

Rachel's Day

Women boldly standing for children



We are approaching two decades of observing Rachel's Day. Much has been accomplished in building awareness about gun violence. At the same time, it is now legal in all 50 states for qualified individuals to carry guns, and more children are exposed to violence than ever before.

Did you know that every 30 minutes a child or teen dies or is injured from a gun? In 2010, the latest data available, 2,694 children and teens died from guns in the United States—one child or teen every three hours and 15 minutes, seven every day, 51 every week for a year, according to a Children's Defense Fund report—*Protect Children Not Guns*. More than six times as many children and teens—18,270—suffered nonfatal gun injuries as gun deaths in 2010, the report said, and children and teens in America are 17 times more likely to die from gun violence than their peers in other high-income countries.

There is still much education to be done around gun violence, and this resource will help you take a stand and make a difference.

“It’s everywhere. Guns and violence are in every nook and cranny of America. Many children can get a gun quicker than they can get a book out of the library. That puts us all at risk.”

—*Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund*

What is Rachel's Day?

In 1994, one woman urged her congregation, Bethel Lutheran Church on the west side of Chicago, to support children facing violence. They began by clearing a vacant lot and turning it into a garden—Rachel's Garden. It became a place where folks—mostly mothers—could come to mourn children killed by gun violence in the past year. They also planted a white cross and flowers in remembrance of these young ones. Two years later, the Metro Chicago Synodical Women's Organization brought a memorial to the Third Triennial Convention (1996) of Women of the ELCA to broaden awareness of the violence children face and actions to address it. The convention passed the memorial, resolving "That ELCA women encourage their congregations to recognize the first Sunday in May each year as Rachel's Day, based on Jeremiah 31:15–17 wherein Rachel grieved for her children, to mourn the loss of our children and to renounce the forces of evil and fear that plague our nation."

Is Rachel's Day still needed?

The original focus of Rachel's Day was and still is shining a light on gun violence against children. Marian Wright Edelman, activist for the rights of children and founder of the Children's Defense Fund, said, "It's everywhere. Guns and violence are in every nook and cranny of America. Many children can get a gun quicker than they can get a book out of the library. That puts us all at risk."

She said this following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Connecticut—one of two that week and one of the nine mass shootings in 2012.

Mass shootings are not the only exposure children have to gun violence, certainly, and so we still need a Rachel's Day focus. Violence is embedded into many a child's life. Twenty years ago the emphasis was the loss of inner city children to gang gun violence. Drugs, abuse, neglect, poor education, health and hunger also contributed to the death of children.

Today, children are also threatened with death by suicide, often a result of being bullied. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people, according to the United States Center for Disease Control. For every suicide among young people, there are at least 100 suicide attempts. More than 14 percent of high school students have considered suicide, and almost 7 percent have attempted it. Bully victims are between two to nine times more

likely to consider suicide than non-victims, according to studies by Yale University.

Ending violence seems a difficult challenge today because our children's forms of play—violent online and video games, for example—create a dangerous environment and a formidable opponent for adults who want to protect them.

No group of children is safe until all children are safe.

Begin with God's word

Many may be reluctant to observe Rachel's Day because guns are a polarizing issue. Politics, personal views and societal attitudes make it so. Perhaps, Scripture can help you find common ground. In Matthew 2:16–18, we see that children have been objects of violence for thousands of years.

Read verse 18. Rachel's actions can become the resolve we need to say, "Enough is enough." Rachel refused to be comforted, and Scripture implies that her weeping went on for a long time. Yes, many may believe that gun violence is part of our culture, and we can do nothing about it. But Rachel was not deterred. Her actions bore witness to the urgency and gravity of the situation and the need to take action.

Read Exodus 1:15–22, Jeremiah 31:15–17 and Mark 10:13–16. Pay attention to why and how the adults took violent actions while others (usually women and Jesus) found hope and solution.



QUESTION: Who or what are the “Herods” of today that are threatening the lives and future of our children?

Preparing to stand

Rachel's Day and anti-violence work are not about fixing others nor are they spectator activities. Start with how violence affects everyday life in your home, congregation, workplace, schools and community. Remember that children need to know that adults care so it is important we know what they are feeling. Children can be traumatized by community violence because they are often too young or emotionally unable to process it.

Remember, this work is a marathon and not a sprint. Use Rachel's Day Sunday as the beginning of your efforts. Here are a few activities to get you started:

Debunk the myths about gun violence and children.

Many myths exist about gun violence. One is that guns are only a gang problem in major inner cities. Gun violence statistics include unintentional shootings, suicide by gun, mass shootings and youth-on-youth violence. Are children safe in areas where crime is low? Not necessarily. Gun violence can happen anywhere to any child. It occurs most often when there is a gun in the home. Do the research and learn the facts in your area. Find space in the newsletter or bulletin insert to periodically report your findings to the congregation and community. Host an adult forum.

Host a Kitchen Table Talk. It's important that adults have a safe space to vent and share their fears, feelings and needs for supporting their children. Assure participants that discussion about gun violence is not a debate or forum for political views, but a solution-seeking process on behalf of the children. Children need honest and accurate answers regarding violence in their communities in language they understand. And they need to hear it often because this ensures that you care. Parents and supportive adults can tackle this together. All you need is a comfortable space, refreshments and ground rules (generated by the group).

Host a summit. Children and teens need a safe space to express their feelings and thoughts about issues that worry them, like safety and their future. A summit is a place to discuss matters of importance, and often the answers to the questions raised are already in the room. It may take children and teens a while to trust that the adults will listen without judgment or rebuttal, so begin the summit with a “talking wall.” Place newsprint on a long wall in the summit space where the young participants can write or draw their questions, thoughts or feelings. Encourage older kids to help the younger ones. Recruit an older teen or young adult to serve as moderator to guide the conversation. They will talk, and you don't have to have answers. Just listen. Thank them for sharing.

Take action. Commit to pray for victims and their families. Follow up with participants of the events you have hosted to keep the conversations alive and hopeful. When you are ready to take more advanced actions, connect with organizations doing work to combat violence. Attend local gatherings and events. Join a group. Volunteer at schools. Taking action will make a difference.

Pray. Use “A litany of lament and hope for Rachel’s Day” (see page 6) during Sunday worship, at the beginning of a Kitchen Table Talk, during a summit or even as your congregational unit meets and observes Rachel’s Day. Regularly include petitions relating to these issues in your weekly worship. Invite individuals to keep these matters in their daily prayers.

Share. We can encourage one another and acknowledge what we have done collectively by sharing our actions toward making a difference. The success and power of organizations and movements such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) comes from collective sharing. Visit womenoftheelca.org and leave a report of your work. Share your stories in social media: on Facebook ([facebook.com/womenoftheelca](https://www.facebook.com/womenoftheelca)) and on Twitter (use #actboldly hashtag and @WomenoftheELCA).

Rachel’s Day is a day of remembering the young lives lost, and it should also be a time to recommit to children everywhere. It is important to celebrate as well as mourn. It is in celebrating that the faith community is stirred to hope and can envision a better future.

Beyond Rachel’s Day

Remember, Rachel’s Day is to serve as a beginning, a place and time to move participants to action. Take time after Rachel’s Day to gather a planning group that decides how your group/congregation will continue working on behalf of children. Create a plan for accomplishing and evaluating each task or activity by keeping a journal to share. Here are some suggested actions.

1. When your group is ready to expand its actions, designate an agency in your community that helps children (day care, aftercare program, family shelter). In consultation with the agency, determine what kind of “in-kind offering” (tangible items) your congregation can collect to support children at physical risk. It could be diapers, books, school supplies, art, sports equipment, or something else. Don’t guess or assume. Ask local agencies what they need. When you collect in-kind gifts, determine what you will do for the children in your congregation. Present as a part of the Sunday offering both the in-kind gifts and the actions your congregation will take for your children. This serves as a reminder of your commitment and the difference you are making.
2. Host an open house and community forum. Invite local officials (government, law enforcement, education, daycare and aftercare providers, faith community) to present practices and plans for children’s safety. This open house might also help build relationships within the community. Check the Internet to see what other groups are doing across the country.

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups, and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at womenoftheelca.org or mail to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.

How to use this resource

Here are some ways to help shape the day:

- Plan to include Rachel's Day in Sunday school and worship on the first Sunday in May. Remember to involve your pastor, Christian education leaders and worship planners. Prepare enough blue ribbons (a symbol of hope) for the congregation to be distributed to folks as they enter for worship. Use wording from "What is Rachel's Day?" on page 2 in your bulletin inserts or handouts.
- Invite children of all ages to serve as greeters, ushers, readers, etc.
- Consider bringing all Sunday school classes together and filling the hour with intergenerational activities such as storytelling, poster making and conversations between adults and children about gun violence in our society. There will be an urge for those who have observed Rachel's Day before to shift the focus away from gun violence. But, until death by gun violence is no longer a threat to children, women, like Rachel, must take a stand to continue the observance.
- Before Rachel's Day, plan to collect the names of young lives lost and write them on small white crosses (to be placed in your garden, on long white ribbons to be placed on the altar or white balloons in the worship space). Collect names from your local media or police community liaisons.
- Worship is unique to each faith community. Part of this work includes creating a worship celebration that reflects the community. Remember, the day need not be all lamenting: Matthew 2:16–18 lifts up the hopelessness and severity of losing young life. Yet Jeremiah 31 provides a word of hope in verses 16 and 17: "Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is reward for your work... there is hope for your future, says the LORD."
- Create prayers, a children's sermon, bulletin inserts and use the litany on page 6 of this resource. Consider special music, dance, and spoken word, maybe reflections and letters written by the children and youth. During worship, provide an opportunity to revisit the promises sponsors make at children's baptisms.
- Also use the hymns, prayers and worship resources in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and *This Far by Faith*, both published by Augsburg Fortress.
- Host a fellowship hour.

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A litany of lament and hope for Rachel's Day

Reader:

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the second chapter.

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt . . . for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." When Herod saw that he had been tricked . . . he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem. . . . Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

A voice: I weep for our children who are no more.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep for our boys who are no more.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep for our girls who are no more.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep for our parents who grieve.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep for our families forced to grieve.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep for our cities and towns torn by gun violence and terror.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

A voice: I weep.

All: We refuse to be consoled.

(Voices may name children recently lost to gun violence, neighborhoods affected by gun violence, streets where gun violence is visible, each time saying "I weep for . . ." with the response, "We refuse to be consoled.")

A voice: I cry out for justice for our children.

All: We refuse to be defeated.

A voice: I cry out for hope for our boys.

All: We refuse to be defeated.

A voice: I cry out for serenity for our girls.

All: We refuse to be defeated.

A voice: I cry out for tranquility for our parents.

All: We refuse to be defeated.

A voice: I cry out for peace in our cities and towns.

All: We refuse to be defeated.

A voice: I pray for hope!

All: We pray for hope!

A voice: I act for peace!

All: We act for peace!

A voice: I work for justice!

All: We work for justice!

Leader: Let us pray.

God of peace, God of justice, you weep with us for our children, our brothers and sisters, our parents, our families, our cities and towns torn apart by gun violence. Give us courage, give us determination, give us strength, that we may work untiringly for the hope and peace and justice you desire for all the world. This we ask through your Son, the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.