A Faith-Based Intergenerational Resource for Conversation and Action to Prevent Gun Violence

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Three Resource Appendices to accompany this downloadable PDF booklet may be found at: www.docfamiliesandchildren.org
Following our nation’s experiencing 38+ mass shootings in the first three months of 2018, a large group of articulate and passionate student activists joined their voices with Parkland High School activists to launch a very impressive nationwide “March for Our Lives” campaign to prevent gun violence. While the fruits of this campaign have not yet been fully realized, this new surge in young activism gives families and leaders in faith communities a vital opportunity to engage with our children and youth on the subjects of gun safety and gun violence, in addition to the how to conduct faith-based promotion of non-violent communication and conflict resolution, and an intentionality to follow the countercultural peacemaking power of Jesus which actively embraces the mission of compassion, healing and wholeness for all God’s children.

This resource introduces congregational leaders and families to a variety of options for engagement with the mission of gun safety and gun violence prevention. The overall theological vision is that of responding together to the Biblical call to place our trust in the power of God through Jesus Christ, rather than in the powers of violent coercion and weaponry which dominate the streets of our communities, and our nation.

The call of Christ presented here is for congregations and families to intergenerationally pursue becoming spiritual warriors (or guardians) as suggested in Ephesians 6 and lift up Jesus as a real “suprahero” above all ficticious “superheroes”. Following in the way of Jesus as a non-violent, yet extraordinarily powerful “suprahero” this resource outlines ways to learn specific non-violent communication and conflict resolution skills in combination with learning a variety of holistic practices which help

Preview: Gun Violence Prevention Ministry
adults, children and youth alike become Spiritually empowered and centered in God’s trust and love in Jesus as Christ.

Recognizing that the subject of guns and gun violence prevention can stir conflict and partisan division within faith communities and families, this resource seeks to help congregations and families avoid such conflict. Our nation’s current epidemic of gun violence is complex, and calls for a multi-level faith based response, but the focus of this resource is personal and “local”. One cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that our culture is addicted to violence. We see it on our daily news media, television dramas, video games and theater screens.

The voices of faith communities are needed to turn around this cultural addiction and its deleterious influence on our children and youth. Responding to such a call, however, must be built on a foundation of personal, non-blameful, honest conversations upon which we can build our understanding about the complex socio-economic and moral / ethical influences that contribute to our nation’s current epidemic of gun violence.

Family and faith community members honestly and non-judgmentally sharing their thoughts and feelings about their personal or family guns in tandem with educating and promoting basic gun safety can save both souls and lives! There is a surprisingly high number of guns in the homes of even the most devout Christians, and many are not stored safely away from the hands of children and teens.

As of OCTOBER 22, 2018 the Children’s Firearm Safety Alliance reported that this year there were:

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- 148 KIDS INJURED
- 9 ADULTS SHOT.

...ALL BY KIDS HAVING ACCESS TO NEGLIGENTLY STORED FIREARMS.

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So, in addition to providing the basics for creating a “Save Our Children’s Lives” gun safety ministry project within a congregation, this resource suggests following an “in-house” gun safety promotion program with a community outreach gun safety educational program. This can open participants to conversations about and engagement with the more complex issues and perspectives on gun violence in general.

Along the way, it is hoped that the quest to trust God before guns will raise up many practical as well as theological questions. Our approach affirms that the “wondering” is as important as the answers, but this resource also provides a variety of intergenerational resources for exploring non-violent disciplines to assist young and old alike in prayerfully living out basic trust in God.

Each congregation and family needs to choose its most authentic path to more fully trusting the non-violent spiritual power of our Savior’s reconciling love.

However, I believe that it remains important in the midst of our “superhero” culture that we, our children and youth understand that Jesus was not a wimp! Jesus was, in fact, “super strong” in his self-giving, inclusive, reconciling love which conquered all things, even death. Being non-violent does not mean being passive! By contrast this resource suggests that today we are all called to become

**Do Not be Afraid!**

Our time calls us all to claim anew the simple core truth of our faith that if we truly believe in the power of God’s almighty love and grace in Jesus Christ which conquers all things, even death, then we do not need to be afraid of ANYTHING!
“spiritual warriors” or “spiritual guardians”. The popularity of Star Wars and Harry Potter sagas suggests that today’s children and youth seek spiritual apprenticeship and mastery. *Our churches need to step up and provide it!*

Theologically, the place to start is the New Testament’s often neglected identification of Jesus as the incarnation of the “Cosmic Christ” whose mighty strength and power existed with God before all other creation and is ours eternally through the companionship of the Holy Spirit if we open ourselves to it. In addition, Ephesians suggests that all ages together should consciously focus on exercising God’s spiritual “weapons” of truth, righteousness, peace, faith and salvation, all the while praying and studying God’s Word and supporting one another “so that no one falls behind or drops out”. Ephesians 6:13-18 (The Message) says:

“Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s Word is an indispensable weapon. In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out. “

In contrast to the evil fighting yet violent powers of popular fictional superheroes, I suggest that faith communities should educate and support families in a relational and spiritual practices which strongly contrast to the use of angry, uncontrolled verbal or physical fighting to solve problems or power struggles. Jesus came to show us: that empathetic, inclusive compassion, not polarizing hate and violence, is the most powerful force in the world. We are called to embrace a certain “holy chutzpah” (chutzpah is a Yiddish word for bold self-confidence, audacity, or nerve.)
THE BRADY CAMPAIGN TELLS US THAT EVERY DAY IN OUR NATION (ON AVERAGE)

- 46 children and teens are shot in murders, assaults, suicides & suicide attempts, unintentional shootings, and police intervention.

- 7 children and teens die from gun violence:
  - 4 are murdered
  - 3 die from suicide

- 40 children and teens are shot and survive:
  - 31 injured in an attack
  - 1 survives a suicide attempt
  - 8 shot unintentionally

Asking the following simple question is an important step every parent can take to help keep their child safe, and possibly save their child’s life:

“Is there an unlocked gun where my child plays?”

(Note: Numbers may not sum because of rounding of CDC averages.)

The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence
Simply put, vital churches need to be actively involved with saving lives as well as souls. As suggested earlier, talking about the basic gun safety in our homes and church is a good place to start the journey. Every day, parents or caregivers drop off children and youth to play in the homes of new friends without checking with the new friend’s parents or caregivers to learn whether or not there are guns in the home and whether or not any onsite guns are locked up. And, every day, children’s lives are lost because of neglecting the simple wisdom of asking about guns.

Having faith community education about and support for engaging in potentially uncomfortable gun safety conversations and actions not only SAVES LIVES, but hopefully opens the door to discussing topics such as learning other ways of protecting ourselves and our families which involve trusting God’s love before any weapons or violence.

An intergenerationally engaged, open hearted community of faith may find themselves called to research and learn about civic activism around gun access issues (ERPO), background checks, and other relevant state and federal gun control legislation as it arises.

Although I have included three online appendices with resources for further research and action in civic activism the focus on this resource is on broadening a basic intergenerational gun safety ministry into the realm of community mission, joining voices with Scouts BSA, YWCA/YMCA, police officers, pediatricians, and hospital emergence...

“We stand with the children and youth. Jesus comes down on the side of the little ones. This slaughter of the innocents needs to stop. The injustice of this madness of not loving our children, God’s children, more than metal objects needs our support to stop!”

- Rev. Mary Jacobs, Co-Moderator Disciples Peace Fellowship
cy staff to spread the word about basic gun safety with door handle cards, handouts and short talks with the help of several faith based gun safety education toolkits available online.

Beyond this I encourage theological reflection about the role of our Risen Savior and the non-violent power of the Holy Spirit to bring about peace and justice, healing and wholeness (God’s shalom) in in our daily lives.

So, Instead of heading into complex and potentially divisive partisan issues, this resource hopes to encourage intergenerational sharing and learning not only about gun safety ministry but practical, life-changing understandings about God, Jesus as Christ and countercultural heroes of non-violent spiritual empowerment.

Exploring the non-violent power of God’s redeeming love in Jesus as Christ in the context of today’s superheroes is something that can actually be fun! As a grandmother of two superhero enthralled elementary age grandsons I have discovered that exploring Jesus as an all-powerful, non-violent, evil-fighting “Suprahero” (supra=above) is something children can easily understand. Proclaiming the universal saving power of our Suprahero Jesus is easy when we start with the fact that Jesus as Christ was and is real and all the rest of today’s popular “superheroes” are simply fictitious (made up)!

Do you know who has guns?

Do you know who among your friends, faith communities and neighbors have guns in their homes?

Do you know if they are stored safely? ASK!!!!!
God’s power is non-vident

Whatever your approach to understanding the Bible (historical critical or literal) the Truth is that Biblical stories we tell are about a very real person named Jesus who taught and healed, lived, died and rose again by the transformational power of radical compassion and inclusive hospitality. Furthermore, by God’s grace, these same awesome powers of Jesus are ours (John 14:12) as we learn and practice together specific ways of compassionately relating to each other and God through the power of the Holy Spirit!

How? Through exploring together one or more ancient body-mind-Spirit healing and protection “arts” which, although not initially Christian in origin, have recently been embraced and adapted Christian practices. My family and I have experienced breath prayer, reiki healing touch, body prayers such as yoga and running, and martial arts such as aikido, kung fu and tai chi to uniquely embodying the lifechanging power of the Holy Spirit as they are intentionally undertaken in the name of Jesus.

Children, and youth especially, need to concretely experience ways which ordinary people can count on a powerful Life force other than brute human strength or coercion (with or without weapons) for protection and safety and daily sustenance. Traditional spoken prayers of intercession and petition are only a part of holistic spiritual and relational empowerment. ” Our dynamically transforming Christ who partnered with God in the creation of all things, continues to partner with God and us eternally, - empowering us to being transforming agents of God’s New Life and Love, in all circumstances. We can trust God in Christ Jesus to provide a way whenever it seems that “there is no way”!
Practicing Radical Compassion

As a “movement for wholeness in a broken world” our Disciples of Christ faith calls us to an open-hearted, inclusive understanding of God in Christ and invites us to embrace spiritual growth and empowerment as a “holy adventure” which includes not only a Bible based “Supra-hero” theology of Jesus as Christ, but also a wide range of Spirit filled, empathetic ways of talking and living together which, when combined with holistic prayer practices, can bring us to trust the power of God’s love at work in our lives in ways that do not need or include guns or violence of any kind.

The specific ways of talking and living introduced in this resource are those of Non-Violent Communication (NVC). NVC is a specific way of talking and behaving which calls us to empathetically collaborate in meeting each other’s basic (often shared) needs even when conflict (and violence) hovers near.

Similarly, Dr. Frank Rogers, Professor of Spiritual Formation and author of Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus, says that the way of Jesus’ radical compassion,
calls us to believe that by creating the right circumstances for compassion and empathy, we can always discover or create new effective strategies for problem solving and conflict resolution. Dr. Rogers says it is about taking the “PULSE” of every situation:

- **P**—Paying attention without judgment
- **U**—Understanding empathetically
- **L**—Loving with connection
- **S**—Sensing the sacredness
- **E**—Embodying new life

While these may sound at first like basic pastoral skills, clergy leadership with these PULSE skills is not enough. Lay leaders, parents, kinship caregivers, children and youth alike will find that PULSE taking within themselves and others can be empowered through experiencing holistic spirituality learnings such as centering prayer (or breath prayer), and either traditional laying-on-of-hands prayers or non-traditional laying-on-of-hands prayer forms such as reiki healing touch (about which my husband, Bruce, and I have written a book). Let the holy adventure begin!

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:1-5  (NIV)
Guidelines for Engagement

In addition to learning basic facts about gun safety and gun violence prevention and seeking to be fully (holistically) present to ourselves, God and others as we pray for the healing power of the Holy Spirit to flow through us, we need to observe a few basic guidelines for engagement with children and youth:

1. Be a consistent and non-judgmental emotional and physical presence in their lives. We need to do our best to be “God with skin on”.

2. Provide a “holding container” for a wide range of overwhelming emotions (fear, anger, loneliness, abandonment, confusion etc.) which children and youth may need to discharge when talking about these topics.

3. Provide compassionate, empathetic reflective listening. Emotional “mirroring” is important.

4. As you begin, create covenant (promise) statements which include treating each other in ways that nurture positive regard (non-judgment) of both ourselves and each other. (Along the way, check in on how these behavioral promises are being maintained. Make course corrections when necessary.)

5. Open and/or close your time together, no matter how short, with simple rituals and/or Biblical (or your own life) stories which in inspire courage and hope.

At first, such intentionality about relational dynamics and creating “sacred spaces” for holding difficult conversations may seem contrived, but such ritually “bookended”, non-judgmental intergenerational exchanges can be powerful tools for mutual spiritual and emotional healing.
Nurturing dependable, spiritually inspiring, and emotionally healing relationships always involves focusing on process more than outcome.

In our fast-paced world, we all need to really work at “slowing down time” and deepening our sense of presence with each other and God whether it is around the dinner table at home or in our regular faith community gatherings.

Whatever else you do, be sure to take the PULSE of your own heart and that of others around you, and invite Christ’s healing and protecting Spirit in.

Who is your favorite superhero and why? Where do they get their power? How do they use it? Are they good? Are they loving and kind? If not, why not? Would it take away from their superpowers to be gentle and kind?
If you spend much time with school age children and teens these days you will see that they are hurting, angry, and very afraid of gun violence. Even if their parents have attempted to shelter them from full knowledge about the rising number of horrific mass shootings in schools and elsewhere, it is “in the air”.

Children and youth talk to each other about it and like many other topics, if responsible adults don’t give them basic, age appropriate facts, they will pick up a lot of unhelpful and even very wrong ideas about guns and gun violence on their own. With guns and weapons of destruction being wielded violently by heroes and villains in movies, TV and video games at every turn, it is hard not to get some wrong ideas about guns! The ubiquity of guns and gun violence in our nation cannot be denied.

Sadly, very little is being said within and by church communities. Too often, we Christians would rather pray than risk taking real action to stop gun violence. This resource assumes that if the topic is presented in a blaming and shaming way, people will become defensive and tempers will flare. Conversations about gun violence must not blame and shame. The simple fact is that many people simply inherit guns and ammunition and leave them unlocked in the attic or basement. They have never really have considered the danger they might present to children exploring on their own. Some people keep unlocked
guns in their bedside drawers, believing that these guns will protect them from intruders. So too, some people like to hunt wild animals with guns. Of course, some people use guns on the streets to commit crimes and some use guns to enforce laws.

This is why the topic of **basic gun safety** is an important place to start. It is important for **ALL** of us to know about, safe storage of guns **whether we own guns or not**. Knowledge about basic gun safety **SAVES LIVES!**

Starting isn’t difficult. What would it look like for your church to have an in-house informational session on gun safety after coffee hour taught by someone “in the know” such as an officer of the law, or a member of your local gun club or a member of Grandmothers Against Gun Violence or Moms Demand Action? Such sessions can open to further conversations about fears and worries, and the huge number of guns that are actually present in our communities and maybe even open to participants talking about trusting Jesus as Christ instead of guns.

**Basic Gun Safety Practices**

The **first** gun safety practice is simply to ask your friends and neighbors in whose homes your child or youth visit, “**Do you have guns in your home?** If so, are they under lock and key with the ammunition stored elsewhere?” If persons answer, “Yes, we have guns but no, they are not under lock and key”, the dialogue must then become educational, **and** it will also need to include an invitation from you to have the children or youth to meet at your house until you can see that the guns are safely stored away. Basic gun safety tips can be found at **Safe Kids Worldwide**. The Brady Campaign has a good **Asking saves saves lives from gun violence** video on YouTube.
Learning about Gun Laws

A second basic gun safety practice is to teach your children and youth what to do if they ever see a gun which is not secured under lock and key. Whether found in a friend’s home, in a car or lying out in the open somewhere, NEVER, NEVER. TOUCH IT! Instead, get away from it and quickly go to a parent or police officer and report its location.

Obviously, if you own guns yourself, be sure that guns are locked up with ammunition stored in a differ location. If you own guns and you believe that a friend or family member might be depressed and suicidal, store your locked guns off-site and exercise an Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) law if it is available in your state.

Disciples pastor, Rev. Kris Eggert, Founder and Director of the Northeast Ohio ecumenical gun violence prevention group called God Before Guns is offering the gun safety card shown below to all Disciples free of charge to be handing out to church members, friends and community leaders as part of a gun safety ministry.
KEEP YOUR KIDS SAFE:
Just talking to your child about gun safety is not enough. Children are naturally curious and open to peer pressure. With a gun in 40% of homes with children, to keep your child safer:

**TIP 1:** Always ask if **there is a gun** in another family’s home and, if so, how it is secured, before sending your child over to play or your teen to a party. If you have doubts, invite the children to play at your house.

**TIP 2:** If you own a gun, **secure it:** Unload it, lock it up, lock ammunition in a separate lockbox, and keep the keys with you at all times. It will take less than a minute or two to unlock and load if needed.
- Always check to be sure there’s no bullet in the chamber before cleaning a firearm.
- When handling or cleaning, never leave a gun unattended, not even for a moment.
- Make sure that no one who is staying or living with you is keeping an unsecured firearm in your house.
- Most school shooters use firearms taken from a relative’s home. Don’t let that weapon be yours.

PREVENT SUICIDES:
- Two thirds of all firearm-related deaths in the U.S.—more than 20,000 a year—are suicides.
- Suicide is often an impulsive act spurred by a break-up, job loss, legal trouble, etc. From teens to seniors, all ages are at risk.
- 85%-90% of suicide attempts with firearms result in death.
- Less than 5% of suicide attempts using most other methods succeed, and 90% of survivors will not die by suicide later.

**TIP 3:** Store firearms off-site if you suspect a friend or family member may be suicidal. You may save a life.
Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence is an interfaith coalition of representatives from more than 50 faith-based organizations, including Rev. Kate Epperly, author of this resource and Coordinator for Justice and Advocacy, Ministries Across Generations Team, Disciples Home Missions, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Faiths United offers a number of gun violence prevention resources including December’s National Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath liturgies; a Concert Across America to End Gun Violence toolkit; in addition a basic congregational toolkit for learning about how to prevent gun violence.

The Brady Campaign is working with Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence to promote a new resource called “End Family Fire” (a concept similar to accidental military “friendly fire”) which explores various ways to prevent accidental home gun violence.

Sandy Hook Promise is a national non-profit organization founded and led by several family members whose loved ones were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. It offers free gun violence prevention training programs in five areas:

1. SOS—Signs of Suicide Prevention Program
2. SAY SOMETHING
3. SAFETY ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION
4. START WITH HELLO
5. KNOW THE SIGNS.
Depending upon how well conversations about gun safety in your congregation go, an outreach ministry of gun safety education can be a good platform for forming vital community partnerships with police, pediatricians, schools, social service agencies or various gun violence prevention organizations. In addition, a congregation reaching out to start a community wide “lock it up” campaign, can open the door to engaging with other violence related community issues. Establishing new bonds of learning, friendship and trust can help build bridges upon which potentially polarizing issues of a partisan nature can crossed, but more importantly, it will SAVE LIVES!

A faith community which has pulled together and formed creative partnerships with community leaders around basic gun safety education is a faith community which will find itself growing across generations.

Faith communities have always been called to create safe places—sanctuaries—where people can creatively deal with their emotions of fear and grief. Why not create a gun violence prevention ministry which begins with education about basic gun safety, and includes providing emotional and spiritual sanctuary in worship on the annual National Gun Violence Sabbath weekend (mid-December) and facilitates a series of expert led opportunities for discussing life saving educational information and diverse opinions about having and using guns?

Having learned the skills of empathetic, non-violent communication and problem solving as introduced elsewhere in this resource beneficial in this engagement.
Dealing directly with our current epidemic of gun violence and our violence addicted culture provides an opportunity to explore how we see the love and power of Christ at work in our daily lives. This involves exploring what scholars call our “Christology”. How do we (and our children and youth) understand Jesus fully and some would say, perfectly, incarnating God’s power and love? What does it mean for us to call Jesus our “Christ”? What and who is “Christ”, anyway?

Today many rationalist mainstream and progressive churches have “flattened” their approach to the transformational powers of Jesus as Christ. (Note: This is not related to the “Flat Jesus” movement!) For the sake of our “superhero-worshipping” children, I believe we need to “go higher” in describing the power of Jesus Christ at work in our daily lives. The Apostle Paul (Jesus as Christ = God’s Holy Wisdom) and the author of the Gospel of John (Jesus as Christ = God’s Holy Word) both proclaim boldly that our humble, gentle teacher and healer Jesus is, therefore. also to be seen as the incarnation of God’s cosmic pre-existing Wisdom and Word who partnered
with God and still partners with God (and us) to help with all transformational moments of Creation!

What is really important about this often skipped Biblical theology is that this very same “Cosmic” Christ (God’s Wisdom and Word), by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, continues to partner with each and every one of us in all our creative efforts towards God’s shalom! Whenever we work towards healing and wholeness, peace and justice for all God’s children and Creation itself, our cosmically powerful Suprahero Jesus as Christ is with us and in us, guiding and empowering us all the Way!

This “higher” approach to Jesus as Christ is important in a society where children and youth today are heavily commercially “soaked” in wild tales of fictional superheroes such as the Avengers, the Justice League; and intergalactic Jedi knights, not to mention Harry Potter and his Hogwarts gang.

Mainstream and progressive Christians need to step up our exploration of Biblical and early church Christological tales, mysteries and miracles and tales of early church heroes and saints, in addition to those of contemporary real life non-violent faith-full heroes and heroines (See: Angels, Mysteries, and Miracles: A Progressive Vision by Bruce Epperly).
We also need to share our struggles and triumphs about how it is that we ourselves have experienced partnering with our risen Suprahero Jesus as Christ! God may not have “friended you” on Facebook, but many of us have experienced synchronous moments of divine intervention or presence at one time or another as we have done our part to non-violently battle evil, heal the sick, free the oppressed and bring justice and peace in the way of Jesus.

My personal story includes our family faith challenge when our newly married son was diagnosed with cancer. I was on a Celtic spirituality pilgrimage to Iona, Scotland when I first heard got a call telling me about his having a large tumor in his chest above his heart. As I flew home I practiced deep belly breathing as a prayer for inhaling Christ’s peace for me and exhaling healing intercessions for our son. I also prayed for our son’s healing by visualizing my laying my hands on him in prayer and surrounding him and his wayward cancer cells with the Love and Light of Christ. Part of his “I am going to fight this” attitude was to regularly practice breath prayer, He also visualized his chemo treatments as a vehicle of Christ’s Love and Light flowing into him. For three months, we and others administered laying on of hands (reiki style) after each of his chemo treatments and we palpably felt the loving prayers of congregants, friends and colleagues from churches all around the country. At no time did we feel alone or afraid. Fear and its accompanying overload of adrenalin would not have been helpful for our son physically. But because of our strong belief that, when bidden, Christ’s love always brings healing and wholeness we were never afraid.

Fear is at the root of so many forces of despair and violence, yet our society feeds on fear. The Love of God in Jesus as Christ calls us to let go of fear because it, not
hate, is the opposite of love. One doesn’t have to be facing cancer in a loved one to experience the challenge of “letting go of fear”. It is a faith practice which we all need to practice regularly these days!

Even our young grandsons can tell you that one of the best ways to “let go” of fear is to turn it over to God by breathing slowly and deeply with the intention of letting one’s inhalation bring in the cleansing, releasing, renewing love and light of Christ and with each exhalation, holding the intention of letting go of one’s fear, dis-ease, and, whatever burdens one carries and letting them flow into the strong, healing hands of Jesus Christ. While healing does not always mean “cure”, our family shares the strength of experiencing much healing through breath prayer and reiki healing touch.

The Bible says “Do not fear” more than 365 times! As a Biblically based Christian, it is important to me that our
children and youth understand that the New Testament embraces a number of exciting ways to understand how it is that Jesus as Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is a lively, powerful and present advocate and guide available to empower us to meet life’s challenges on a daily basis. Our job is to open to it and listen to it and trust its empowerment. A study of the Wisdom of God (in Paul’s epistles) and the Word of God (in John) helps theologically ground our journey. (See: *Wisdom Christology: How Jesus Becomes God’s Wisdom for Us* by Daniel Ebert for a conservative overview.)

This being said, it is important for children and youth to understand that unlike Clark Kent and Superman, for instance Jesus did not ‘take on and off” his cloak of heroism but wore it quietly every day within all his many simple, but radically lifegiving, “countercultural “acts of radical compassion and inclusive hospitality. Like our Savior, we do not need to wear a special cape or costume which we take on or off, but simply “be ourselves” as we seek to walk in Jesus’ footsteps.

Today, when we seem to be surrounded on every side by chaos, ugliness, dis-ease, hatred and lies at work in so many of our institutions we and our children can find hope and joy in sharing in the “Holy Adventure of Creative Transformation in the Way of Jesus as Christ” which the Bible tells us we can count on to create order out of chaos, beauty out of ugliness, and goodness and truth out of hatred and lies. Jesus is our real life heroic companion and guide for bringing wholeness to our broken world!

Undertaking a holy adventure into the robust powers of the risen Cosmic Christ as the Wisdom and Word of God
calls us to pursue learning very specific ways of creatively transforming conflict and chaos, confronting violence and injustice, and speaking truth to lies and ugliness. It means becoming apprentices of Jesus’ way of radical compassion and inclusive hospitality. This, in combination with proclaiming Jesus as our “Supra-hero”, provides a compelling platform for innovative or at least non-traditional intergenerational faith formation programming and community outreach programs (including gun violence prevention).

As a life long pacifist, I never could have imagined myself forwarding the spiritual warrior/guardian imagery of Ephesians 6:13-18, but I believe that our society and its ills calls for it now.

I believe that Martin Luther King Jr. drew on this understanding as does Rev. Dr. William J. Barber today in his leadership of the New Poor People’s Campaign which the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) endorses. The battle is on!

Jesus was and is our hero because he lived and died and rose from the dead to bring healing and wholeness, freedom and joy to a world of full of oppression and pain, injustice and hatred, sickness and death. The cost of discipleship in the way of our non-violent, countercultural “Supra-hero” Jesus requires a level of dedication and discipline which is hard to find in today’s mainstream and progressive congregations. It may well involve finding new ways to “be church”. At its best, the living, breathing organism which we call the body of Christ is always reforming its institutional manifestations as well as transforming lives in the name of Jesus.
Happily Wondering Along The Way

Using a “Wondering” Approach

With these difficult topics I strongly recommend using the “wondering” faith sharing process forwarded by Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman in Young Children and Worship and Lisa Engelken, Disciples Home Mission’s Coordinator for Children Worship & Wonder. This approach says that the best way to pass faith on to children is through sharing together in “wondering” rather than giving pat answers. With difficult subjects such as guns, violence and the non-violent power of Jesus, it is particularly helpful, because, beyond the “lock it up” gun safety level of dialogue and action, there are no easy answers.

This approach is also non-judgmental. With it, there are no right or wrong answers. Instead, it involves opening conversations with “I wonder...”. This leaves space for people’s imaginations to ponder your words and verbalize many more creative possibilities. (It works with adults too!)

Wondering With Children about Jesus, Superheroes and the “Supra-powers” of Jesus Which we can Share

I wonder how Jesus is like a superhero...
I wonder how we are like superheroes...
I wonder how Jesus felt about hurting others...
I wonder how Jesus could be a “Supra-hero” (bigger and stronger than all our superheroes) without hurting others...
I wonder how we can stop a bully without fighting...
I wonder what is most important...
I wonder what _____ must have been feeling when ________.  
I wonder what we already know about ____________...  
I wonder how God can love people who do bad things...  
I wonder why people get angry...  
I wonder how we can be helpful when ____________...  
I wonder what we can be thankful for...  

Questions to Engage with Youth and Adults

- What characteristics of superheroes do you wish you had against bullies?
- Read Ephesians 6:10-18 from The Message Bible. In what ways can truth, righteousness, peace, faith, prayer, and scripture help you to “arm” yourself against hatred?
- Share a situation you experienced or witnessed where someone exerted excessive power over another. Brainstorm ways that scenario could have turned out positively. What are some of Jesus’ teachings that could help with this brainstorming?
- Why do you think people behave violently? What do you think they are really saying with their actions? What are some ways to help keep them from resorting to violence?

Check Out the Hillsong Kids “Jesus is my Superhero” song with hand motions on YouTube!

It is fun to listen to and at the same time helps us (and children) think about the awesome power and yet humble goodness of Jesus as our friend and “Superhero”.  

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The call to engage in spiritual “battle” against the evils of chaos and violence of our time is rather foreign to mainstream Christianity, and especially that of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). However, I believe that the destructive forces of racial, religious and economic injustice at work in our nation and world today call persons of faith of all ages to work together to address the “macro” as well as the “micro” of issues contributing to our current gun violence epidemic.

We are called to speak and live out of the Wisdom and Word of Jesus as Christ with an increased level of maturity as we pursue non-violent empowerment and activism to mend our broken world. Examples of such maturity can be found in writings and activities of Protestant reformer Martin Luther in the 16th century, “Confessing Church” pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the Third Reich in Germany, leader of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day in the ’50’ and civil rights activist, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.in the early 60’s in our country.

Being a spiritual warrior/guardian of the Wisdom and Word of God in Jesus as Christ is not a short term quest. It requires a lifetime commitment to learning and practicing integrative holistic disciplines which open ourselves and others to the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

It is my experience that first to be learned and practiced is the type of opening and listening to the Spirit called “centering prayer” or “breath prayer” as taught by
Christian spiritual leaders such as Fr. Thomas Keating. Such practices help young and old alike to calm and center themselves and listen to their “better angels” (their truest, deepest selves as created by God) so that they can be as creative, compassionate and response-able in situations of stress or potential conflict. (See: Journey to the Heart: Centering Prayer for Children by Frank Jelenek)

Of second importance to me is teaching and employing the principals of non-violent communication and conflict resolution such as that forwarded by Marshall Rosenberg (NVC). NVC is widely taught for healthy marital and parent-ing relationships, but it has also been taught to United Nations ambassadors and to many international organizations to forward the cause of peace and understanding. NVC helps young and old alike focus our attention on empathetic understanding of others without compromising values and without blame or judgment. It involves a four-part process of:

**Observing**—noticing and naming exactly what it is that is affecting our well-being

**Feeling**—recognizing exactly what we are feeling in relationship to what we are observing

**Needing**—identifying how our life’s values, preferences and goals are connected to our feelings and our current needs

**Requesting**—verbalizing concrete, action-able changes that we want others to make in order to respond to our needs and help us enrich our lives
Building character and Perspective

There can be no substitute for experiencing the reality that conflicts and misunderstandings can actually be turned into opportunities for creating deeper, more empathetic connections. Without calling it that, our Biblical witness reveals this dynamic in the ways that Jesus taught and healed others throughout his ministry. The earlier in life that we can experience this transformational wisdom—whether between parents and their children, between friends at church, between colleagues at work or in the midst of potentially violent street-side encounters—the more hope we have for our effectiveness in helping achieve a just and compassionate world.

Teaching and modeling the power of non-violent, empathetic communication in congregations is augmented by providing or supporting character and skill building programs for children and youth. Groups such as Scouts BSA, Girl Scouts of the USA, and Campfire USA have always been welcomed by churches, but I believe it is time for these same congregations to also sponsor other practices which encourage strong character development, positive values, and non-violent empowerment such as such as reiki, aikido, kungfu, tai chi and yoga as well as faith-based fitness and youth empowerment programs.
Bringing it all together is about providing training in what Ephesians 6 calls “putting on the whole armor of God”. We, our children and youth to “redact” its clear set of positive values and behaviors in contrast to oh so colorful realm of evil-fighting, justice seeking, fictional superheroes whose battles against evil often includes bullying, teasing, taunting, and a wide variety of vengeful and violent behaviors.

As I stated earlier, we need to make very clear that Jesus, the man, was no Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne or T’Challa, Jesus didn’t put aside his heroic nature at will. He lived, died and rose to New Life solely by following the guidance of God’s radical compassion rather than his own will. We are called to pursue the heroic path of Jesus by doing the same.

The way Jesus lived—his radically compassionate teachings, healings, and inclusive hospitality—provides us a full embodiment of the awesome power of God’s eternal radical compassion.

While I regard Jesus’ embodiment of God’s radical compassion as unique, I believe it is important that we teach that, by the grace of God, each and every one of us is also able to practice this same awesome power of radical compassion and inclusive hospitality. In partnership with the living Christ as our guide and companion we will never walk this heroic journey alone.
Thankfully, storytelling is an art which is being revived in congregations. Children are not only hearing but seeing Christian heroism “up close and personal” as they participate intergenerationally in the life of the church in both faith formation, fellowship and outreach projects. (See: Intergenerate: Transforming Churches Through Intergenerational Ministry

What is MOST important, however, is less the awe, magic and mystery of it all and more emphasis on “so what are we going to do right now to respond to the mighty wonder-working power of Christ that we have just heard and seen?”

What drives our zeal to respond today is very different from traditional missionary zeal to save souls, but a deep compassion for the suffering of so many in our world due to human sins of selfish greed, injustice, oppression and domination. Our quest today must not only be saving souls but saving actual lives and even saving the earth itself through generous acts of radical compassion and inclusive hospitality.

Ultimately, it includes preserving our Children’s Trust (https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/) by securing a stable climate and healthy atmosphere for the benefit of all present and future generations. However we choose to do take action, our families and faith communities are called to equip themselves by putting on the “whole armor of God” through intergenerational study,
Integrative spiritual practices and shared actions on behalf of God’s truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and Word. Today, we are called to start our adventure together, joining hands and hearts in ministry across generations as we begin a congregational gun violence prevention ministry. Beyond that, who knows where the guidance and empowerment of our risen Suprahero Jesus Christ will take us!

Ephesians 6:10-18 (The Message)

10-12 And that about wraps it up. God is strong, and he wants you strong. So take everything the Master has set out for you, well-made weapons of the best materials. And put them to use so you will be able to stand up to everything the Devil throws your way. This is no afternoon athletic contest that we’ll walk away from and forget about in a couple of hours. This is for keeps, a life-or-death fight to the finish against the Devil and all his angels.

13-18 Be prepared. You’re up against far more than you can handle on your own. Take all the help you can get, every weapon God has issued, so that when it’s all over but the shouting you’ll still be on your feet. Truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation are more than words. Learn how to apply them. You’ll need them throughout your life. God’s Word is an indispensable weapon.

In the same way, prayer is essential in this ongoing warfare. Pray hard and long. Pray for your brothers and sisters. Keep your eyes open. Keep each other’s spirits up so that no one falls behind or drops out.
Last but not least, in an age of mass shootings, school lockdowns we must feed the fires of the imagination through literature which provides a sense of adventure, hope and inspiration in faith leaders, parents, kinship caregivers, children and youth alike. We each need to stretch our hearts and imaginations to look for God’s Spirit-filled call and empowerment for our time and place. Happily Literary Safari (which develops, produces, and publishes inclusive children’s educational media) on the 6th anniversary of the Sandyhook shooting, released a curated #armmewithbooks list for this purpose.

“#ArmMeWithBooks puts at our fingertips a directory of powerful stories to inspire young people and remind them of the timeless values of hope, resilience, and empathy.”

- Po Murray, Chairwoman of the Newtown Action Alliance and the Newtown Foundation

Literary Safari has also produced “World Rescue”, a narrative, research-based video-game for youth inspired by the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Through fast-paced gameplay set in Kenya, Norway, Brazil, India, and China, you will meet and help five young heroes and help them solve global problems—such as displacement, disease, deforestation, drought, and pollution—at the community level.

My friend, Rev. Sarah Hess, founder of Growing Peace Family Group in Indianapolis, has created a Facebook group where families are asked to share ideas, stories and questions and activities that help grow peaceful families and teach anti-bias and anti-racist living.
This young mother and UCC pastor, has curated her own lengthy collection of resources which is available after joining this closed FB group.

Of course, older children and teens can gain a sense of spiritual adventure by intergenerationally reading and discussing classical Christian books such as Madeline L’Engle’s Austin Family Chronicles (especially *The Ring of Endless Light* and *A Wrinkle in Time.* ) and C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia.*

Our Harry Potter smitten grandsons are enjoying discussing with their grandpa Bruce comparisons between “magical spells” of the sort taught at Hogwarts and our Christian understandings of the effectiveness of prayers of all sorts, including Celtic protection prayers.

Each of us needs to prayerfully decide just what ways to actively train ourselves, our children and youth as spiritual warriors/guardians in the way of our Suprahero Jesus. Please note, that however you do it, research has shown that it needs approaches which are fun, multi-sensory and holistically integrative. Interactive storytelling and “wondering” together about the stories of Jesus and other New Testament heroes is a great place to start. Colorfully telling our own stories about how we have experienced Jesus as Christ alive and at work in our lives and in the lives of contemporary heros and heroines of the faith is just as vital.
6: Wondering AND Acting Together

Wondering With Children

I wonder how being kind to mean people can change them…

I wonder how your favorite superhero can be strong without hurting bad people…

I wonder what kind of superhero Jesus would be if he were here today…

Reminding Children

1. Tell the truth as much as you can.

2. Learn more about God, Jesus, and people, especially people who are different from you.

3. Talk with your family about God’s Love.

4. Ask your parents or caregivers to help you forgive your siblings or friends when they make you mad.

5. Read about Bible “heroes” in your Bible or a children’s Bible from church.
6. When you are happy, help others to be happy.

7. The Bible tells us that we don’t need to be afraid because God’s love protects us.

8. When you feel afraid, think of God’s love and light in you and around you, protecting you.

9. Learn more about what Jesus taught about loving others, and how his self-giving love drew him to be willing to die to show people like you and me the eternal breadth and power of God’s unconditional love and grace.

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

(Colossians 2:15)
How can being kind and thoughtful, speaking the truth in love, and using non-violent words and actions be effective in overcoming violence, evil, bullying, etc.?

In overcoming coercive behavior such as bullying (with or without physical violence) what are some ways to build unity instead of “winning the fight”?

Ask your pastor for or Google scriptures that tell of Jesus’ views toward violence. What would it be like if Jesus were to ride into Washington DC on a donkey today? Who would be waving palms and welcoming him? Who would be persecuting him? What might happen to him on Capitol Hill or in the White House?

**Reminding Youth**

1. When you see bullying or the abuse of power and say or socially share something about it.

2. Read in the Bible about how Jesus wants us to live our lives and how that affects how we are to treat people who are different from us.

3. Practice being a peacemaker by finding ways to feel peaceful within yourself first.

4. Practice empathy, humility, non-violent communication, and conflict resolution. Invite a friend to join you in finding YouTube videos about how to engage in these peace-making ways of living.

The Bible says “fear not” over 350 times.
5. Learn more about biblical and Christian “superheroes” and use them as examples in your life. Ask your pastor for or Google scriptures and helpful websites that tell their stories.

6. Try forgiving someone who is hard for you to forgive. Talk with a trusted adult about what forgiveness can mean for your life — now and into your future.

7. The Bible says “fear not” over 350 times. Think about all of the ways that God’s love can reduce or eliminate your fear. Breath in God’s love and light. Breathing out, let go and breath out your fear.

8. Read about Jesus’ death and resurrection in the Bible. What does it mean for you and your life? What can it mean for how you protect yourself against evil and harm?

**Getting Active in Disciples of Christ Heroic Non-Violent Action**

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), many of us are being called to join the New Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival while others of us are called to respond to violence against nature through our Green Chalice movement.

Others are interested in promoting our Disciples 2020 Vision “to be a faithful, growing church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality, and passion
for justice” (Micah 6:8) by working on a Disciples Regional Transformation Team or participating in one of the various programs and committees sponsored by our Reconciliation Ministry, which seeks to unravel the threads of racism.

Others may want to engage in activism with our Disciples Justice Action Network (DJAN) or be an intern with the Disciples Peace Fellowship, or like me, have a heart for working with our Refugee and Immigration Ministries.

Others may respond to God’s prophetic call for justice and mercy in more personal ways by reaching out persons who inhabit our city streets without adequate shelter or food through groups such as Bridge of Hope Ministries or reach out to families of incarcerated persons through our National Benevolence Association’s Prison and Jail Ministries or advocate for persons vulnerable to human trafficking.

There is much to be done and many opportunities provided through the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Disciples Home Missions. Where is God calling you to respond? Because you are reading this resource, I pray that whatever you do, you will embrace the notion that persons of faith are called to wonder, watch and explore together through Ministries Across Generations exactly how and where our Suprahero Jesus is calling us to take action.

However we respond to the call I believe it is vital that we all MUST lead the way in learning and practicing non-violent communication and conflict resolution skills to build radically compassionate bridges to battle the evils of our increasingly fearful and polarized nation...beginning with our current gun violence epidemic.
We are called to save lives as well as souls! If we don’t, who will?

From USA Today Article, Nov. 8, 2018
(following the Thousand Oaks Mass Shooting)

“When the thunder of gunfire broke through the revelry of a country music dance hall packed with 9 back on "college night," Thousand Oaks, California, added its name to a dark roster: The site of the 307th mass shooting in the U.S. this year. And an even grimmer statistic was marked: The 307th mass shooting took place on the 311th day of the year – an average of a deadly incident almost every day so far this year.

The Wednesday night massacre at the Borderline Bar and Grill, which left 13 people dead, including the gunman, became the nation's latest mass shooting, according to data from the Gun Violence Archive, a not-for-profit organization that provides online public access to information about gun-related violence.

In all, 328 people died in those incidents, and 1,251 were injured, according to the data. The numbers include incidents in which four or more people were shot or killed, not including the shooters, according to the archive.

For additional ideas, questions or concerns please feel free to contact me, Rev. Kate Epperly D. Min. Director, Justice and Advocacy for Families and Children, Ministries Across Generations, Disciples Home Missions, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), at kepperly@dhm.disciples.org