

**American Baptist Home Mission Societies Public Witness Statement on Gun Violence
January 23, 2013**

The December 14, 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, as with other incidents such as those in Aurora, Oak Creek, Tucson, Ft. Hood, Virginia Tech, and Columbine give us pause as disciples of Jesus Christ and citizens of the United States of America. We recoil in horror at these mass shootings, as we also lament the daily toll of gun violence in the United States. Our hearts go out to the victims of these horrendous acts and to their families whom we continue to hold in prayer and for whom we will continue to work for justice and peace.

Firearms are a part of the history and fabric of our nation. Changes in the laws governing the ownership and use of firearms must take into account this uniquely American experience and the ways in which our understanding of the right to keep and bear arms has developed over time. The Supreme Court has held that the Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees an individual right to “keep and bear arms,” while also making it clear that this right is “not unlimited.”¹ Nor should it be. The liberties we enjoy are often in tension with one another and no right should be so broadly construed as to undermine the ability of the broader community to maintain order and the peace necessary for human life and flourishing.

Today, approximately 300 people, including 65 children and teens, will be injured or killed with guns in murders, assaults, suicides, and accidents. Today, an estimated 40 percent of gun sales will occur without a criminal background check. Today, background checks for private gun sales have reduced illegal gun trafficking within states that employ them by 48 percent while strong, enforced gun dealer licensing laws have reduced illegal gun trafficking within states that employ them by 64 percent. Today, licensing and registration will make it more difficult to obtain crime guns locally.²

While we cannot put an end to gun violence, we can reduce its impact on individuals, families, communities, and our nation. Therefore, we, the board of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, support the following measures:

- Decreasing the firepower available to civilians by banning assault weapons and prohibiting the sale of large capacity ammunition magazines;
- Closing gaps in the background check system including requiring criminal background checks for all sales at gun shows;
- Implementing a common sense, comprehensive approach to help law enforcement prevent gun trafficking that will decrease the availability of illegal guns, including licensing handgun purchasers and strengthening the regulation of gun dealers;
- Strengthening record keeping of gun transfers, and requiring the reporting of lost or stolen guns to law enforcement to ensure better accountability of guns for persons involved in the supply of guns to the illegal market;

- Increasing resources and capacity for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and repealing existing statutory restrictions that hamper the agency’s ability to combat illegal gun trafficking;
- Developing new technologies to help law enforcement more effectively trace crime guns and developing safety features to childproof guns;
- Encouraging local efforts to prevent and reduce gun violence;
- Urging firearms retailers to implement protocols aimed at preventing the sale of firearms to prohibited purchasers and preventing “straw purchases”; and
- Improving the National Violent Death Reporting System and restoring firearms research funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Encouraging greater societal attention to issues of mental health and illness as well as cultural issues including the pervasiveness of violence in entertainment and the media.

Pursued together, we believe these measures will reduce gun violence while maintaining access to firearms for individuals for the purposes of self-defense, sport, and hunting, and we reject the rhetoric that misleadingly portrays these goals (reduced violence and legitimate access) as incompatible. In the name of the Prince of Peace, we encourage our constituent congregations and the membership thereof to join us in support of these measures as we commit ourselves and the American Baptist Home Mission Societies to the patient work of reform, of taking the sensible steps necessary to reduce gun violence in our land.

¹ District of Columbia v. Heller

² Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence (www.faithsagainstgunviolence.org) and Mayors Against Illegal Guns (www.mayorsagainstillegals.org)