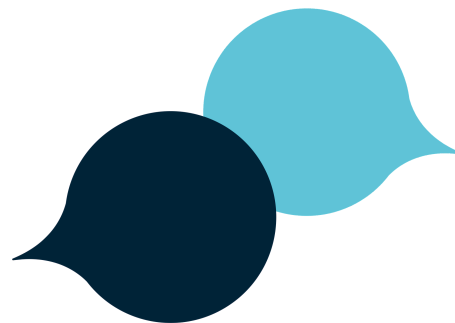




SAFER TOGETHER

Launch Packet

Resources for participants gathering across Minnesota and North Dakota.

Welcome and Invitation	2
Initiative Goals	3
Launch Objectives	4
Evening Schedule	5
Ground Rules for Conversation	6
Social Message: Two-Page Summary	7
Discussion Guide	9



Additional resources

Scan the QR code to visit the Safer Together webpage for faith resources, state data, research, and tools for continued conversation
<https://nwmnsynod.org/safer-together/>

SAFER TOGETHER

Beyond the Gun Control Debate

*A Peacemaking Initiative Among the People and Congregations of the ELCA
in Minnesota and North Dakota*

***“Christian love builds powerful relations of giving and receiving that counter the
isolation, despair, enmity, and nihilism that often contribute to lethal harm and criminal homicide.”
– ELCA Social Message on Gun-related Violence and Trauma***

The United States continues to face an epidemic of violence and harm involving guns. Communities across our region have not been spared. Most recently, Minnesota experienced the Annunciation school and church shooting and the political assassinations of Representative Hortman and her husband. Too often public debates around firearm use and misuse devolve into a standoff between personal rights and government control.

This pattern fails to address the many ways each of us can act to reduce gun-related violence and trauma in our homes, workplaces, schools, and communities. As Lutherans, how do we respond to this ongoing reality? What does our social teaching say? How might we foster the kind of moral deliberation and call to action that can lead to meaningful change?

To address these questions, ELCA synods and congregations of Minnesota and North Dakota are organizing opportunities for shared learning, discernment, and collective action toward solutions to the harms of gun misuse in our unique contexts. We hope to move beyond the gun rights-gun control debate and to promote safer communities with the conviction that we are safer together.

On the evening of 27 October 2026, the Safer Together launch will bring together rostered and lay people to engage in conversation with Dr. Jillian Pederson, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Hamline University and the Executive Director of The Violence Prevention Project. Dr. Pederson will present her ground-breaking research into sources and solutions to the mass shooting epidemic in the United States. Following her presentation, participants will be invited to discuss mass shooting and ELCA social teaching. In-person conversations across congregations in Minnesota and North Dakota will allow participants to consider how their own communities are impacted by gun misuse and harm.

This event will be available both in-person at synod-sponsored sites and livestreamed for interested individuals and congregations who choose to organize local gatherings. We hope that this event can launch a movement across our region for moral deliberation and collective action that will reduce gun violence and trauma in our communities and contribute to communal healing and the common good. We hope you will join us.

Bp. Justin Grimm, St. Paul Area

Bp. Regina Hassanally Southeastern Minnesota

Bp. Tessa Moon Leiseth, Eastern North Dakota

Bp. Lisa Lewton, Western North Dakota

Bp. Jen Nagel, Minneapolis Area

Bp. Dee Pederson, Southwestern Minnesota

Bp. Taryn Montgomery, Northeastern Minnesota

Bp. William Tesch, Northwestern Minnesota

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Initiative Goals

Guiding Question – Can congregations, aided by synods, become bridging institutions that help the people and congregations of Region 3 participate in God's work of peacemaking by reducing violence, trauma, and other harms associated with gun misuse while creating shared understanding and action around matters that often divide people along ideological and political lines?

1. Build trust and understanding across differences.

Create space for people with different views and experiences around guns to listen to and learn from one another, exploring differences honestly and kindly.

2. Move beyond the usual gun rights/gun control debate.

Use the ELCA social message on gun-related violence and trauma to explore the broader idea of shared responsibility for reducing gun misuse and related harms.

3. Learn more about gun violence, trauma, and prevention.

Bring good research, lived experience, and our Lutheran social teaching into conversation with one another, while identifying questions and topics where we need further learning.

4. Help people think about their own vocations and responsibilities.

What can each of us do—as parents, pastors, gun owners, teachers, health-care workers, law enforcement, public officials, neighbors, citizens, and so forth—to reduce the risks and harms of gun misuse?

5. Encourage local conversations and action.

Each synod and community has a different context. The work should reflect those differences and help people identify actions appropriate to their own roles and communities rather than assuming one approach will fit everywhere.

6. Learn from one another across the region.

Create back-and-forth between the synods: local conversations informing the regional work, and regional learning helping to shape what happens locally, with the goal of sustaining the conversation beyond any one event.

7. Practice being church together as community of moral deliberation.

Model a way of engaging difficult and divisive questions as God's people—listening carefully, speaking honestly, discerning together, and seeking ways to build safer and more peaceful communities



SAFER TOGETHER

October 27 Launch Objectives



Give participants a common starting place.

Dr. Jillian Peterson's research can help us begin with what we know about mass shootings, gun violence, trauma, and prevention—and identify questions we need to keep exploring.



Introduce a different way of framing restraint and prevention of gun misuse.

Begin exploring the emphasis of the ELCA social message on shared responsibility and a public-health approach rather than starting with the usual rights and control debate.



Model the kind of conversation we hope to have for the Safer Together initiative.

Practice being a community of moral deliberation in which people can share personal experiences, listen carefully, ask questions, explore differences honestly and kindly, and look for common ground.



Begin connecting the issue to our own contexts.

What does gun-related violence and trauma look like in our communities? What is different in metropolitan areas, smaller cities, rural areas, tribal communities, and other settings?



Begin asking the vocation question—personally.

From where I actually stand in my life, what opportunities do I have to reduce harm, strengthen community, or contribute to greater safety? Invite participants to identify at least one action they might take within their own roles and contexts.



Create interest and commitment for what comes next.

Use the evening as the beginning of a sustained regional conversation among Lutherans seeking to build safer and more peaceful communities through further learning, conversation, and action taking shape within participating synods and across the region.

October 27 Schedule

6:00 P.M. — Doors and Zoom open

- Doors open at in-person sites across Minnesota and North Dakota. Online participants may log in to the Zoom webinar.

6:30 P.M. — Welcome and opening prayer

- Bishops Justin Grimm and Jen Nagel welcome participants and introduce the evening.

6:40 P.M. — Why we gather as church

- Bishop William Tesch shares the purpose of the gathering and what we hope to accomplish.

6:50 P.M. — Introduction to the speaker and social message

- Dr. Per Anderson introduces Dr. Jillian Peterson and the ELCA social message on gun-related violence and trauma.

7:00 P.M. — “Peacemaking in an Epidemic of Gun Violence”

- Presentation by Dr. Jillian Peterson.

7:45 P.M. — Questions and answers

- Participants submit questions for Dr. Peterson through the webinar chat, with assistance from the leadership team at Transfiguration Lutheran Church in Bloomington.

8:00 P.M.— Group discussion

- In-person groups and online participants discuss mass shootings and ELCA social teaching.

8:30 P.M. — Sharing from discussions

- Groups share highlights through the webinar chat, with assistance from leadership teams at the ten in-person sites.

8:45 P.M. — Next steps and closing prayer

- Bishop William Tesch invites participants to continue Safer Together conversations in their congregations and synods and offers a closing prayer.

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Ground Rules for Conversation

To fulfill the hopes people have for conversation in their congregation, and to lessen their anxieties and fears about it, certain ground rules for conversation are helpful. These will help to build trust among participants and create a safe space in which good conversation is possible.

The purpose of this honest sharing is to open up discussion of things that need attention, rather than to close off discussion.

Follow the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—even when you disagree with them.

Listen respectfully and carefully to others. This is your best way to begin to understand them. This also helps keep the “public space” of this conversation safe for candid conversation. By listening

carefully to others, you help to build relationships of trust. You also move beyond our private feelings and thoughts to public space where it feels safe to share your differences, and where you can probe for values and positions that you hold in common.

Speak honestly about your thoughts and feelings. Honesty about your thoughts and feelings expresses respect for others. Personal thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences are as legitimate a part of the conversation as factual information. Conversation can be quite passionate and still be respectful, civil, and constructive.

Speak for yourself, rather than as a member of a group. You do not necessarily know what everyone else in the group is thinking or feeling—even if you’ve known someone for a long time and think you know them well. Use “I-statements” rather than “You-statements.” Likewise, it is not fair to expect other conversation partners to represent a whole group. Remember that they are only speaking for themselves.

Realize that the Holy Spirit is present and active in the conversation and has given each participant a part of the truth you are seeking to discern. But you won’t hear that if you judge too quickly what is being said!

A true conversation needs give and take. Give others plenty of opportunity to speak and respond. Help keep the discussion focused by sticking to the subject at hand.

Maintain confidentiality about matters people share with the group when it is asked or obviously appropriate. This helps to build and maintain trust.

Keep an open mind and heart. Try to understand others as much as possible from their point of view as they express it. Even those who disagree with you are not necessarily your enemies. Christ has broken down dividing walls of differences and hostilities (Ephesians 2).

Exercise care for group members who become upset over what is said during the conversation.

The outcome, quality and safety of the conversation is everyone’s responsibility.

In a conversation of this kind, listening is as important or more important as talking.

Genuine listening is not a passive activity, but an active, demanding one. Listen not only for the content of what is said, but for the way it is said—such as the language used, the tone of voice, the kind and level of feeling expressed, the body language and facial expression of the person speaking, whether they make eye contact, and so on. Also be attentive for what is not said. Being more conscious about this kind of deep listening will help us to hear and understand better what other people are saying.



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

A social message on...

Gun-related Violence and Trauma

As adopted unanimously by the Church Council on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 13, 2024.

This Message in Summary

Guns and gun-related violence and trauma are woven into U.S. history and society in substantial, complex, and problematic ways. The full social message therefore requires length, nuance, and complexity. This summary provides an overview of key aspects of the four sections, much like a map that conveys the main points of a complex landscape.

- I. Introduction: God's Resolve for Peace Abides*
- II. Seeing Trauma in Insecurity, Despair, and Mayhem*
- III. Countering Violence and Trauma as God's Resolve for Peace*
- IV. Toward Shared Responsibility in What Makes for Peace*

At its heart, this social message makes the case for reframing the gun debate and activity in the U.S. beyond gun rights versus gun control. The message commits the ELCA to a moral framework of shared responsibility that comes to terms with trauma honestly and seeks prevention carefully through a public health model. Such a model suggests individual and institutional practices that could reduce tragic, irresponsible, and illegal uses of firearms and their related risks and harms. This message argues that such a framework can open up constructive dialogue and action across many, many communities and should be publicly embraced.

*Section I shows how this message builds upon the scriptural references, insights, themes, and commitments found in the ELCA social statement *For Peace in God's World* and the ELCA social message "On Community Violence" and draws from others such as the social statement *The Church and Criminal Justice*. (Readers may review these at www.elca.org/socialstatements.) From a Lutheran Christian perspective, it returns to themes such as peacemaking and prevention that, too often, have*

been sidelined. It soberly charts the horrific facts and the disparities of age, class, gender, and race of the nearly 50,000 lives taken each year. It introduces, as well, two factors increasingly recognized by social science: the widespread effects of trauma and the rise of defensive gun cultures.

Section II explores the multiple, often unrecognized forms of trauma resulting from armed threats and shootings in which the perpetrator intends to harm others or self. These actions not only harm people physically but traumatize human spirits, families, communities, and the social order itself. The call to see trauma in this way expands moral responsibility for gun-related harm.

Section III reminds Christians of the centrality of Christlike service of neighbor in our social roles. It calls them, and all people of goodwill, to practice wise and proactive efforts to restrain gun-related violence and prevent it. This emphasis on prevention aligns the ELCA with a growing movement to approach gun misuse as a public health crisis. This section also recognizes that members of our church and society are divided in various ways and degrees about how to reduce gun-related harms. These divisions cannot be fully addressed in this message, and some of them call for further discernment, such as defensive gun use for example.

Section IV calls upon multiple types of secular communities to prevent violence and make peace. It spells out the responsibilities of communities as diverse as shooting associations and firearm defense groups, health care providers and firearm businesses. The section also describes the distinctive responsibilities of our church and other faith communities toward peacemaking. These include calls to bridge divides, build community, advocate policy, and care for the traumatized.

This message concludes that such a reframed understanding and practice in responsible communities can resist and reverse the immense and mournful toll of tragic, irresponsible, and illegal gun use in the United States today.

SAFER TOGETHER

Guide for Group Discussion

Following the presentation by Dr. Peterson and Q and A, the launch schedule provides 30 minutes for small group discussion and 15 minutes for reporting out through the chat function of the Zoom webinar.

As you begin the discussion:

Review the ground rules.

Read the “Ground Rules for Conversation,” drawn from the ELCA resource Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues. Some participants may have reviewed them in advance.

Review the social message summary.

Take a few moments to look over the two-page summary of the ELCA’s Social Message on Gun-related Violence and Trauma.

Introduce yourselves.

Share your name, what brought you to this gathering, and what you hope will come from the conversation.

Dr. Peterson’s presentation.

Did her research findings and recommendations surprise, challenge, or cause you to think differently? What are your takeaways from the presentation?

Your context and experience.

How do you experience gun-related violence or risk of harm in your life? Do you feel safe from gun misuse and harm in your community? If not, what needs to change toward greater peace and security?

Common social values and commitments.

Where might Americans find common ground to move beyond stalled debates over government control and personal rights? Why do Americans find it difficult to talk with their neighbors about gun ownership and use? Can the church help to support these difficult conversations?

Called to be peacemakers.

What would it mean for Americans to embrace a “shared responsibility” to greatly reduce gun misuse and related harms? What roles can families, schools, gun owners, healthcare providers, law enforcement, public officials, the media, and others play?

First personal step.

What is one thing you might do to strengthen relationships, reduce harm, and contribute to a safer and more peaceful community?

Continuing the dialogue.

What would help this conversation to continue in your congregation or community?

Wrap up your Discussion

As a group, choose one way to share your conversation:

- **Write a two-sentence summary highlighting the main themes.**
- **Choose five words that describe your conversation.**

Share your response with the other groups at your site and enter it in the webinar chat for all participants to see.

SAFER LEARNING • DISCERNMENT • COLLECTIVE ACTION