



Will you strive for justice and peace among all people . . .
I will with God's help.
— The Book of Common Prayer page 305

February 24, 2010

Dear Friends,

It has been 27 years since the death of children by violence in the Chicago Metro area became a fixture on newspaper front pages, and the impetus for an interfaith effort to stem the tide and foster peace. The deaths that year of 62 children led to a strengthening of local gun control ordinances, to a nation-wide ban on assault weapons, and to the creation of a memorial cross on our diocesan and cathedral commons plaza. In the decades since, the assault weapons ban has expired, gun manufacturers and gun associations have lobbied and sued for an overturn of common sense gun laws in force in Chicago and San Francisco—succeeding before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2008 on the Washington D.C. handgun ban—and as these efforts against sensible gun policies have mounted, more young lives have been lost to gun violence.

The toll is not abating. In the 2008-2009 school year, 36 Chicago Public School children died from violence, most of it by gunfire. The previous year it was 31 and the year before that 27. In Illinois in 2006, the most recent year for state-wide figures, 1,036 people died from firearms injuries, 369 of them were children or youth. Chicago now ranks among the nation's five most populous cities which lead the nation in youth homicides.

As we know too well, this tragedy affects urban and rural communities, and families of all income levels and ethnicities, though a disproportionate number of those killed are African American. Halting and reversing this carnage will require the resolve and resources of all those parts of our social fabric: our families, our schools, our police and courts, our churches, and most definitely our state legislators and aldermen. Counseling, community policing, afterschool programs, job training and referral, and gang abatement programs have a significant part in ending the violence, but, in my judgment, must be accompanied by sensible gun violence prevention policies to have a lasting effect.

Some noteworthy steps have been taken, including the two-year-old law requiring more thorough mental health background checks for firearm purchasers. But access to guns remains all too easy. Currently, there are no requirements for background checks for private gun sales; nor are there penalties for selling or giving guns to street gang members. Those who are prohibited from purchasing firearms from a licensed dealer—including persons with severe mental illness, known gang members, and domestic violence offenders—can do so legally through a private seller. A bill (SB 3632) now in committee at the Illinois state senate would bridge these gaps by requiring all persons engaged in the private sale or transfer of firearms to do so at a licensed firearm dealer who by law is required to conduct background checks. The bill, sponsored by State Senator Dan

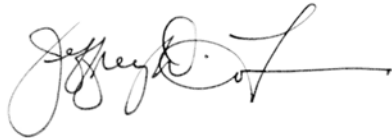
Kotowski (D-33rd), also applies a Class 1 felony status to anyone knowingly selling or giving firearms to street gang members. The transfer of firearms between family members—spouses, parent to child, or grandparent to grandchild—is not affected.

The outcome for this legislation is uncertain. While an overwhelming majority of Illinois voters favor closing the private seller loophole, the gun industry and its lobbyists are working hard to pressure key Chicago area suburban legislators to vote against SB 3632. Responsible groups like the Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence, Episcopal Peace Fellowship, the Legal Community Against Violence, and the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention are working equally hard to educate the public about the need for sensible gun prevention policies, like those put forward in SB 3632. The church's voice must be a part of this effort.

During this Lent, I encourage you to inform your members of the impact of gun violence on our families and communities, and of the remedies available through meaningful gun policy reform, as proposed in SB 3632. Our Commission on Peace and Justice is available to lead workshops on gun violence prevention. The contact information is listed below.

Pray for the persons who are coping every day with injuries and disabilities sustained from being a victim of gun violence, and for the families who have lost a loved one to gun violence. Pray also for our legislators to have the wisdom and courage to support legislation that works to reduce the toll of gun violence, particularly among the most vulnerable, our children.

In Christ,



Jeffrey D. Lee
Bishop of Chicago

Committee on Peace and Justice
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Illinois Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence
<http://www.icpgv.org/>