



## Not a Place for Guns

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*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." (Psalm 23:4, NASB)*

The tragedy of the 2012 Sandy Hook mass shooting in an elementary school in Connecticut occurred during my first year as a local church pastor in New England. The Sunday following the shootings was Gaudete (Joy) Sunday in the Advent calendar, and though we lit the Advent candles, I decided to do away with my prepared sermon and read the 23rd Psalm and opened up the floor for the congregation to share their feelings about what happened in Sandy Hook.

The opportunity for congregants to share their grief, anger, confusion, and bewilderment was a release valve that Sunday. The permission to come together as a community, to suspend the "business as usual" worship, and to ask about where is God in all of this, was the right thing for us that day. I provided no answers—I could not—but it was a lesson for me to be present and give space. In the end we prayed for the victims and survivors of the shootings (something that would be come all too familiar in the years to come) and held each other tight.

Soon thereafter, I noticed one of the congregants began sitting at the last pew, far from his normal seating place closer to the front of the altar. I finally approached him and in a lighthearted way invited him to sit up closer. In all seriousness, he asked if we could speak privately in my office, where he explained why he was sitting at the last pew. It was to protect me and the church during worship. He was carrying a gun into the church and was ready to deal with any shooter that may decide to attack us. Then he proceeded to show me the weapon.

I was both touched and horrified. I gently asked him to unload the gun of its bullets and to put it away. I explained that as much as I appreciated his concern for me and the church, bringing in a gun into the sanctuary was neither the answer nor appropriate. Acknowledging that there had been incidents of religious space shootings, it was my firm Christian faith that gave me the courage to face

whatever dangers lie in life.

We agreed he would no longer bring a gun to church, and instead I asked him if he would consider working with me to bring an active shooter training program to our church. Soon thereafter, working with our local police department and Neighborhood Watch group, our congregation hosted a community training and forum on how to respond to shootings in a public space as well in one's home. This training has been offered several times ever since.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roberto Ochoa is Program Associate for Congregations of Color for the United Church of Christ

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