

PLEASE NOTE:

I've written this in a very "conversational tone"---
that is, pretty much just as I would say it to a friend. Feedback is welcome.

Blessings,

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A FAITH-BASED APPROACH TO PREVENTING YOUTH VIOLENCE

OR,

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How many murderers have God's peace at the center of their being?

How many murderers have "that peace which passes understanding" in their hearts?

How many are able to say, "No storm can shake my inmost calm, when to that Rock I'm clinging"?

And how many murderers are convinced that God loves them—that they are a precious, unique child of our Heavenly Parent? And how many saw their victims as such?

And, is there even a single murderer who felt firmly connected to a warm, accepting Youth Group, or to a supportive, loving Church Family?

Well, though I have no statistics to back this up, my fervent, emphatic answer is "Hey, it's a no-brainer! The answer to "all of the above" is NONE!"

So, what would happen if the inner peace granted by God's presence were to be shared a lot more freely in our society—and world---by those of us who enjoy it in our own lives?

And what could happen if those of us who have filled our God-shaped void with God were to convincingly share the joy, the sense of worth, purpose, and direction in doing God's will—with those whose God-shaped void is achingly empty?

And what would happen in our society and world if we were to truly get out there and convincingly share the Good News that God does love each one of us....and "them," too! And what difference would it make if millions more felt firmly connected to a loving, supportive Church Family?

Well, I'd say that's another no-brainer; there'd be fewer violent people around, right? So, an added bonus of faithfully, energetically---and yes, relentlessly!-- sharing the Good News is that we're also helping create a safer society and world for ALL God's children! I'm not suggesting that our sole or main motivation for evangelism should ever be the eradication of violence; however, I do believe that increased peace on earth would simply be a natural, blessed by-product of our being even more faithful to the Great Commission.

A RAMBLING NARRATIVE PART (OPTIONAL, PROBABLY)

In March (2001), I had just recently been impressed by the powerfully moving play "Bang, Bang, You're Dead" as a very effective tool in the fight against youth violence, and I had clearly in my mind the rage, frustration, lack of self-worth, and desperation of the shooter as portrayed in the "Bang, Bang" play. I also had very present in my mind the inner turmoil, rage, and desperation of the Santana and Granite Hills shooters.

So, when those two troubled young men made the decision to arm themselves and lash out so violently at schoolmates and teachers---so close to my own precious daughter's High School, this time---I felt called (well, compelled, to tell the truth) to compile a list of those resources for preventing youth violence, and try to spread their use to touch the lives of (hopefully) many more young people (that list can be accessed at <http://www.cob-net.org/docs/williams.htm>). As my list of resources grew---and grew, and grew!--- I asked myself for weeks, "What else can I add? What else would help turn the tide of violence in our society?"

Looking back at it, I find it rather ironic that I had, at the same time, begun to work on writing a new song, "We're created with a God-shaped void in each one of us, that only God's presence can fill"---and yet, it still took me a while to "put 2 and 2 together". Then, one morning, on my usual route to drop my daughter off at school, my eyes rested on the bumper sticker of a car parked in its usual spot on our route. "No Jesus---No Peace/ Know Jesus---Know Peace" DUH! The missing piece in the lack of inner peace in the shooters! What a concept! Though I smiled at the strange sound of the title that came to me---Evangelism can help Eradicate Violence--- more and more connections came to me as the days went on.

And, as an aside, I'd considered "Evangelism can help END Violence," as a title, too, but "Eradicate" says it better---our goal is to root out, at the very ground floor, the very beginnings of those things which make for violence and the destruction of lives, and replace them with the "things that make for peace."

I should state a couple of disclaimers. No, I haven't checked out my assumptions by personally interviewing the shooters nor their families, nor (in cases where applicable), those who may have been involved in bullying or put-downs. As mentioned previously, I have no statistics upon which my arguments are based---only what I've seen, heard, and read about cases involving youth violence ---plus, I daresay, common sense. Also, my years of experience as a parent, teacher, youth leader, and peace activist have informed my conclusions. (I began passionate work to promote peace, including curriculum and songwriting, after my husband's grandmother was brutally murdered in 1981).

When I was a teenager attending Youth for Christ, it rang so true to me when I heard the explanation about our in-born God-shaped void. When that space in our lives isn't filled with God's presence---that is, when it's empty---many people seek to fill it with so many things that never do fill the emptiness, but only make the ache deeper--- money, power, fame, material possessions, sex, drugs----many of which become addictions, and many of which lead to self-destruction and/or the destruction of others.

So, it simply stands to reason that the more people we welcome into the fold of God's loving care and tender

mercies, the more people who have that “peace which passes understanding” at the center of their being, the more people who can say, “no storm can shake me in most calm, when to that Rock I’m clinging”, the more people who are filled with the joy and purpose of doing God’s will—then, the fewer people there will be who, out of emptiness, anger and disconnectedness, strike out in violence against their fellow classmates, teachers, fellow human beings.

And what about the teasers, the taunters, the tormenters who seem to have played a role in a number of shootings? Again, I would expect that God’s love and peace are not at the center of their being, and that they are certainly not viewing their victims as precious creations of God, either.

A moment for a sidebar at this point:

I do not in any way wish to suggest that we excuse, justify, or condone a murderer’s violent actions by blaming the victim(s). Bullying is cruel, wrong, and inexcusable, and is most certainly NOT “doing unto others...” However, what bullying clearly calls for is an instant and unequivocal response of “Uncool!” from peers, and “bully-stopping and prevention” words and actions on the part of all adults involved—not “the death penalty”! So, though no one would argue that a murdered bully “got what they deserved,” it is a sad fact that cruel treatment (or perceived cruel treatment) from peers has been the “straw that broke the camel’s back”--- a decisive factor with at-risk youth who are ill-equipped to deal with the stress of peer rejection.

...which leads me from my “sidebar”/ birdwalk” back to my main point..

NOT AS RAMBLING:

So, how do we go about equipping youth to deal well with the stresses and pressures of life? For those of us coming from a faith-based perspective—and, since you chose to read this, I expect I’m safe to assume that you ARE coming from that perspective--- the answer is staring us in the face:

* “Go ye therefore...!”

* Be instruments of God’s peace!

* Share Jesus’ message of God’s love, grace, and forgiveness which is there for each child of God!

* Jesus called us to be “fishers” of people...of followers for Him. So, we all need to stop sittin’ there WISHIN’ and get out there and go FISHIN’! (from Rev. Vernon Mitchell’s sermon)

Speaking on more specific terms, let’s:

* Look for youth who are feeling disconnected and create many ways to help them feel firmly connected to a loving church family—and, most importantly, to a loving God!

* Reach out to and support parents in their efforts to create a home where positive values and loving boundaries are taught.

* Let God’s love, peace, and grace shine through us consistently, so that those with an un-filled God-shaped void will see that they’re missing, and hunger for it!

Those of us in the Church of the Brethren like to say that we’re know “by the manner of our living’ That’s clearly crucial for ALL believers! However, in addition to “walking the walk,” let’s not forget the importance of

* “Talking the talk!”

Now, I, for one, am thoroughly uncomfortable with a lapel-grabbing “Are you saved, Brother?” approach. Alternatives, as I see them, are to

* Be cheerfully/ optimistically/ relentlessly INVITING----to church, youth activities, Bible Study, Sunday school, special events, social events, etc., etc.! Of course, fliers in the neighborhood, ads in local papers, and all other efforts to get the word out, are all to be commended; however, there's nothing to replace a face-to-face, warm invitation from someone who cares about you. So, think of any and all unchurched friends, co-workers, neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances, and invite, invite, invite!

* Share your faith in even casual conversations. If a friend or even chance acquaintance shares challenges with which they're faced, you'll certainly first offer empathy. Then share how, "For me, prayer helps so much in times like these." And perhaps ask, "Do you have a Church Family who's praying for you?" or, "Would you like me to put that on our church's Prayer Chain?" If they respond receptively, the door is clearly open to share further about how God's presence makes a crucial difference in your peace of mind, and to invite them to church.

And, when we do get to welcome unchurched seekers into our Youth Group meetings, Worship Service and/or social activities, what will they experience there that will help fill their God-shaped void, as well as the need for warm fellowship? With our Youth Group, we often talk about the goal of having church-sponsored activities that create strong connections in two directions for the participants. Thinking of the symbol of the Cross, we affirm the importance of the "horizontal" connections—the fellowship, sense of belonging, fun, getting to know each other—and the activities that will help foster that. However, we often remind ourselves that if we leave it there, it might as well be a secular gathering; therefore, we also want to make sure that even social events include activities—prayer, scripture, discussions, songs—that will call our attention to and strengthen our "vertical connection"; to God, of course. So, let's check what we'll be offering to those we invite, and make sure that they'll leave with a strong sense of both horizontal AND vertical "connectedness."

I'm certainly not claiming—nor even suggesting—that there's any guarantee that 100% of unchurched people who do join in on a church activity or two will have an instantaneous, miraculous conversion experience! However, we'll know that we've planted the seeds, that we've created ripples. Here are some empowering visual images which remind us that our faithful actions will often bear fruit which we ourselves never see:

"No ray of sunshine is ever lost, but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout, and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith." Albert Schweitzer

And, from a story about Gandhi:

When one of Gandhi's followers felt his efforts made no difference at all, Gandhi said to him, "Your words and actions matter, whether large or small; you need to choose them with great care; they're like pebbles that you cast into a pond. The ripples will take care of themselves, I've found."

In Galatians 6:9, Paul offers this empowering promise "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for we will reap a harvest at the right time, if we do not give up."

So, let's be energetically faithful in not only doing our much-needed secular good deeds, but also in tirelessly sharing the love and peace that God offers to all, so that our Creator will fill and fully satisfy the God-shaped void in more....and more....and more of those who are hurting, hungering, and thirsting, and who currently don't know that it is God that will heal and satisfy their needs... And it is God who will give them that inmost calm—and joy, and sense of purpose--- that NO storm can shake.