

[VIOL-11] On Directing MRTI to Place Gun-Related Companies on the Divestment List
Source: Commissioners
Committee: [VIOL] Addressing Violence in the USA
Prefile #: [CR-007]
Event: 225th General Assembly (2022)
Sponsor: No Assignment
Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Action Summary	
Recommendation	Action
On this Item, the Addressing Violence in the USA Committee acted as follows:	Approve as Amended (CA)
On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:	Approve as Amended (AA)

Assembly Action

On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:

Approve as Amended

Electronic Vote - Plenary Affirmative:253 Negative:107 Abstaining:

Final text: Show Amended Text

1. Direct Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to engage with Walmart, Dick's Sporting Goods and Kroger, three publicly-traded companies held by either the Board of Pensions or Presbyterian Foundation, that sell guns not classified as semi-automatic and assault-based weapons.

2. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to study the impact of the following gun investment policy proposals and to propose appropriate recommendations based on these proposals to the 226th General Assembly (2024):

a. Declare firearms and ammunition to be "a certain class of enterprise [that] will not be considered" for investment because "the nature of the enterprise is judged to be fundamentally and irretrievably incompatible with the nature and purpose of the church," comparable to tobacco and alcohol. (*Minutes*, 196th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 25.256).

b. Expand the current policy on the prohibition of companies that manufacture and sell "assault-type" automatic and semi-automatic weapons to include all guns (ACWC Advice and Counsel on VIOL-11).

c. Urge the Board of Directors of investing agencies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), such as the Presbyterian Foundation and The Board of Pensions, to incorporate this updated policy on firearms and ammunition into their own financial policies.

3. Share information on what MRTI is already doing with all the new resources on gun violence to encourage divestment in regards to companies on the "do not buy list" with all the new resources on gun

violence to encourage divestment on many levels.

Referral

Referrals to PMA from VIOL-11

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3. Share information on what MRTI is already doing with all the new resources on gun violence to encourage divestment in regards to companies on the "do not buy list" with all the new resources on gun violence to encourage divestment on many levels.

Status:	Referred to Entity
Refer to Entity:	Presbyterian Mission Agency
Expected Completion Date:	

Referral to ACSWP from VIOL-11

2. Direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to study the impact of the following gun investment policy proposals and to propose appropriate recommendations based on these proposals to the 226th General Assembly (2024):

a. Declare firearms and ammunition to be "a certain class of enterprise [that] will not be considered" for investment because "the nature of the enterprise is judged to be fundamentally and irretrievably incompatible with the nature and purpose of the church," comparable to tobacco and alcohol. (*Minutes*, 196th General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 25.256).

b. Expand the current policy on the prohibition of companies that manufacture and sell "assault-type" automatic and semi-automatic weapons to include all guns (ACWC Advice and Counsel on VIOL-11).

c. Urge the Board of Directors of investing agencies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), such as the Presbyterian Foundation and The Board of Pensions, to incorporate this updated policy on firearms and ammunition into their own financial policies.

Status:	Referred to Entity
Refer to Entity:	Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)
Expected Completion Date:	

Committee Recommendation

On this Item, the Addressing Violence in the USA Committee acted as follows:

Approve as Amended

Electronic Vote - Committee
Affirmative:20
Negative:8
Abstaining:

Final text: Show Amended Text

Text for Assembly Consideration

Direct Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to engage with Walmart, Dick's Sporting Goods and Kroger, three publicly-traded retail companies held by either the Board of Pensions or Presbyterian Foundation, that sell guns not classified as semi-automatic and assault-based weapons.

Recommendation

Commissioners of the 225th General Assembly (2022) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) respectfully recommend that the 225th General Assembly:

Direct Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to suspend the corporate engagement process of their investment policy in order to immediately place all companies engaging in the manufacture, sales, and retail/distribution of firearms and components (such as bullets, etc.) on the PC(USA) Divestment List, no matter the size of the companies, public or private, or types of firearms and components in question.

Rationale

In 2012 the Presbytery of Southern New England suffered the unimaginable horror of the Sandy Hook shootings in Newtown, CT that robbed twenty children, all between 6 and 7 years of age, and 6 of their teachers and school administrators of their lives. As a Presbytery community, we are horrified that our nation did not learn from this and other mass-gun violence tragedies, and the daily toll of nearly silent gun violence and death that happens every day in our country, estimated by the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence to every day injure 321 persons, with 111 persons on average killed each day. Jesus told Peter in the garden to "put down his sword." We are called to put down the "swords" of our time, which are firearms. As the Church we are called to find ways to help our nation put down its weapons, and for people and communities to have the opportunity for life abundant, free from the daily fear, trauma and death that gun violence visits on countless people across our country. We know the toll of a mass-shooting event all too well in Southern New England Presbytery, and the community around Newtown, CT, is re-traumatized each time these events occur. We want this to stop, and we want to be a part of a denomination that has no complicity in the manufacture and sale of firearms of any type. We must act to end this madness of violence. Our witness and allegiance to the Gospel must be clear.

The Presbytery of Southern New England met in May 2022, the day after the horrific murders of more schoolchildren in Uvalde, Texas. As we gathered, we prayed, wept, and considered how we were doing in the wake of another horrific school mass-shooting event. Out of those deliberations, the Presbytery Assembly expressed significant concerns about the investments of the Presbyterian Church (USA) which we share, and the upcoming timing of the General Assembly.

The limited research we have done with the short time we had before this Assembly leads us to conclude that the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not fully divested from all firearms of all types and all companies that sell them. Simply put, our divestment list is not 100% clean from weapons of violence and those who sell them for profit. Research indicates, for example, that while they have made some positive moves, companies such as Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods are not 100% out of firearm sales. Our divestment list is focused on military-grade weapons only, not all firearms.

We understand and commend the work of MRTI and believe it essential for our witness as the Presbyterian Church (USA). We understand MRTI typically likes to have time for “corporate engagement, bringing issues back to later Assemblies.” However, MRTI serves at the direction of the General Assembly, and so we are asking this General Assembly to act with the urgency of the moment that we are in, and have been in for some time. Gun violence is increasing in our country, we must act.

The issue of gun violence, the toll it is taking on our communities and the complete oppositional nature any weapons have to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, suggests to us that we should not wait as a denomination, but act with urgency for the time that we are in. We urge the 225th General Assembly to act boldly and decisively in this area, and to not move this to study or delay.

Please act with swiftness and clarity, born out of allegiance to the Gospel that is demanded of us.

– TE Christine Caton

As a Pastor serving a congregation in Tucson, Arizona, during the mass shooting and assassination attempt of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, I concur with the rationale provided by Teaching Elder Caton and offer the following additional rationale:

When the President of the United States spoke to those of us who were sitting high up in the bleachers of the University of Arizona basketball arena—we who had gathered with the rest of Tucson for a word of comfort and hope in the wake of a mass shooting and assassination attempt—ushers passed out navy blue t-shirts that say: Tucson and America. Together We Thrive.

I shared the shirt with the children of St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church, Tucson, Arizona, where I served as pastor the following Sunday. Some of our children went to school with Christina-Taylor Green, who was killed January 8, 2011. A day that none of us will ever forget.

Our kids were scared. But I assured them that we were not alone. I told them the whole world was with us, thinking of us and praying for us. And it did help to know you were thinking of us and praying for us. Then I told them that the adults of the world would do everything we could to keep them safe. And I meant it!

Once the children had gone up to Sunday School, I turned toward the adults. They were scared, too. Angry. Traumatized. Clamoring for answers. St. Mark’s is known as a “social justice church,” which meant many of our people were ready to march right away for gun safety legislation. I was, too! But, like the Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Uvalde, Texas, during their Prayer Night after the shooting, I refused to go there right away.

Now is the time to grieve and heal, I said. The time to figure out what to do next will come, I said. Right now we just need to hold onto each other and onto the God who wants us to be well.

It is hard to imagine today, but back then we honestly believed the time really would come when the adults of the world would sit down, objectively, in response to our trauma and figure out what to do next. We genuinely believed that a mass shooting and assassination attempt on a sitting U.S. Congresswoman and a federal judge and a nine-year old girl—born on September 11th—would call our country into a time of heartfelt introspection and determined action.

But now here we are. Eleven years, five months, eleven days, and two hours later. One Sandy Hook Elementary School later. One Parkland High School later. One Aurora movie theater, one Buffalo supermarket, one El Paso Wal-Mart store, one Taiwanese Presbyterian Church, one Tree of Life synagogue, one Las Vegas music festival, one Charleston AME church, one Uvalde Elementary School later. And those are just the ones we remember!

That navy blue t-shirt that once brought comfort and hope to a community in crisis now carries little more than a lie. I have gotten so disgusted with the moral failure of our nation’s leaders, I threw away that navy blue

t-shirt. Because the truth is, we are not together. We are not thriving. We are dying.

–TE Gusti Linnea Newquist

Other Comments

Advice and Counsel—from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy advises the 225th General Assembly to **approve item VIOL-10 with amendment.**

This item of business **cannot be implemented by the investment entities of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as written.** To place publicly-traded companies on the GA Divestment/Proscription List, MRTI must make specific company recommendations based on established criteria in *The Divestment Strategy: Principles and Criteria* policy (1984) and the General Assembly must agree with the MRTI recommendation.

Semi-automatic and assault-based weapons are already on the Divestment/Proscription List. ACSWP recommends that the recommendation be amended to read Direct Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to ~~suspend the corporate engagement process of their investment policy in order to immediately place all companies engaging in the manufacture, sales, and retail/distribution of firearms and components (such as bullets, etc.) on the PC(USA) Divestment List, no matter the size of the companies, public or private, or types of firearms and components in question. [engage with Walmart, Dick’s Sporting Goods and Kroger, three publicly-traded retail companies held by either the Board of Pensions or Presbyterian Foundation, that sell guns not classified as semi-automatic and assault-based weapons.]~~

This will provide MRTI the opportunity to follow its focused engagement process with these retailers to cease all gun sales, bringing attention to these retailers that could cause reputational risk.

Comment—from the Presbyterian Foundation

The General Assembly Divestment Strategy: Principles and Criteria policy (approved by the 196th General Assembly in 1984) includes seven criteria that need to be met before a divestment recommendation can be made. The Presbyterian Foundation **supports the MRTI process and understands that recommendations for divestment must proceed through specified channels** to meet the minimum requirements for divestment by the Presbyterian Foundation.

Comment—from the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA)

Given the tragic rise in mass shootings and the loss of life from the proliferation of firearms, the Presbyterian Mission Agency **appreciates the intent of this commissioners resolution.**

Unfortunately, VIOL-11, “On Directing MRTI to Place Gun-Related Companies on the Divestment list” **goes against existing General Assembly policies and the process MRTI has for implementing those policies.**

The overture directs MRTI “to suspend the corporate engagement process of their investment policy in order to immediately place all companies engaging in the manufacture, sales, and retail/distribution of firearms and components (such as bullets, etc.) on the PC(USA) Divestment List, no matter the size of the companies, public or private, or types of firearms and components in question.”

This directive circumvents the General Assembly's Divestment Strategy: Principles and Criteria policy [approved by the 196th General Assembly (1984)] that includes seven criteria that need to be met before a divestment recommendation is made.

- Criterion #6 calls for "The proposed action should be sufficiently precise that the effect of its application can be evaluated," which means that specific guidelines must be applied, and specific companies must be named to determine if a company is moving towards or away from complying with the standards set by the General Assembly.
- Criterion #2 states that "The issue on which divestment is proposed should be one that the church has addressed by a variety of educational and action efforts, such as: correspondence with companies, discussion with company managers and directors, statements, questions, and shareholder resolutions at stockholder meetings, and legal action against companies." This engagement has not yet occurred.

If the resolution asked MRTI to engage named retailers on a specific issue, in this case engaging on the cessation of the selling of guns that are not classified as "assault-type" automatic and semi-automatic weapons (which are already included on the General Assembly's Divestment/Proscription List, MRTI would be able to follow its established process. Given the urgency of the issue, engagement with other investors might make an impact.

While the focus of this resolution is on economic strategy (divestment), the issue for the church is not just an economic problem, but one of preventable human suffering. Beyond immediate economic and political goals, the true policy goal for the church is and always must be the end of gun violence.

Advice and Counsel—from the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee (REAC)

The Racial Equity Advocacy Committee advises the 225th General Assembly **disapprove** VIOL-11.

REAC concurs with the advice of the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns.

Advice and Counsel—from the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC)

The Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns advises the 225th General Assembly to **disapprove** VIOL-11.

As gun violence increases in the United States, it is critical that Presbyterians are fully aware of the impact gun violence has on women, especially trans and queer women and women of color. We recognize the deep and urgent need to lift up the voices of the Indigenous women, girls, and two spirits that have been lost in the flawed legal system that fails to protect women and children from firearm violence. The Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns is called to stand as advocates for our siblings who have suffered from the unjust ways guns perpetrate violence against women.

ACWC is a permanent member of MRTI with full voice and vote. ACWC **trusts that MRTI follows the long-standing General Assembly policies that guide its work**, specifically the Divestment Strategy: Principles and Criteria policy (adopted by the 196th General Assembly in 1984). MRTI is bound to this process when implementing a divestment recommendation. We do agree that the current policy on the prohibition of companies that manufacture and sell "assault-type" automatic and semi-automatic weapons needs to be expanded to include *all* guns. **ACWC would therefore recommend the General Assembly consider expanding the language in the policy to include *all* guns.** For this to be done, the General Assembly needs to give guidance to MRTI by naming particular publicly traded companies whose primary business is not the sale or manufacturing of guns, but who sell guns that are not classified as "assault-type" automatic or semi-automatic weapons. This additional policy guidance and the naming of particular companies would initiate

MRTI's engagement process which could ultimately result in a divestment recommendation if the companies do not move towards alignment with the General Assembly's policy.