



*The*  
**EPISCOPAL CHURCH** *in*  
**CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA**

Dear Members of the Episcopal Church in Central Pennsylvania,

On Saturday, March 24th, more than one hundred Episcopalians in our diocese participated in the March For Our Lives event held in cities and towns across our country. In our diocese, Episcopalians were led by teenagers in Harrisburg, Lancaster, Lewisburg and York to speak out about school safety and gun violence. Some Episcopalians from our diocese travelled to be part of the March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C. This march was a response to the February 14th shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Parkland, Florida that claimed the lives of 17 students and teachers. On the day of the march, we opened the cathedral for a prayer service and began the day praying to God for the safety of our children, for peace in the world, and for an end to senseless violence that claims the lives of innocent people.

In a follow-up conference call with participants from the march, we talked about the power of the day as we had experienced it, the leadership of the youth, and the need for continued support and action. One of the most important ways that I believe we can act, is to support and care for our children.

Violence is not uncommon in our diocese's urban centers; deaths from shootings in York, Harrisburg and Lancaster have averaged annually in the high teens in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Our rural towns and villages are not immune to violence, either. In a study of criminal justice offenders and crime conducted for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, among the most prevalent crimes committed in our Commonwealth's rural areas are crimes of domestic violence, property crimes (robbery, arson) and sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> We must work to improve the safety of our communities and, above all, care for our children.

Gun violence is engrained in our culture and impacts our children. The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that gun violence is the second leading cause of death for children in the United States. The Brady Campaign reports staggering statistics of a daily average of 40 children in our country who are shot and survive.<sup>3</sup> There have been 165 school shootings since the Sandy Hook mass shooting in 2012. An important study published in *Pediatrics* indicated that over 17.5 million or 1 in 4 school aged children in the United States have been exposed to weapon violence in their lifetime, either as witnesses or victims.<sup>4</sup> The results also suggest that 1 in 33 children (more than 2 million) have been directly assaulted with lethal weapons.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/01/2017\\_homicides\\_central\\_pa\\_harr.html](http://www.pennlive.com/news/2018/01/2017_homicides_central_pa_harr.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.rural.palegislature.us/documents/reports/criminal\\_justice\\_offenders](http://www.rural.palegislature.us/documents/reports/criminal_justice_offenders)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bradycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics#.WswCFRY4FM0.email=0A=0A--->

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/Committees-Councils-Sections/Child-Death-Review/Pages/Gun-Violence.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> [https://injury.research.chop.edu/violence-prevention-initiative/types-violence-involving-youth/gun-violence/gun-violence-facts-and#.Wsx\\_IGaZO8V](https://injury.research.chop.edu/violence-prevention-initiative/types-violence-involving-youth/gun-violence/gun-violence-facts-and#.Wsx_IGaZO8V)



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These statistics are staggering.

The Rev. John Sivley LCSW, Priest Associate at St. Stephen's Cathedral, and mental health professional who works with children and teens, says that, "As a therapist working in Harrisburg, I have spoken with children who go to sleep with the sound of gunshots and live in fear that they will not live beyond adolescence. Their parents will not let them play outside for fear that they may be shot, as drug deals are seen from the windows of their homes."

I asked John to share some ideas about how we might help our children cope with gun violence and the resulting effects of stress and strong emotions. He writes:

- *Parents, clergy, and parishioners can talk with children about what happened in simple and reassuring ways. We can explain the traumatic event using non-graphic facts. Talking with the child about their worries and concerns is the first step to help them to feel safe and begin to cope with the events occurring around them.*
- *Kids know what happened. Gun violence is not a forbidden topic. To create healthy dialogue, invite children to ask adults any questions that they might have about what happened or about themselves and their loved ones.*
- *Kids should always feel that their feelings are valid and important. When adults try to make children feel better rather than listening and validating their feelings, it only makes kids less likely to share their feelings with adults. Furthermore, when parents or other adults resort to a "don't worry, everything is fine, this won't happen here" message, kids are likely to see these adults as inauthentic and not understanding of their worries or concerns.*
- *Watch for signs of stress, fear and anxiety. After a traumatic event, it is typical for children (and adults) to experience a wide range of emotions, including fearfulness, shock, anger, grief, and anxiety. Children's behavior may change, because of their response to the event. They may experience trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and changes in appetite. Folks in parishes can be sensitive to changes in the children as they interact with them in parish activities following traumatic events.*
- *Take "news breaks." Children may want to keep informed by gathering information about the event from TV and the Internet. I remember seeing children traumatized by 911 by staying glued to the television. This constant exposure may actually heighten their fears and anxiety.*
- *Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Part of keeping the discussion of the tragedy open and honest is not being afraid to say that you don't know how to answer a child's question.*



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- *Take care of yourself. Take care of yourself, so you can care for children. Be a model for children to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules for activity, exercise, eat well, and get enough sleep.*
- *Finally, for some people, children and adults – actually taking action cultivates a sense of control. Adults and children can become involved in efforts to reduce gun violence and causes supporting mental health for all people. Taking steps is not only empowering, it means that we can actually be a part of making a small change in the world.*

In our Holy Scripture, the psalmist writes, “Children are a heritage from the Lord.” (Psalm 127: 3a).

May we, as Christians in community, strive to find ways to care for these tender souls, support them in their growing and maturing, and give them hope for a world in which God’s love, peace and justice will reign.

In the love of Christ,

*Audrey C. Scanlan*

+Audrey  
The Rt. Rev. Audrey C. Scanlan  
XI Bishop  
*With thanks to The Rev. John Sivley*