



# THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church

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*Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

James 1:21-22

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

When I arrived in New York as Resident Bishop in 2016, someone suggested that I highlight December 14<sup>th</sup> on my calendar. It is the date of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, where 20 children and six adults were shot and killed. Newtown is within the bounds of my episcopal area.

Over the years, I have attended Sandy Hook memorial services and listened to people who survived that horrific day. They will never forget. Life appears to have moved on, but their memories are frozen, paralyzed by an unthinkable act of violence on that day in 2012.

Yesterday it happened again. This time it happened in Uvalde, Texas at Robb Elementary School. Two teachers. Nineteen students. Gone at the hands of yet another heavily-armed person who gained access to the school and changed the narrative for families, friends, and the community for a lifetime.

When will it end?

A recent FBI report reveals that active shooter incidents increased by over 50% in 2021. The number of mass shooting incidents in 2021 were up 171% over 2020. Incidents of violence all around us are growing, multiplying with every news cycle.

Just 10 days before Uvalde, a racially motivated shooting in Buffalo left ten Black people dead at a supermarket. Here in New York, a gunman set off smoke bombs and randomly shot more than a dozen people in a Brooklyn subway station in April.

Acts of violence fill the evening news stories. It was two years ago today that George Floyd was murdered. A mood of anger pervades our towns and cities. With every raised voice, comes the worry that if the person behind the animated voice pulls out an assault weapon, it will mark another day of violence on the calendar. It only seems to build, growing more and more troubling with every passing day.

The contexts are different, but the scenarios are all the same. A mass shooting takes place. Family members are robbed of the joy of life and dreams of passing on a legacy to their children. Racially motivated acts of violence add to the fear and frustration of people who have endured the sin of racism for generations. Innocent people and lives altered in a moment. And it only seems to build, growing more and more concerning with every passing day.

The aftermath of such incidents have grown sadly predictable. An act of violence takes place. It is the lead story on the evening news. Concerned people express their feelings. Politicians cry for a change of culture and the passage of new laws. A week passes. Maybe a month. Something else finds its way to the front page. The story gets shoved down in the reporting cycle. Partisan politicians will turn the horrific act of violence into their own version of a horrific denial of our rights. Members of the House and Senate will debate the Second Amendment, gun rights, and basic freedoms established in the constitution. And nothing will happen, . . . again.

And yet, in Uvalde, Texas, there are inconsolable families. No words are good enough. Their lives have been changed forever. While all of us are urged to have a heightened awareness of the potential of violence all around us, people of color must endure the frightening reality that systemic racism has caused them to live their entire lives with a heightened awareness since the day of their birth. It just does not end. And no words are good enough.

In my role as a bishop and as President of the Council of Bishops, whenever events like this happen the first question asked of me is whether or not I am going to issue a statement. Words put together in response to another horrific act of injustice, violence, racism, or war in our midst. Words that include things like, “our thoughts and prayers are with the victims.” Today, I do not have a statement in me.

My outrage and anger demands a statement, but my love of people demands action.

I spend my life thinking about people. I am a person of prayer. But this cycle of violence has reached a point where there are no words good enough, no statement that meets the need, no thought that will salve the wound, and heal the hurt.

I believe that we must, with conviction, determine how we are going to move from words to actions. We have to find a way to keep these stories on the front page of our consciousness and let nothing detract from

our commitment to curb violence, fight for justice, end systemic racism, elect politicians with courage, deeply listen to those who have been harmed, and genuinely seek the power of the Holy Spirit to lift us from this posture of paralysis into a mode of action that does not deny the need for thoughts and prayers, but realizes that there is a need for more, so much more.

We have to come to terms with how we are going to fix this. We absolutely have done nothing different and, as a result, the cycle of violence and the denial of human life just continues. We are paralyzed into a posture of inactivity that only allows the same story and the same response to happen over and over again. And as a result, we live our lives on the defense, always reacting to something that has already taken place around us.

My “statement” today, is quite simple: Let’s go on the offense.

If you are a pastor, weave our theology of a lived-out faith into sermons that challenge people to convert their fears, angers, racist tendencies, and complicit behaviors into a mobilized witness of the power of God to do far more than we could ever dream of or imagine. If you are a lay person, determine today how you will take the faith you nurture each week in a pew to the streets, the places where you work, and the homes where you live. If you are a church body, don’t settle for just active shooter training. Determine that you will actively work to transform lives from violence to peace, elect officials that will not settle for inaction, and inject communities with the grace and love of Christ that will alter the course of our current behaviors.

Let’s go on the offense today and play whatever role we can to change the cycle of violence, end racism and other behaviors that treat people less than they were created to be, and create a narrative that will compel people to live a life with a heart of peace.

In his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, John O’Donohue writes, “Now is the time to hold faithful to your dream, to understand that this is an interim time full of awkward disconnection.”

As a bishop of the Church, I refuse to see this period of our lives as a permanent time of disarray. Instead, I choose to see this as an interim time, a time that will not remain as it is, a time that will not be the standard upon which we experience the life we have been blessed to live. As United Methodists we embrace a gospel and a mission that we state has the power to transform the world. The risk is that they will only be nice words that easily roll off our tongues just like every statement made after the latest act of violence. The risk is that we will see our current state as a permanent one, rather than an interim time that we can, with the power of God in our midst, change.

The call today is for every United Methodist Christian to go on the offense, stating what we believe the power of God can do in our midst, opening ourselves to the power of God at work within us, and doing whatever we can to alter the current course of behavior once and for all.

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas J. Bickerton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small star-like mark above the 'i' in Thomas.

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