

Dear Representative:

I write to you representing the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania, a diocese of congregations and institutions in 25 counties from the New York border in the north to Maryland in the south. We share a deep concern about recent tragedies of public and domestic violence in our country and local communities. In recent decades there have been at least 60 public shootings, involving multiple deaths and injuries. This does not include the daily violence in our inner-city and rural communities. We are concerned.

Our Diocese includes proud and responsible gun owners as well as persons with strong anti-gun passions. However, we are all deeply concerned with the apparent increase in violence, particularly the most recent tragedy in Sandy Hook in which 20 children and 6 adults were murdered. We join with many American citizens and our President in the concern that significant strategies for improving safety must be addressed. While we know that evil exists in the world and that nothing can prevent all tragedies, we must do what we can to learn and address all the realities of such violence. Many factors must be considered and we especially encourage the following considerations:

- **STRONGER ENFORCEMENT:** We are concerned for better enforcement of existing gun control laws; and also strengthening the resource capacity of our law enforcement officers who are often under-resourced and “out-gunned” by the high powered weapons and equipment of perpetrators.
- **NATIONAL BACKGROUND CHECK:** We are concerned that any loop-holes be closed and enforced in background checks wherever guns are sold, traded or transferred; and that law enforcement agencies be required to share such information for enforcement purposes.
- **IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION:** We are concerned for improvement in access to mental health care and public education. We often learn that the cost and process for mental health care impedes addressing situations which too often prove lethal. A part of public mental health education is not only to help citizens note signs and proper resources to help those in need, but also to reduce the shame assigned to mental illness which may cause delay in seeking help for a family member or loved one.
- **SUPPORT PRESIDENTS EXECUTIVE ACTIONS AND CALL FOR CONGRESSIONAL DISCUSSION AND ACTION.** We encourage and support our legislators and president to ban military assault weapons and the large capacity magazines to the public. We are not opposed to properly registered and licensed hand gun or hunter type rifle ownership. Our concern regards easy access of highly dangerous weapons indiscriminately available in our homes and neighborhoods. Even when held by good healthy citizens, such weapons are a very dangerous luxury, as we saw in the Newtown tragedy.

We understand that the Second Amendment protects the rights and choices of fellow citizens. However, there comes a time when the discipline of moral duty merits reasonable constraints on interpretation of rights when in the interest of safety and the public good.

We know that there is a very strong and influential gun lobby which resist any further consideration of Executive or legislative action regarding gun control. However, people of faith believe that demand for absolute interpretation or restrained discussion regarding any matter becomes a form of idolatry. It is why Jesus Christ taught "those who live by the sword will die by the sword" [St. Matthew 26:52]. Our communities and larger society are dying "by the sword". More "swords", lack of action on mental health care and education, recalcitrant positions on improved legal restriction and enforcement will only continue the pall of fear and death presently covering our nation and local communities.

We are a diocese of diverse people with diverse views on these topics. But we also believe that given the realities of our times all of the issues, and others not noted, merit new consideration and action. Your active leadership on these matters, especially in support of the president's initiative and call for action, will help reassure a very concerned citizenry.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

The Rt. Rev. Nathan D. Baxter, D.Min., S.T.D., D.H.L., D.D.
Bishop, The Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania