



Start a Conversation about... **School Violence**

School shootings are tragic. They rock the foundations of communities, cities, and nations. They leave many afraid and anxious of going to school or other large public gatherings. I asked a group of 7th graders at a Confirmation Retreat to close their eyes & raise their hands if they were anxious about a shooting happening at their school. All 14 of them raised their hands – half of them attend my Congregation's parochial school. To give context, in 2014 our community had a shooting at the Prom that wounded a few students & ended the shooter's life. The American Psychological Association found that 72% of Gen Z report that school stress is a significant source of stress.

The rise, and shocking normalcy, of school shootings in our lifetimes brings about difficult questions like, "Why does God let this happen?" These acts of violence bring out emotions and thoughts of how to keep them from happening. Discussions on school shootings are difficult, as they can be filled with more questions than answers, be emotionally charged, and politically polarizing.

The aim of the conversation guide is not to take political sides or to speak to how to prevent them. Instead, it is to aid you in walking with teens who are impacted directly or indirectly through the mess of emotions, fears, and honest questions they may have. Approach these conversations carefully, making sure your talk is seasoned with salt.

As you have these conversations be sure to:

- Communicate this with parents so they can continue the conversation at home, especially for youth who are feeling high levels of anxiety around school violence.
- Set the stage with your youth. Many teens respond to uncomfortable or frightening conversations by joking around. Laughs may indeed be needed, but this is also a serious conversation. Set the stage to alleviate the fears and communicate that the conversation is serious & deserves a certain reverence.

Potential Activities

FOR YOUR YOUTH TEAM/CHURCH LEADERSHIP

- Take time to consider policy & procedures regarding building security, crisis prevention, and crisis management. What would you do if something happened during Sunday morning? What would you do if a shooting happened at your regular youth ministry programming? Write out a plan, chart it out, and communicate it with those who need to know. Discuss with parents if there is an age appropriate way to share plans with youth to help offset worries.
- Participate in training for what to do in the event of a shooting. The Church/School/Childcare I currently serve uses ALICE training, and each staff member needs to complete it each year. Research a company near you or have your local police department give you some training & guidance on what to do in the event of a shooting.

FOR YOUR YOUTH

- Hand out notecards to all youth. Have them write their answer to the question "What would you ask God about school violence?" Without putting their names on them, have them fold the card, and place it in a basket. Read through them with the group as a part of the conversation or you can do this activity a week or so before you have a discussion to allow yourself time to look for answers.
- Choose hymns and Psalms of lament and use them at the start of the conversation. Discuss how they help us to see hope in Jesus alone during difficult times.
- Take time to make cookies, bread, or other gifts to community helpers like police, firefighters, and EMS. Take time to write Scripture and words of encouragement to them and deliver them with your thanks.
- Set ground rules for your discussion to help keep the discussion civil, empathetic, and anti-political. For more ideas on this, see the article "Getting Into It: Suggestions for getting into difficult discussions in youth ministry".

Discussion Questions

- What thoughts or emotions do you feel when hearing of school shootings? When you have drills for intruders in your school?
- Are shootings part of God's plan? Why & why not?
- When violent and scary things happen in our world, what do we know is always true about God and what God desires for us?
- Where do you see people sharing God's Love through the work of the Spirit when school shootings occur?
- How could we serve our community in Jesus' name in the event of a shooting? What needs could our youth or church fill?
- How could the greater Christian Church serve our neighbors after shootings occur?
- What Bible verses might you memorize that would give you hope and peace when you feel stressed or worried about school shootings?

Foundational Scriptural Truth

For these questions, refer to the scriptures below for guidance and direction. Some of these verses could be read in a manner that produces shame. Make sure to walk through what each verse means in a careful & delicate way.

While there are no Bible verses explicitly about shootings or gun control, check out these verses to help you comfort, engage, and challenge the youth God has entrusted in your care:

Romans 8:26

In the wake of a shooting, we often don't know what to say or pray for. In those times, in all things, God is praying with and for us in ways that we could never even express. This is a great comfort for us through tragedy.

John 11:35 & Revelation 21:4

Jesus' humanity – weeping (ugly crying) – at the loss of His dear friend Lazarus, and the words of God from Revelation 21:4, remind us of an important truth of God. He cries & He cares. He stands alongside us in our grief. He wipes away our tears, and in his divinity, He is able to do much more by saving us from our sins.

Hebrews 4:14-15

God, in the person of Jesus, has experienced life (see above). He understands us. He knows what we go through. This should be a great comfort in any tragedy, knowing that God is there with us in every emotion and situation imaginable.

Romans 8:28

God works good for those who love Him. Tragedy is not the end of God's story. This verse could be a great way to transition your conversation from sadness to joy found in Jesus.

Psalm 34:18

God is close to us in all things, especially when we are broken hearted. When we are at our lowest mentally and emotionally God is there. He cares for all our needs – mind, body, and spirit.

John 16:22

Jesus is talking to the Disciples of His impending death on the cross, attempting to comfort them. These words can be a great comfort for us & others. We will experience grief in many ways, but Jesus has gone ahead of us to prepare a room for us. He has given us great joy through His death & resurrection. That is the source of true joy that no one can take from us.

Romans 12:15 & Romans 10:15

These verses can be used to engage and challenge teens to care for those around them. God is near the broken hearted – often through His people. We can build up, encourage, and support others by being like Jesus in comforting those who need it.

Other Resources

- ALICE Training comes from an organization that specializes in training & planning for shootings, especially in schools.
- Check out Cassie Moore's articles on understanding and praying for teens who are struggling with fear, especially around violence.