



Gun Violence Prevention

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MISSOURI

The diocesan Gun Violence Prevention Advocacy ministry was born at the 2022 Diocesan convention where Bishop Deon appointed Rev. Mary Haggerty to be the diocesan missioner for Gun Violence Prevention Advocacy. Our first step was to convene an advisory committee with representatives from across the diocese. The current advisory committee is:

- Betty Bowersox, Grace, Kirkwood
- Jeff Wunrow, Trinity Episcopal, St. Louis
- Colleen Haggerty, Holy Communion, University City
- Donna Bernart, St. Francis, Eureka
- Albert Morrow, Holy Cross, Poplar Bluff
- Machel West, All Saints and Ascension, Northwoods
- Diane Chalberg, Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis
- Lore Gross, Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis
- Megan Ryan, St. Timothy, Creve Coeur
- Pat O'Brien, Grace, Kirkwood
- Sally Boyd, St. Barnabas, Florissant
- Greg Barnett, Transfiguration, Lake St. Louis

The committee then drafted a statement of purpose:

The Gospel of Christ asks us to protect the lives of all of God's children. Our call is to protect Missourians from injury and death from gun violence through education, resource development, and advocacy. We will do this by engaging with clergy and laity in our Diocese, coordinating with established groups with similar goals, and reaching out to all Missourians on our holy ground.

Our first effort was to invite Episcopalians across the state to attend Gun Sense Advocacy Day at the state capital in Jefferson City. About 40 people from the Episcopal dioceses of Missouri and West Missouri participated in a prayer service on the steps of the capital and worked with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America to attend meetings with lawmakers. We met in small groups with lawmakers to encourage them to address the gun violence epidemic in our state and to consider passing laws that keep guns out of the wrong hands.

In May, Colleen Haggerty represented the diocese at the Bishops United Against Gun Violence advocacy event in Washington, DC. Colleen brought back reports, stories, ideas, and energy to keep us going in this complex struggle. In June, Colleen and Rev. Mary delivered a dialogue homily at Grace Episcopal Church in Kirkwood about Colleen's experience at the event. In September, Colleen was the guest speaker at St. Francis in Eureka to share her experience and to help the parish learn ways they can get involved in ending gun violence.

In June, we observed “Wear Orange” weekend in the diocese. Wear Orange is an annual campaign to raise awareness of gun violence, to honor victims and survivors, and to commit to work together for an end to the gun violence epidemic in the US. On June 2nd, we held a prayer service of lament and remembrance in Tower Grove Park in St. Louis. Bishop Deon led a group of approximately 100 people in prayer and urged us to continue to speak up and take action to end gun violence. Attendees had the opportunity to write notes to families who lost loved one at the Uvalde, Texas school shooting and to learn about the Be SMART gun safety program. Women’s Voices Raised for Social Justice offered information about their Lock it for Love program and handed out free gun locks. The Faces Not Forgotten project hung quilts with portraits of young people from the St. Louis region who have lost their lives to gun violence. Christine Ilewski, the founder of the project, reminded those gathered that victims of gun violence are not just statistics. They are beloved children and siblings whose families will never be the same.

On Sunday, June 4th, many parishes around the diocese observed Wear Orange Sunday with special prayers during the liturgy and a bulletin insert with ways to get involved in working for an end to gun violence.

Several committee members have spent time this past year being trained to present the Be SMART program in parishes around the diocese. Be SMART is a public awareness program to teach adults about how to keep kids safe from gun violence. The program raises awareness of the role of guns in teen suicide, the critical need to store guns safely, the need for parents and caregivers to ask about gun storage when their little ones go off to play, and ways to model safe behavior to our kids. Our goal for 2024 is to present the Be SMART program in every parish in the diocese.

This December, the committee is sponsoring a letter-writing campaign to the Speaker of the MO House and the President of the Senate. The letters will ask that these leaders ensure that gun bills advocating for background checks, red flag laws, reasonable permit rules, safe gun storage laws get on the calendar for debate in the Missouri House of Representatives and Senate. Currently these types of bills do not tend to get a hearing. We are asking parishes to host letter writing on Dec 10th to urge our lawmakers to allow discussion and debate to take place around reasonable gun laws for the safety of all Missourians.

We are also working with the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Louis and the ELCA Lutheran Church to plan a prayer vigil to honor and remember victims of gun violence and to pray for change. The Bishops will lead us in prayers and there will be an opportunity to learn more about ways to get involved in the work to end gun violence. The Prayer Vigil will be held in December, around the date of the Sandy Hook Connecticut school shooting anniversary.

The issue of gun violence in the United States is a complex, deeply embedded problem. It is easy to get overwhelmed and to lose hope for change. But as people of faith, we cling to the hope that we can and must bring the Reign of God to bear on our world. We look forward to continuing to work together across the diocese and the larger church to “proclaim by word and example to Good News of God in Christ” and to curb the gun violence that devastates our communities.

In Christ,

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