

A rash of killings in schools spur youth in the church to seek Positive Solutions to Violence

by Marcey Balcomb

There is hope. It was difficult to remember that on May 21, 1998, when a student opened fire in the school cafeteria of Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon. Two students were dead; others, wounded. The community will never be the same.

The killings in Oregon came at the end of a school year marked with violence. Five students, ages 11–16, in four states, opened fire upon their classmates. Fifteen persons—students and teachers—died; 44 were wounded. The students, staff, and community went into shock and grief. In the hours and days to follow, the youth, their families and friends, and indeed a wide community of people struggled with why and how such a tragedy could happen.

The Church Responds

The churches and other concerned agencies had opened their doors, giving immediate aid—both medical assistance and crisis care. But something more was needed: ways to help one another deal with the fear and anger that bring us to hurt the very people we love and sometimes even those we've never seen or met.

Three weeks later, youth and adults came together at a local United Methodist church in Oregon to explore positive solutions to handling anger. We spent time with presentations, skits, small group discussions, and a closing candlelight prayer service.

Throughout the summer and into the new school year, the Oregon-Idaho Conference has sponsored multiple “Positive Solutions” events. The workshops bring youth and adults together to learn ways to make schools safer and to keep anger from exploding into gunfire. For more information see “Resources.”

A key discovery is that anger is not always about a single, large issue or event. It builds up day after day through small things that, if left unattended, suddenly become too much to handle. So we yell, hit, throw, explode. And if a gun is available ...

If we are to choose different behavior, we must learn alternative ways of thinking about events in our lives and around us. Solutions lie in little things we do moment by moment. From our meetings with youth, we offer some simple but significant helps.

Positive Solutions

- A Your particular attitudes or beliefs can affect the things happening around you.
- B Your behavior reflects your attitudes. You behave certain ways based on your thoughts and feelings about what's happening.
- C There will be consequences to whatever behavior you choose. Sometimes the consequences are good and sometimes they are not; they may bring trouble for you or others.

Positive Self Talk

What you choose to say to yourself has a much more profound effect on you than what others can say. Choose how you interpret the actions and words of others. Choose a calming phrase or idea to say to yourself when you are feeling over-stressed or angry. Practice using it so that it becomes a habit. Positive self-talk may give you the space you need to think before reacting or responding to a situation.

HELP

- H is for “Hear your own self-talk.”
- E is for “Examine your emotions.”
- L is for “Look for options.”
- P is for “Pick a solution.”

Take 10

This is an easy-to-remember method for controlling your anger: Take 10 steps backward. Take 10 deep breaths. Take a 10-minute time out. It's all right to get angry, but you need to deal with it constructively. These suggestions are from the youth at the conference:

- Call a friend who will listen or guide you.
- Pray, pray, pray.
- Remove yourself from the situation in order to think it through.
- Take a walk (not a drive), exercise, write, draw, paint, listen to calming music, climb a tree, read a book, and so forth.
- If action is necessary, make a decision about how to approach the problem.
- Seek help if you feel your situation is beyond your own ability to handle.
- Pray some more.

Positive Family Support

If you have been blessed with a caring family, take advantage of time together. Discover new ways to support one another. If your relatives can't or don't do this for each other, find other persons you can trust, including your church family, and turn to them when times are hard. We all need support.

Responsible Decisions

Be intentional about making decisions. When you are faced with a situation,

- Identify what's happening and how you feel
- Ask God for guidance and strength.
- Make of list of possible outcomes of the decision, and their pros and cons.

- Seek wisdom from those you trust and gather additional information.
- Make the best decision you can.
- Evaluate and learn from what you decided, and be ready to make your next decision.

Have Faith

"For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11).

God of grace, lead us in your paths of understanding, forgiveness, and love, which we know only through you. Remind us to take thought and prayer before we respond so that we might create and expand true communities of caring. Take our anger and transform it into creativity and integrity. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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RESOURCES

"Positive Solutions for Youth." For more information about the program, contact Marcey Balcomb, Oregon-Idaho Conference Office, 1505 SW 18th, Portland, OR 97201-2599; phone 800-JWESLEY (593-7539); email: marcey@umoi.org.

LinC. This special issue on violence (Volume 4, Number 33) is available free at www.cokesbury.org. You will also find the school violence issue of its sister publication, FaithLink, for use with adults.

To the Point: Violence (Abingdon Press, 1994). This book is full of programs and teaching articles. Available at Cokesbury and other Christian bookstores or order by phone (1-800-672-1789)

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