

A 4-WEEK SERIES ON



NON-VIOLENCE

working through grief with hope



A DIFFERENT KIND OF CURRICULUM

**This curriculum is dedicated to all of
God's beloved, whose lives have been
ended or affected by gun violence...**

We remember all those whose lives have been taken by gun violence, grieving the futures stolen and the communities left aching. Scripture calls us to imagine, and to build, a world where weapons become tools of healing. We lament what is broken, and we commit ourselves to shaping communities where all can live without fear.

**THIS SERIES WAS DEVELOPED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) PA REGION'S GUN
VIOLENCE PREVENTION TASK FORCE.**

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WEEK 1

Ordinary People



Series Synopsis

This four-session series invites youth to confront the reality of gun violence in their communities and imagine ways they can make a meaningful difference. The first two sessions help them understand the pressures and influences that shape violent environments, as well as the deep and complicated grief young people often carry because of it. Through these conversations, students begin to see how even small, intentional actions can interrupt cycles of harm. In session three, youth engage in the practice of lament, discovering how honest expressions of grief can open space for empathy, solidarity, and courageous action. The final session turns toward hope, showing how resilience can grow alongside pain and fuel real change. By the end of the series, young people recognize that they have the agency and imagination to help build safer, more connected communities.

Session 1

WEEKLY SESSION SYNOPSIS

This lesson helps youth explore the reality of gun violence in their communities and consider ways they can take meaningful action. Through reflection, discussion, and storytelling, students examine the pressures, dangers, and cultural influences that shape life in places where violence is common. This lesson emphasizes that God works through ordinary people to interrupt cycles of harm and promote justice. Students identify where they feel stuck and where they can stretch themselves to act with courage, love, and hope, learning that even small, intentional choices can break cycles of violence and create safer, more life-affirming communities.

Session Supplies

Notebooks or paper for each student

Pens or pencils

Large sheet of paper, whiteboard, or big Post-it notes for T-chart

Post-it notes (2 per student)

Markers (for labeling T-chart columns: “STUCK” and “STRETCH”)

Audio/Video equipment to play media for the group: [Give Me the Gun](#)

Printed copies of God Section worksheets for each participant

Topic / Theological Lens

This lesson explores the reality of gun violence in young people's lives and the small, intentional steps they can take to confront it. Students reflect on their own experiences and observations, sharing honestly about how violence shapes daily life and the pressures of living in environments where danger and loss are common. Centering their experiences fosters empathy, self-awareness, and a deeper understanding of the challenges they face, while also highlighting areas where they have agency to act, speak, and make choices that bring safety, hope, and healing to their communities.

The lesson frames these reflections within a theological perspective, emphasizing that God works through ordinary people to interrupt cycles of harm and bring about transformation. Even small acts rooted in love, courage, and hope can create meaningful change. Students are encouraged to cultivate resilience, care for others, and prioritize intentional action over despair or revenge. By the end, they are invited to consider how their faith, choices, and everyday efforts can break cycles of violence, foster justice, and reflect God's vision of a world where every life is valued and protected.

Preparing

To prepare for this lesson, the leader should set up the room so students can see and hear each other easily, arranging seating in a circle or small groups. Have notebooks or paper, pens or pencils, Post-it notes, markers, and a large sheet of paper, whiteboard, or big Post-its ready to create a T-chart labeled "STUCK" and "STRETCH." Watch *Give Me the Gun* ahead of time. Review all activities and discussion questions to ensure a smooth flow, and plan timing for writing, discussion, and alignment exercises.

Dilemma– Give Me the Gun

DISORIENTING DILEMMA (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this opening dilemma, your group will watch a video called *Give Me the Gun*. This video was made by OK, Inc., a non-profit organization that exists to challenge young people to develop healthy relationships and strong character so they may chase their dreams. This video presents a real-life example of the impacts of gun violence, portraying the tough choices, peer pressures, and lasting consequences that can shape a young person's future. It's designed to spark honest conversation around the pressure young people are facing regarding the reality of gun violence in their lives.

To lead this dilemma, you'll watch the video together, then move on to the sharing piece.

Introduction for Students



SAY

This week, we're starting a conversation together about gun violence. In just a minute, you'll watch a video about someone around your age whose life is caught in a moment where one choice could change everything. The story might feel familiar—maybe it reminds you of someone you know, something you've seen in your neighborhood, or even choices you've had to think about yourself. As you watch, pay attention to what feels real to you, what makes you pause, and what you might have done in their shoes.

[Watch the video together.]

Sharing our WOW

WOW MOMENT (10 MIN)



Now that we've seen Trey's story, I've got some questions to help us break down what we just watched. I want you to keep it real in your answers—no need to sugarcoat or hold back. This is our space, and we can trust each other enough to speak our truth. Trey's story is just a jumping-off point for our conversation—let's talk about what stood out, what hit close to home, and even the parts you didn't connect with or couldn't relate to. All of it matters in how we understand and learn from this story.



- Do you know any people in your life—friends, family, or people in your neighborhood—who have had to face tough choices around guns or violence like Trey did?
- What moment in this video hit you the most? It could be something that felt powerful, upsetting, irrelevant, or even confusing.
- What about that moment made it stick with you? Was it how it felt, what it showed about the person, or the situation itself?
- As you watched the video—or even just hearing that we'd be talking about gun violence—what came up for you? What were your first thoughts or feelings, and why?
- When you think about gun violence in our city, in our neighborhood, or around people you care about, what thoughts or feelings come up? Do you feel hopeful, mad, numb, or something else? Why do you think that is?

What would culture say?

WHAT? (10 MIN)



Gun violence is real in our neighborhoods, and it affects the way we live, get around, and even think about what's ahead. To really understand it, we have to look at how our culture, history, and the pressures in our communities shape the choices people make and keep these cycles going.



- Think about where you come from—your family, friends, and neighborhoods—what's the general attitude toward gun violence?
- If you talked to your friends about the video we just watched, what do you think they would say?
- How do you see gun violence shown on TV, in movies, in gaming, and in other media? Do you think it actually reflects what's happening in real life?
- What about on social media—how does it show gun violence in your community, and what kind of impact do you think that has?

What does God say?

GOD? (20 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this section, we will reference: [The Story of Antonio](#). It may be helpful to read the article for reference prior to meeting with your group although not necessary.



SCRIPTURE REFERENCED

John 6:1-14

Real Stories for Reflection



There's a story that came out of Baltimore a few years ago about two young men named Antonio—both called “Tone”—who grew up in East Baltimore surrounded by poverty and gun violence. Both had dreams of escaping that life: Antonio Lee wanted to be a chef, spending hours experimenting with flavors and imagining a future in the kitchen, while Antonio Moore was drawn to business and real estate, looking for ways to create opportunities for himself and others. Both worked hard in their own ways, but their paths diverged—not because one was better, but because Moore was able to take advantage of the opportunities and support that came his way, while Lee faced obstacles and circumstances that cut his journey short.

Antonio Lee's life was tragically ended by the violence around him, something all too real for many young people in similar neighborhoods. His death shook everyone who knew him, including Moore, who took that loss as a turning point. Instead of giving up, Moore channeled his grief into action, staying focused on his goals, building a future, and finding ways to lift up other young people in the community. Their story shows that even in neighborhoods where danger feels constant and opportunities seem scarce, ordinary people can make choices that create change for themselves and those around them.

The realities of gun violence are all around us; it can feel like the water you swim in, so normal that it seems impossible to escape. In neighborhoods where danger is constant, it's easy to feel trapped, hopeless, or even depressed, like nothing you do will ever make a difference. The cycle of violence can feel endless, with fights, shootings, and loss repeating again and again.

On top of that, there's often a crabs-in-a-barrel mentality, where people may hold one another back, sometimes out of jealousy, fear, or frustration. In this mentality, when someone tries to rise above the struggle, others pull them down, back into the suffering, rather than lifting them up or allowing them to rise. In that environment, revenge can start to seem like the only path to justice or peace, a response to a world that doesn't feel fair.

All of this can weigh heavily on you, making it hard to imagine a future different from the struggle you see every day. This is all a lived experience of grief, the deep sorrow we feel when we encounter the world's brokenness. Both Antonios felt this grief and carried it with them, just like you and I do. And yet, those who work for change in our world use their grief to deepen their love for others and fuel their commitment to building something better.

Real change doesn't always come from big speeches or famous leaders; it comes from ordinary people stepping up in small but powerful ways every day. It comes from people in the community who see what's wrong and choose to try to make it better. Even when it feels like nothing will change, God is at work in our neighborhoods, trying to stop gun violence—but God only has our bodies, our hands, and our feet to work with. God is in the business of using ordinary people to do extraordinary things. Before he led the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was just an ordinary kid from Atlanta. Ruby Bridges was a normal six-year-old who showed courage by walking into a newly desegregated school. And young people today—like Marley Dias, who started the #1000BlackGirlBooks campaign, or Amariyanna Copeny, who fights for environmental justice—show that people just like you can step up, raise their voices, and make real change. Just like Jesus used a few loaves of bread and some fish from a kid's lunch to feed five thousand people, God can use ordinary people doing ordinary things to make the world a little closer to how it's supposed to be.

This may feel like a big problem, because it is. But even as teens, there are things you can do to make a difference in your life and community. You can look out for your friends and avoid situations that could pull you into violence. You can mentor younger kids, get involved in programs that bring positive energy to your community, and use your voice at school or on social media to speak up in safe ways. You don't have to do this alone, but every small choice to step up, protect yourself, and support others adds up to real change in our neighborhoods.

Perspectives from Culture



INSTRUCTIONS

Take a moment and slowly read the two different quotes out loud to students. Encourage them to listen quietly and attentively. Read through each quote twice.



READ

Just as those who have been capable of the most horrendous atrocities turn out to be ordinary human beings like you and me, so too those who have demonstrated noteworthy instances of the capacity to forgive could easily be the man or woman living down the street.

Tutu, D. (1999). *No future without forgiveness*. Rider.



READ

I wrote these words for everyone
 Who struggles in their youth
 Who won't accept deception in
 Instead of what is truth
 It seems we lose the game
 Before we even start to play
 Who made these rules? We're so confused
 Easily led astray
 Let me tell ya that...
 Everything is everything
 Everything is everything
 Everything is everything
 After winter must come spring....
 Change, it comes eventually
 Change comes eventually

Lauryn Hill. (1998). *Everything Is Everything*. On The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.
 Ruffhouse Records/Columbia Records.

Where is God?



Now that we've explored some real stories of people who have been impacted by gun violence and read some quotes from voices that matter in our world, how would we share with others what we think our response should be to all of this?



- Thinking about Antonio Lee and Antonio Moore, what choices or opportunities in your own life might help you step out of cycles of violence or struggle in your community?
- How do you see the “crabs in a barrel” mentality or pressures from your peers affecting your decisions, and what might you do differently to rise above it?
- Where have you seen ordinary people take steps to make big change in their community?
- Lauryn Hill reminded us that after winter must come spring. What does that mean? What does that spring look like after the winter of gun violence?
- What are some ordinary things we can do that would begin to change the reality of gun violence on our streets?

Alignment activity

ALIGNING WITH GOD (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this activity, we'll help youth map out both the ways they feel they can make a difference around gun violence in their community and the areas where they feel stuck.

First, you're going to write down your thoughts as you consider these two reflection questions. Then, you'll bring the group together to create a T-chart (shown below) and share, as a group, both the areas where they feel stuck and the ways they can stretch themselves to take action.

Youth will need something to write on and a pen or pencil. You will need a large sheet of paper, whiteboard, or big Post-it notes to create a T-chart with two columns: one labeled STUCK and the other labeled STRETCH.

After writing their thoughts, give each student two Post-it notes:

- On one Post-it, they write one thing they feel stuck about.
- On the other Post-it, they write one area where they can stretch and take action.

STUCK	STRETCH

Students then place their Post-its on the wall in the correct column of the T-chart. This allows the group to see patterns and discuss areas where they feel challenged and where they have opportunities to make a difference.



SAY

In our last activity, we're going to take everything we've talked about today and see where we are with gun violence. First, you're going to answer two questions just for yourself on your sheet of paper. We'll talk about what you wrote, but you don't have to read it out loud to anyone. Consider these two questions:

- Where do I feel stuck when it comes to gun violence?
- Where do I still have room to move?

[Give them time to write. When they wrap up, give them each two Post-it notes and move on to the T-Chart.]



Next, we're going to make a big T-chart on the wall. One column says STUCK, the other says STRETCH. You'll each get two Post-its:

- On one, write one thing where you feel stuck in relation to gun violence.
- On the other hand, write one place you can stretch and make a difference.

Then stick your Post-its in the correct columns.



- What do you notice about where people feel stuck?
- What inspires you about the ways people can stretch?
- Realistically, do you think it is possible for us to move from stuck to stretch? Why or why not?
- How can we support each other in moving from stuck to stretch?



On the page where you wrote your thoughts, I want you to finish this sentence for yourself:

“Even if I feel stuck, I will still _____.”

[Give them a second to write.]

Now, if you feel comfortable, turn to your neighbor and share what you wrote.

Prayer

CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 MIN)



READ

God, we see the weight of violence and loss in our communities, and we feel how easy it is to get trapped in anger, fear, or hopelessness. Help us remember that even ordinary people—like us—can choose forgiveness, courage, and love instead of revenge. Give us the strength to redefine power in our neighborhoods, to lift each other up, and to act in ways that bring life, not destruction. Teach us to be instruments of peace, even when the world around us feels heavy. Amen.

God Section Worksheet

As you read the theological section, use the boxes below to take notes. As you listen or after completing the statements as a way to process the talk and quotes.

CONFUSED

These concepts, ideas, or points in the quotes don't make sense to me.

ASK: Who can help me figure this out?

MY EXPERIENCE

This helps me see my own experience of people, the world, God or myself in this new way...

ASK: Has anyone else had this experience?

MY BELIEFS

I'd never before thought about this idea that the quote presents:

Do you believe the quote is correct? Why or why not?

ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?

GRASP IT

Another way to explain one of the quote's main points is this...

ASK: Do others think that's the main point?

WEEK 2

Tough-minded & Tenderhearted



Series Synopsis

This four-week series invites youth to confront the reality of gun violence in their communities and imagine ways they can make a meaningful difference. The first two weeks help them understand the pressures and influences that shape violent environments, as well as the deep and complicated grief young people often carry because of it. Through these conversations, students begin to see how even small, intentional actions can interrupt cycles of harm. In week three, youth engage in the practice of lament, discovering how honest expressions of grief can open space for empathy, solidarity, and courageous action. The final week turns toward hope, showing how resilience can grow alongside pain and fuel real change. By the end of the series, young people recognize that they have the agency and imagination to help build safer, more connected communities.

Session 2

WEEKLY SESSION SYNOPSIS

This lesson helps youth explore the realities of gun violence in their communities and consider their role in responding. Through movement, reflection, and discussion, students examine the range of experiences and emotions surrounding violence and how culture, community, and social media shape their understanding. Grounded in restorative justice, they are invited to think about accountability, healing, and repairing harm rather than simply assigning blame. Emphasizing the call to be tough-minded and tenderhearted, a phrase associated with Martin Luther King Jr., students learn to face hard truths with compassion and hope, identifying safe, practical ways to contribute to safer, more just, and life-affirming communities.

Session Supplies

- Four signs or posters labeled:
 - “I’ve lived this”
 - “I’ve seen this up close”
 - “This isn’t part of my world”
 - “I’m not sure how this affects me”
- Open space for youth to move between corners safely
- Audio/Video equipment to play media for the group: [A New Story of Justice](#)
- Pens or pencils
- Paper for reflection
- Post-its
- Printed copies of God Section worksheets for each participant

Topic / Theological Lens

When you face tough realities like gun violence, you have two choices: you can shrink back in helplessness, or you can step forward with resilience and purpose. This lesson builds on Lesson One—not only naming the problem of gun violence, but also exploring your role in helping to address and prevent it in your community. To do that, you'll lean into what Martin Luther King Jr. described as being tough-minded and tenderhearted—learning to see the truth clearly, stand up to injustice, and take action, while still holding onto compassion, care, and hope for yourself and others.

This is also where restorative justice becomes essential. Rather than responding to harm with more harm, restorative justice invites you to focus on accountability, healing, and repairing relationships. It challenges you to ask: Who has been hurt? What do they need? And how can the community be part of the healing process? In conversations about gun violence, this framework helps you move beyond blame or despair and toward responsibility, restoration, and transformation.

In the Gospel of Matthew 10:16, Jesus sends his disciples into a world full of danger: “Look, I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves. Be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves.” This isn’t a warning to hide or give up—it’s guidance on how to live with both courage and care. Being “shrewd” is like being tough-minded: seeing risks clearly, thinking ahead, and responding wisely. Being “harmless as doves” is like being tenderhearted: staying compassionate, gentle, and committed to healing, even when the world feels harsh. Holding this balance equips you to engage gun violence not only as a social issue, but as a relational and spiritual one—where justice seeks restoration, accountability is paired with mercy, and communities work together to create safety without losing their humanity.

Preparing

Before the session begins, leaders should prepare both the physical space and themselves. Set up the room so there is plenty of open space for students to move safely between corners. Clearly label four corners with signs or posters: “I’ve lived this,” “I’ve seen this up close,” “This isn’t part of my world,” and “I’m not sure how this affects me.” Make sure all materials—pens, paper, Post-its, or markers—are ready and accessible.

Take a few moments before students arrive to center yourself spiritually and mentally: pray for courage, wisdom, and sensitivity, and remind yourself to maintain a neutral, affirming tone throughout. Finally, review the statements and discussion questions so you feel confident guiding conversation, managing strong emotions, and supporting students safely and compassionately.

Dilemma– Four Corners

DISORIENTING DILEMMA (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

For this exercise, you'll set up four labeled corners in your meeting space: "I've lived this," "I've seen this up close," "This isn't part of my world," and "I'm not sure how this affects me." Youth will move to the corner that best represents their relationship to each statement you read. The goal is not to debate or prove anything, but to help participants recognize the wide range of personal experiences with violence in the room. This activity is meant to invite awareness, curiosity, and connection, not judgment.

Before you begin, make sure the corners are clearly labeled—printed signs or large handwritten posters work well—and that there is enough space for youth to move freely and safely between them. Remind participants that this activity involves sensitive and potentially personal topics. Depending on your group dynamics, you can let youth know they can “pass” on any statement and simply stay where they are if they don't feel comfortable moving. As you read each statement slowly and clearly, give the youth a moment to choose a corner. After each movement, you can invite—but never require—participants to share why they chose their corner. Keep your tone neutral and affirming, thanking them for their honesty. You will end with a brief reflection, helping the group notice the variety of perspectives and the shared longing for safety that connects everyone.

Introduction for Students



SAY

Alright, today we're going to do a four corners activity. It's basically a way to see where everyone's coming from and to understand each other's experiences a little better. We're going to be talking about stuff around gun violence, and I know that can hit hard or bring up some feelings. Some of us may have lived through these things, and some of us have only seen or heard about them. Either way, your experience matters and is real—there's no judgment here.

Look around and see that each corner of the room is labeled:

- I've lived this
- I've seen this up close
- This isn't part of my world
- I'm not sure how this affects me

When I read a statement, go stand in the corner that feels like it fits you the most. You get to decide what each corner means to you—there's no right or wrong spot. Once everyone's in their corners, I might ask if anyone wants to share why they picked that corner. You get to choose what you say and how much you want to share—no pressure.

A couple of important things before we start:

- You never have to share your reasons for where you stand.
- This is not a time to debate or convince someone else to see things your way. We're here to listen, observe, and respect.
- It isn't a race or a competition.

Let's try a practice round first, so we all understand how it works: Pineapple goes on pizza.

[Allow movement and a quick laugh or two.]

Read each statement slowly, one at a time, pausing for movement. After each statement is read aloud, ask a few people to share why they chose their corner, if they want to share.

- I have heard gunshots in my neighborhood.
- I know someone who carries a weapon for protection.
- I have lost a friend or family member to violence.
- I don't always feel safe walking to or from school.
- I've seen or heard about someone being shot on social media.
- I've had to think about carrying a weapon to feel safe.
- Gun violence is something I've mostly seen in the news or movies, not real life.
- I have worried about being shot just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- Someone has taught me about gun safety.
- I've had to change the way I move—where I go or what I wear—because of violence in my community.
- Someone I know has been arrested or gone to jail because of a gun or gun violence.
- Gun violence or threats of violence have made it hard for me (or someone I know) to focus at school.
- I feel like nothing I do will change what's happening with gun violence.

Sharing our WOW

WOW MOMENT (10 MIN)



Thank you all for participating in this activity. What we just saw is that everyone's experience is different, and yet, these experiences are all connected to a bigger story about the communities we live in. Let's sit down together and ask some questions about that activity.

In this part of the conversation, we will focus on the one thing from the four corners activity that made you say, "WOW." And that can be either a good wow or a bad wow—like, "Wow, that seems messed up," or "Wow, that was amazing." Take a minute to think about what really made you pause and say Wow. Remember, this isn't about judging anyone else—it's just about sharing what you noticed and what hit you.



- So, what was your WOW? Remember, wow can be a positive thing or a negative thing.
- What did that moment make you think about?
- What feelings does that WOW moment bring up?
- Are you surprised by any of the WOW moments mentioned? Why or why not?
- What is it that you heard that impacted you the most? Why?
- Did you learn anything new about people's experience with gun violence?
- After this experience, how motivated are you to work towards ending gun violence for good in your community and the world? Why?

What would culture say?

WHAT? (10 MIN)



The culture around us makes a lot of assumptions about teenagers in general, and there are some specific assumptions people make about teens and their connection to gun violence. Let's take a moment to talk about what those assumptions are, where they come from, and how they match—or don't match—the reality of your experiences.



- Think about people who are outside your culture. If they had watched our four corners activity, do you think it would have matched what they expected, or would it have surprised them? Why?
- How is the real-life experience of gun violence different from how you see it in movies or on TV?
- If you could tell the world one thing about your own experience with gun violence, what would you want them to understand?
- What role does social media play in how gun violence is experienced, shared, or talked about?

What does God say?

GOD? (20 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this section, we will reference the [Oakland Gun Deaths](#) article. It may be helpful to read the article for reference prior to meeting with your group although not necessary.



SCRIPTURE REFERENCED

Matthew 10:11-16



INSTRUCTIONS

Before you dive into the talk this week, you'll watch this video with the group about restorative justice and ask the two questions below.



SAY

As we continue our conversation on gun violence, I want us to think about the role that justice plays in gun violence. We're going to watch a video on justice, discuss the video, then continue with our conversation on gun violence.



INSTRUCTIONS

Watch this video on restorative justice : [A New Story of Justice](#)



ASK

- After watching the video, how would you describe the difference between retributive and restorative justice?
- Why do you think we have built our system around retributive justice?



SAY

Now that we've talked a little about restorative justice, let's talk about gun violence. Firearms are now the leading cause of death for kids and teens in the U.S., and that reality hits hard in Alameda County, California—which includes Oakland. The county has declared gun violence an epidemic, and the numbers back it up. Between 2019 and 2023, guns were involved in 83% of all homicides—and for young people under 24, that number jumps to 93%.

In Oakland, the reality of gun violence isn't just a statistic—it's real life. Teens have seen shootings up close: in their neighborhoods, at parties, even at home. By the time she was 18, Aaliyah Bobina had already lost two people to gun violence and held one of them in their final moments. She remembers the police showing up late while her friend died right there. "I told her she would be OK," Aaliyah said. "I feel so bad because I couldn't keep my word." For young people like Aaliyah, seeking justice isn't abstract or political—it's deeply personal. It's about wanting their friends alive, their blocks safe, and adults who show up before tragedy strikes, not only after.

Real Stories for Reflection



When we talk about justice in response to gun violence, the system we often fall back on is retributive justice, or justice that focuses mostly on punishment rather than healing. In practice, that often looks like more policing, harsher sentences, and incarceration, especially in neighborhoods already struggling with underfunded schools, limited job opportunities, and generational trauma. Instead of addressing the conditions that lead to violence, the system removes people from their families and communities, making it harder to finish school, find steady work, or build stability when they return. The result isn't greater safety, but cycles of harm, poverty, and disconnection that ripple outward—children growing up without caregivers, families under financial strain, and communities experiencing distrust of the very institutions that fail protect them. Over time, this approach can actually make neighborhoods less safe, because it treats the symptoms of violence without ever tending to its roots.

With experiences like that, it would be easy for young people to shut down, lose hope, and stop working to end gun violence, especially with a system in place that often does more harm than good. However, young people in Oakland, like Nathan Salinas, have chosen another path, turning their pain into purpose through organizations such as Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ—pronounced courage). Restorative justice is an approach to harm that focuses not on punishment, but on healing, accountability, and repairing relationships between everyone affected. While retributive justice tends to deepen both individual and communal wounds, restorative justice seeks to make people and communities whole. It focuses on a shared accountability to heal the harm done and prevent it from happening again. Nathan, who has experienced violence firsthand, now works with other youth to interrupt conflicts early and create spaces of support and growth rather than punishment. Through CURYJ's work, justice becomes something that restores dignity, builds connection, and strengthens the neighborhood, showing that true safety comes not from locking people away, but from helping young people heal and thrive.

What these young people are showing is what Martin Luther King Jr. called being “tough-minded and tenderhearted.” To be tough-minded is to face the truth about injustice and refuse to look away—to name what's broken and demand something better. To be tenderhearted is to stay compassionate, to keep your heart open even when you're hurting, and to choose healing over bitterness. Oakland's youth are living in that tension every day. They see the harm around them clearly, but instead of hardening, they lean into care—for themselves, for each other, and for their community. That's the heart of restorative justice: telling the truth about the damage violence causes while still believing people and neighborhoods can be made whole.

Carrying that balance is heavy work, especially with trauma, stress, and systemic barriers pressing in from every side. It would be easier to shut down or assume nothing will change. And honestly, this fight shouldn't rest on teenagers' shoulders at all; they deserve space to dream and simply be young. But many of Oakland's youth refuse to give up. They find safe spaces, trusted adults, and organizations like CURYJ that help them channel their pain into action. Instead of tearing their community down, they work to build it back up, pushing leaders to listen and helping shape real solutions to gun violence.

In many ways, they echo Jesus' call to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" that we hear in scripture. Jesus asks his followers to be clear-eyed about the dangers around them, yet still gentle and grounded in love. Like Dr. King taught, and like restorative justice practices every day, real change comes when we hold toughness and compassion together: resisting harm without becoming harmful ourselves, and working not just to punish what's wrong, but to heal what's broken.

Perspectives from Culture



READ

And now my son's gettin' older and older and cold
 From havin' the world on his shoulders
 While the rich kids is drivin' Benz
 I'm still tryin' to hold on to my survivin' friends
 And it's crazy, it seems it'll never let up, but
 Please, you got to keep your head up

2Pac. (1993). *Keep ya head up* [Song]. On *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...* Interscope Records.



READ

Freedom, namely, nonviolent resistance, that combines toughmindedness and tenderheartedness and avoids the complacency and do-nothingness of the softminded and the violence and bitterness of the hardhearted. My belief is that this method must guide our action in the present crisis in race relations. Through nonviolent resistance, we shall be able to oppose the unjust system and at the same time love the perpetrators of the system. We must work passionately and unrelentingly for full stature as citizens, but may it never be said, my friends, that to gain it we used the inferior methods of falsehood, malice, hate, and violence.

Luther, M., Warnock, R. G., & Coretta Scott King. (2017). *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings*. Penguin.

Where is God?



Now that we have discussed how Oakland youth lived with violence and took action, and also some different cultural responses, let's try to explore what we believe. How would we share with others what we think God's response would be?



- What does it look like to balance being tough-minded and tenderhearted? What happens when that balance is off?
- How would you define resilience? What does being resilient look like in your own life?
- Where do you think the teenagers in Oakland found the hope and courage to keep speaking out against gun violence?
- What frustrates you about your community? How could you respond to those issues in a way that's both tough-minded and tenderhearted?
- The teenagers in Oakland were asking people both within and outside the community to see some good in it. What good can you name about your community?
- Where do you go for community, strength, and hope—the things that help you keep your head up? How could you help create those kinds of spaces for others?

Alignment activity

ALIGNING WITH GOD (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

To lead this activity, first divide the group in half and have each half stand along opposite walls, facing each other. Explain that you will read a series of statements aloud, and after each one, they will take 1–3 steps toward the center if they feel they could take action or make a difference related to that statement. If they don't feel they can make a difference, they should stay at their starting wall. Pause briefly after each statement so youth can notice where others are standing and reflect on their own position. Remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers—this is about self-reflection and seeing the range of perspectives in the room. Encourage them to pay attention to what stands out to them as they move and to the courage it takes to step forward, even a little. Use the sample statements provided to guide the activity, and keep your tone supportive, reflective, and neutral throughout.



SAY

Okay everyone, we're going to do a closing activity. First, let's split the group in half. Half of you stand along this wall, and the other half stand along the wall across from them, facing each other. Make sure you have enough space to move a few steps forward.

I'm going to read a series of statements out loud. After each one, take 1-3 steps toward the center if you feel like you could actually do something about that statement. If you don't feel like you could make a difference, stay where you are. There are no right or wrong answers here—this is about looking at your own feelings and actions, and noticing where others are too.

As you move, pay attention to what stands out to you. Even taking a small step forward is meaningful. And don't worry—this is a safe space. No one has to explain why they moved if they don't want to, but if you feel like sharing, that's okay too.

**Read the statements below:**

- I can speak up when I see someone being threatened or disrespected in a way that keeps me and others safe.
- I can help someone calm down instead of reaching for violence.
- I can help make my school feel safer through positive actions.
- I can talk to an adult I trust about gun violence in my community.
- I can be part of a group that works for change.
- I can show up for a friend who's grieving while taking care of my own well-being.
- I can be honest about my own fear or trauma in a safe space without shame.
- I can imagine a future where our neighborhoods are free from gun violence.
- I can create something—art, music, poetry, business, movement—that speaks against violence.
- I can forgive someone who's hurt me when I'm ready.
- I can interrupt a cycle I've seen over and over again in ways that are safe for me and others.
- I can believe healing is possible, even when it's hard.



- Stay where you are. What do you notice about where you (or we) are now standing in the room versus where we started?
- How can we work together to make sure that everyone is safe in our community?
- What are some soft-hearted and tough-minded steps we can take together to promote peace and work towards restorative justice?

Prayer

CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 MIN)



READ

God, we lift up everyone here today, each of us touched by gun violence in different ways. Give us hearts that are tender, full of compassion for ourselves and each other, and minds that are strong, clear, and brave. Help us to stand up for justice, to act in ways that are bold but safe, and to create change even when it feels risky. Surround us with your protection, your peace, and your courage, and remind us that together, love and bravery can guide every step we take. Amen.

God Section Worksheet

As you read the theological section, use the boxes below to take notes. As you listen or after completing the statements as a way to process the talk and quotes.

CONFUSED

These concepts, ideas, or points in the quotes don't make sense to me.

ASK: Who can help me figure this out?

MY EXPERIENCE

This helps me see my own experience of people, the world, God or myself in this new way...

ASK: Has anyone else had this experience?

MY BELIEFS

I'd never before thought about this idea that the quote presents:

Do you believe the quote is correct? Why or why not?

ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?

GRASP IT

Another way to explain one of the quote's main points is this...

ASK: Do others think that's the main point?

WEEK 3

Struggle and Lament



Series Synopsis

This four-week series invites youth to confront the reality of gun violence in their communities and imagine ways they can make a meaningful difference. The first two weeks help them understand the pressures and influences that shape violent environments, as well as the deep and complicated grief young people often carry because of it. Through these conversations, students begin to see how even small, intentional actions can interrupt cycles of harm. In week three, youth engage in the practice of lament, discovering how honest expressions of grief can open space for empathy, solidarity, and courageous action. The final week turns toward hope, showing how resilience can grow alongside pain and fuel real change. By the end of the series, young people recognize that they have the agency and imagination to help build safer, more connected communities.

Session 3

WEEKLY SESSION SYNOPSIS

This week, youth move from naming the realities of gun violence to practicing lament, a biblical way of voicing grief in God's presence. Their disorienting dilemma begins with Amanda Gorman's spoken word poem "Hymn for the Hurting" (performed by Seneca Holden), which gives voice to communal pain. Youth will reflect on what strikes them most in the poem and consider how lament goes beyond "thoughts and prayers" by pressing us toward empathy. They will then practice lament—rooted in the Incarnation, where Jesus entered our suffering—as the bridge between feeling and responding with justice and hope.

Session Supplies

- Audio/Video equipment to play media for the group: "[Hymn for the Hurting](#)" by Amanda Gorman, performed by Seneca Holden
- Printed copies of [Hymn for the Hurting](#) (optional)
- Notecards, paper, or index cards, for youth to write down their reflections
- Pens or pencils
- Printed copies of the God Section Worksheet for each participant

Topic / Theological Lens

In this lesson, we move from exploring the social realities of gun violence and our own individual experiences to the practice of corporate lament. Lament is a holy expression of grief and longing, a way of naming pain together in God's presence. Throughout scripture, we encounter people in the midst of suffering—whether from violence, injustice, or despair—lifting their voices to God with the haunting question, “How long, O Lord?” In joining this tradition, we allow our grief to become prayer and our cries to bear witness. Lament gives us space to name what we are feeling and to invite God into our suffering. Too often we bypass this step and rush to action, but lament roots us first at the level ground of the cross, where we meet Christ in our pain and are strengthened to move with Christ toward mercy, justice, and comfort.

The practice of lament is deeply woven into Black culture, as in many marginalized cultures. In the days of enslavement, song, prayer, and collective outcry were a part of surviving and resisting oppression. Those practices still impact culture today. Sorrow songs of enslaved Africans gave birth to the spirituals, and to the laments of mothers mourning sons and daughters lost to racial violence; lament has been both a cry of pain and a declaration of faith. In these traditions, grief is not hidden but voiced, transforming suffering into a testimony that God hears and that justice must come. This vast witness of Black lament teaches us that to cry out is not weakness but courage, and that communal lament can birth resilience, solidarity, and hope for liberation.

Lament does not permit us to remain at the surface with thoughts and prayers alone; it presses us deeper—first into empathy and then into collective action. By allowing the weight of pain to settle within us, we learn to practice true empathy: entering into the suffering of others and refusing to turn away. This movement is rooted in the very heart of the Christian story, the doctrine of the Incarnation. In Jesus, God took on human flesh and entered fully into our experience, enduring betrayal, violence, and the extreme injustice of the cross. When we lament, we are not only voicing our grief but also joining Christ in his solidarity with the oppressed. In this way, lament becomes the bridge between what we feel and what we do, compelling us to embody mercy, justice, and love in the world.

Preparing

Leaders should set up the room so youth can see and hear the video clearly and have space for discussion and reflection. Have notecards, pens, and paper ready, and download Amanda Gorman's "[Hymn for the Hurting](#)" ahead of time to avoid buffering. Watch the video beforehand and identify a moment, line, or idea that stands out to you and why—this will help you model vulnerability when discussing your reflections. If you decide that the youth need to hold the poem in their hands, you may print copies from this [link](#). Review all questions and activities in advance to ensure you understand them and can make any adjustments for your group.

Before youth arrive, take time to reflect on your own experiences with grief and center yourself through prayer. Remember, this lesson is about holding space and guiding youth into reflection, not solving their pain. Emphasize that there are no "right" or "wrong" responses, encourage youth to notice bodily reactions to grief, and model vulnerability during activities like the layered reading of laments.

Dilemma– Hymn for the Hurting

DISORIENTING DILEMMA (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

For this activity, you'll watch a spoken word video of the poem "*Hymn for the Hurting*" by Amanda Gorman, performed by Seneca Holden. This poem speaks to real pain—the kind of pain that comes from living in communities affected by gun violence and loss. As you watch, ask students to pay close attention to what hits them, what makes them pause, or what they feel in their chest. Play the video twice.

Here is the link for the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkX7OiqZRJQ>

While guiding the activity, encourage students to notice **one line or moment** that makes them feel the weight of this reality—something that connects to struggles they've seen, heard about, or experienced themselves. Remind them they can write down what stands out on the paper provided. If you feel like it would be helpful, you can print out the poem for youth to read along and write on. The link for the poem is here:

<https://kindredmedia.org/2022/06/a-hymn-for-the-hurting-by-amanda-gorman/>

Emphasize that the goal is not to fix anything or feel better right now—it's simply to notice and name the pain that exists. After watching the video twice and giving students time to record their responses, transition into reflection questions to explore the feelings and thoughts that emerged.

Introduction for Students



Today, we're going to watch a spoken word video of the poem "Hymn for the Hurting" by Amanda Gorman, performed by Seneca Holden. This poem talks about real pain—the kind of pain that comes from living in a world where gun violence and loss affect our communities. As you watch, notice what lines impact you, what makes you pause, or what you feel in your chest. There's no right or wrong response—just pay attention to what moves you. I'll play the video twice. While you watch, pick one line, moment, or idea that really makes you feel something and write it down.

[Play the video for the group.]

Alright, we're going to watch the video one more time. This time, I want you to lock in on one line, phrase, or moment that hits you—the part that really makes you feel the weight of what's happening. Think about stuff you've seen, heard, or even lived yourself. Don't worry about fixing anything or trying to feel better right now. Just notice the pain, what it does to your chest or body, what grabs you, and what questions pop up in your head.

Write down that line or moment on your notecard. We're going to use these to start talking and reflecting together after the video.

[Watch the video a second time.]



- Does anyone want to share what they wrote down on their card?

Sharing our WOW

WOW MOMENT (10 MIN)



Now that we've shared some of what made an emotional impact on us, we're going to come back together and unpack what we just heard and its impact.



- Think about the lines and moments everyone shared—what jumped out at you? Did anything surprise you? Did you notice any ideas or feelings showing up more than once? (This is your WOW moment.)
- Why did you pick the line or moment you wrote on your card?
- Did you feel any tension anywhere in your body—a heavy chest, or hurting somewhere else? Did you feel anger, sadness, frustration, or something else?
- Did it remind you of something you've seen, lived through, or heard about in your own neighborhood or community?
- If we tried to sum up all our feelings into one word, what would that word be? Why?
- What's your first reaction to that word? What does it make you think or feel?

What would culture say?

WHAT? (10 MIN)



A lot of times, we don't name what's wrong or sit with how much it hurts. We're not here to just get stuck on the hard stuff, but if we want to do something about it, we gotta know where it hurts first. Let's talk about the messages we see—or don't see—about the pain gun violence brings to our neighborhoods.



- How would your family, friends, or neighborhood react to the pain we've been talking about?
- Where is it okay to show pain about gun violence—and where isn't it?
- How would your friends respond if you shared your own experiences or feelings about this?
- How does social media shape the way we deal with the pain and impact of gun violence?

What does God say?

GOD? (20 MIN)



In this section, we will reference: [Charleston Church Shooting](#) article. It may be helpful to read the article for reference prior to meeting with your group although not necessary.



SCRIPTURE REFERENCED

Psalm 34:18

Real Stories for Reflection



READ

In 2015, nine members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, gathered for Bible study and prayer in their fellowship hall and were gunned down simply because they were Black. Three years later, in 2018, eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, were killed during Shabbat, targeted because they were Jewish. Then, in 2025, survivors of gun violence, including members of the Tree of Life congregation, traveled to Charleston to mark the tenth anniversary of the Mother Emanuel shooting. They came together for a service of lament and remembrance, creating space to grieve side by side and to renew their shared call for justice. Both communities had continued gathering for worship after their tragedies, but this moment was different. It was a chance to sit with people who truly understood the weight of that loss and to hold one another up while still holding onto faith.

They gathered not only to remember the lives taken but to speak honestly about the fear, anger, and exhaustion that linger even years later. Rabbi Jeff Myers of the Tree of Life synagogue said it plainly: “Both of us were assaulted by Americans who did not want us to exist, who thought violence would solve their problems.” When the Declaration of Independence was read aloud—“all men are created equal”—he responded with painful honesty: “Except for the Jews and the Blacks. That’s how I feel in America right now.” His words named what many already feel: that for some communities, the promise of equality has never been fully kept. The service gave them space to say that out loud, to tell the truth about the hurt, and to carry it together.

Naming the pain we feel in response to tragedies—like the loss, fear, and anger caused by gun violence—is called lament. Lament isn’t just sadness. It’s acknowledging the deep hurt, frustration, and injustice we carry. It’s giving voice to what is often silenced, creating space to sit with the pain honestly before moving toward reflection, healing, or action.

For many marginalized communities, suffering isn't new. It shows up in everyday life—tight finances, under-resourced schools, over-policing, neighborhood violence, and the daily weight of racism and inequality. Black lament, in particular, has long been expressed through spirituals, poetry, sermons, protest songs, and art. It's the act of openly saying, "This hurts. This matters. We will not pretend otherwise." Through lament, communities mourn, resist, and demand a more just and compassionate world.

Even in the middle of all this, we look to Jesus, who knew what it meant to carry pain he didn't earn. Born into an occupied land and living under oppression, betrayal, and violence, he experienced injustice firsthand. Scripture says God is "close to the brokenhearted." That means our grief isn't ignored. God sees it and walks with us through it.

Lament may not look like action. It's not revenge or a quick fix, and it doesn't immediately stop the violence. But it's a step we can't skip. Lament is naming what's broken, saying the hard things out loud, and refusing to minimize the damage. It's how we face reality and reclaim our voice in a world that often tries to silence our pain.

So we lament. We lament the lives stolen too soon, the trauma carried by families, and the systems that allow inequality and violence to continue. We lament the stress, depression, retaliation, and hopelessness that weigh on young people. We lament the opportunities lost and the futures cut short.

The communities in Charleston and Pittsburgh understood that before action comes honesty. Before change comes grief. They had to recognize the wound and how deep it ran. Only then could they organize, advocate, and work toward preventing future violence. Their lament wasn't the end—it was the bridge from sorrow to action.

Before we rush to fix things, we also need to stay in that space. Like tending a wound, we have to see it clearly before we treat it. Lament is that clear-eyed reckoning. And when we allow ourselves to grieve honestly, our next steps—toward justice, healing, and restoration—grow from care rather than reaction. In that way, lament becomes not weakness, but strength: the first faithful step toward making our communities whole.

Perspectives from Culture



INSTRUCTIONS

Take a moment and slowly read the two different quotes out loud to students. Encourage them to listen quietly and attentively. Read through each quote twice.



READ

It's hard, it's hard we need help out here
 So we searchin's for Black Jesus
 It's like a Saint, that we pray to in the ghetto, to get us through
 Somebody that understand our pain
 You know maybe not too perfect, you know
 Somebody that hurt like we hurt

Shakur, T., & Outlawz (1999). *Black Jesuz* [Song]. On *Still I Rise* [Album]. Interscope Records.



READ

Black faith emerged out of black people's wrestling with suffering, the struggle to make sense out of their senseless situation, as they related their own predicament to similar stories in the Bible. On the one hand, faith spoke to their suffering, making it bearable, while, on the other hand, suffering contradicted their faith, making it unbearable. That is the profound paradox inherent in black faith, the dialectic of doubt and trust in the search for meaning, as blacks "walk[ed] through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23:4).

Cone, J. H. (2013). *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Orbis Books.

Where is God?



Now that we've explored some real stories of people who have been impacted by gun violence and read some quotes from voices that matter in our world, how would we share with others what we think our response should be to all of this?



- Where do you see lament showing up in these quotes or stories? How do you feel when you read or hear them?
- Have you seen or experienced lament in real life? What did it feel like to notice or be part of that moment?
- Why do you think we can't just skip over lament? Why is it important to sit with the pain first?
- We said God is close to the brokenhearted. Have you felt that in your life? Why or why not?
- How could sitting with our pain before acting change how we respond to violence, injustice, or hurt in our communities?

Alignment activity

ALIGNING WITH GOD (10 MIN)



Today, we're going to practice lament. Over the past few weeks, we've talked about gun violence in our community and how it affects all of us. We've asked you to be both tenderhearted and tough-minded in how you think about it—but before we jump to solutions, we need to sit in a space of lament. We need to really feel the pain that gun violence has left in people's lives, our communities, our nation, and our world.

We're going to do an activity to name the pain, frustration, and fear we feel around gun violence in our community. This is a safe space where your voice matters, and no one's going to judge what you write or share.

[Hand out note cards and writing utensils to the youth.]

First, you're going to write your lament:

Take an index card and a pen. On your card, write **one word, phrase, or short sentence** that names your lament—what's weighing on your heart or mind right now. You **don't need to put your name** on it.

Then we'll collect the laments, shuffle them, and pass them back out. Once everyone is done, I'll collect the cards, shuffle them, and hand them back out randomly, so you get someone else's lament—not your own.

[After passing the cards back out...]

Now, we're going to lament together:

One person starts by reading what's on their card out loud. The next person reads theirs while the first person keeps repeating theirs, and then the third joins in the same way. Everyone keeps repeating their own line until all of us have read ours. By the end, we'll all be speaking together in this layered rhythm. You can keep your voice calm, or yell it if you need to—whatever helps you express what's inside. This isn't about being loud for no reason—it's about showing how all our pain, all our voices, come together as one strong voice. Let yourself be heard.

[Once you have finished the lament, close with the blessing below]

May this shared voice remind us that our pain is seen and known. May we carry each other's burdens with care and courage. We hold this lament with you. No one carries it alone. May we find strength in this truth and keep showing up for each other, even when the world feels heavy.

Prayer

CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 MIN)



READ

Help us, God.
Help us, your children who mourn.
Help us examine our hearts,
to face the grief and anger that weigh on us.
Help us, who are sad and weary,
not to let these lives be lost in silence or forgotten.
We do not pray for vengeance,
but we thirst for justice—true and lasting.
Help us long for healing between neighbors
and those called to protect and serve.
Help us hold fast to hope,
that young lives may grow old,
that no parent will say “good-bye” too soon.

Our hope is in You, God.
Deliver us from fear and despair.
Come quickly to help us.
Come quickly to save us.
In the name of the One who came that we might have life,
and life more abundantly—
we pray. Amen.

God Section Worksheet

As you read the theological section, use the boxes below to take notes. As you listen or after completing the statements as a way to process the talk and quotes.

CONFUSED

These concepts, ideas, or points in the quotes don't make sense to me.

ASK: Who can help me figure this out?

MY EXPERIENCE

This helps me see my own experience of people, the world, God or myself in this new way...

ASK: Has anyone else had this experience?

MY BELIEFS

I'd never before thought about this idea that the quote presents:

Do you believe the quote is correct? Why or why not?

ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?

GRASP IT

Another way to explain one of the quote's main points is this...

ASK: Do others think that's the main point?

WEEK 4

Hope and Joy as Resistance



Series Synopsis

This four-week series invites youth to confront gun violence in their communities and explore ways they can make a real impact. The first two weeks focus on understanding the pressures and influences that shape violent environments and discovering how even small, thoughtful actions can break cycles of harm. In week three, students practice lament, learning how expressing grief honestly can open the door to empathy and inspire action. The final week turns to hope, showing how resilience and hope can coexist with pain and fuel meaningful change. By the end, youth see that they have the power to contribute to safer, more connected communities.

Session 4

WEEKLY SESSION SYNOPSIS

This week, youth will explore how grief and hope coexist in the context of gun violence. Using the lyrics video *Hope* by Twista ft. Faith Evans, they'll identify moments of pain and resilience, reflect on how culture, community, and faith shape their understanding of hope, and consider how hope can fuel action and joy. By the end, both leaders and youth will see that hope isn't passive—it's a practice that helps process grief, build resilience, and work toward a safer, more just future. This lesson stands out by pairing real struggles with the transformative power of hope and joy, showing youth that they can be agents of change.

Session Supplies

- Audio/Video equipment to play media for the group: [Hope](#) lyrics video
- Optional: printed copies of the lyrics [found here](#).
- Paper
- Notecards
- Pens or pencils
- Whiteboard or flip chart (optional, for prompts)
- Markers or chalk for whiteboard/flip chart (optional, for prompts)
- Printed copies of God Section worksheets for each participant

Topic / Theological Lens

Hope is the first step in living out faith. Before Peter stepped out of the boat, he hoped that, through Jesus, the water would hold him. That hope led him to trust Christ, and that trust gave him enough faith to step out onto the waves. When he lost that hope and trust, he began to sink—but Christ caught him anyway. Hope works the same way for us. Even in the midst of horrible things like gun violence, we hold onto hope because we know what life could look like—because Christ has cast a vision of justice, peace, and love. That hope gives us the courage to step out in faith and work toward change, even when the path feels uncertain.

Hope is fragile, but tenacious. It can wobble, falter, or feel impossible to hold onto when the world keeps testing us with violence, injustice, and loss. But in its fragility, hope is also a form of resilience—the ability to keep going, to keep believing, and to keep acting even when circumstances are hard. Active hope turns that resilience into movement: it pushes us to speak, stand, protect, build, and care for our communities. Just like Peter, we may stumble, doubt, or feel like we’re sinking—but hope keeps us tethered to a vision bigger than ourselves. It isn’t passive; it’s the spark that transforms faith into action, guiding us toward a world where justice, peace, and love are not just dreams, but lived realities.

Preparing

Before leading this lesson, take time to prepare both practically and spiritually. Make sure you have paper, notecards, writing utensils, and a device to play the lyrics video for *Hope* by Twista ft. Faith Evans. Consider downloading it ahead of time to avoid buffering issues. Arrange the room so all youth can see the screen clearly and have space for discussion and reflection. If possible, write the prompts for the disorienting dilemma on a whiteboard. Spiritually, center yourself by reflecting on your own experiences with grief and hope, and prepare to hold space for youth to share honestly without trying to fix everything. For the alignment piece of this lesson, you’ll be asked to share about a few organizations in your community that are doing good work surrounding youth development and/or gun violence prevention. If you need help finding them, [Everytown](#) and [Cause IQ](#) (search your town and youth development) are great tools to help your research.

Dilemma– Hope

DISORIENTING DILEMMA (10 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this exercise, you will play the lyrics video for [Hope by Twista featuring Faith Evans](#). You may choose to print out the lyrics from [the website linked here](#). This song gives an honest voice to grief and struggle while also lifting up a vision of hope in the midst of pain. Youth will be invited to listen closely and identify one line or phrase that names grief and one that sparks hope. By paying attention to both, they'll begin to see how grief and hope can live side by side—and how acknowledging both can shape the way we respond to gun violence with honesty, empathy, and resilience.

Before you play the video, make sure each person has paper, two notecards, and a writing utensil. If you have a whiteboard around, it may be helpful to go ahead and write the prompts below on the board so that everyone will know what they are listening for as they watch the video:

- A line or moment that showed **grief**, one that echoes the reality of gun violence, loss, or injustice that you have felt.
- A line or moment that showed **hope**, something that pointed toward healing, resilience, or possibility amidst the pain.

Introduction for Students



To start today's session, we're going to watch the lyrics video for *Hope* by Twista featuring Faith Evans. This song is honest—it talks about pain, struggle, and loss, the kind of stuff that hits home for many of us. But it doesn't stop there; it also points toward hope, even when life feels heavy. As you watch, notice the lines that resonate most with you—what makes your chest feel heavy—and also the moments that spark even a little bit of hope. We're not here to fix everything or pretend the pain isn't real. We're here to sit with both grief and hope, and see how they can exist together.

I'm going to play the video, and as you watch it, I want you to be on the lookout for two things:

- A line or moment that showed **grief**, one that echoes the reality of gun violence, loss, or injustice that you have felt.
- A line or moment that showed **hope**, something that pointed toward healing, resilience, or possibility amidst the pain.

Write them down on each notecard, and we'll talk about what you shared after we watch. Be sure to pay attention; the words come at you fast. Let me know if I need to play it again.

Sharing our WOW

WOW MOMENT (5 MIN)



Now we're going to come back together and unpack some of what we just heard and how it impacted us.



- Who wants to share what you wrote on your card about both hope and grief?
- Looking at the whole song, what part or message really stuck with you—that moment that made you go “wow”?
- When you think about holding both grief and hope at the same time, how does that feel in your gut?
- What do those feelings say about how you see yourself or how you handle tough stuff?
- When life gets hard, do you usually lean more into the grief or the hope—or something else? Why do you think that is?

What would culture say?

WHAT? (10 MIN)



Culture has a complicated relationship with hope. It can lift us up and help us imagine a better future, even when gun violence and loss make life feel fragile. But too often, it doesn't give us real ways to make lasting change. So let's think about the world around you—your family, friends, community, and social media—and how it shapes the way you see hope and respond to the pain of violence.

 ASK

- How do the people in your life—family, friends, your neighborhood, or your culture—usually react when gun violence or loss happens? How does that affect how you feel about hope or grief?
- How do those reactions, plus the “crabs in a barrel” mentality we’ve talked about in the first week, affect your own mental health or how you cope? Remember: The “crabs in a barrel” mentality is when people in a struggling community drag each other down instead of helping each other rise, often because of pressure, fear, or limited opportunities.
- How would your friends respond if you shared your feelings about where you feel like you can stretch out and make a difference, or where you feel stuck in the reality of violence?
- How would the social media you scroll through react to what you’re feeling—would it lift hope, spread fear, or just ignore the pain altogether?

What does God say?

GOD? (20 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

In this section, we will reference: [Black Pastors Demand Justice](#) article. It may be helpful to read the article for reference prior to meeting with your group although not necessary.



SCRIPTURE REFERENCED

Romans 8:24-25

Real Stories for Reflection



READ

Hope is tricky. Too much hope, and it can feel unrealistic. Too little hope can make it feel like giving up. But when it comes to dealing with gun violence, hope matters. It's the first step that helps us imagine a future where people are safe, communities can heal, and change is possible. Hope lets us sit with grief without being crushed, and it gives us the courage to take action even when things feel heavy.

But hope isn't just about surviving—it's also about joy. Black joy has always been a form of resistance, from the spirituals that celebrated freedom even in slavery, to the laughter, music, and creativity that have carried communities through pain. Other minority communities have their own expressions of joy amid their struggles. Joy reminds us that life is worth standing up for, that happiness, love, and celebration are part of what we're working to protect. Active hope shows up when you stand with your people, speak out against what's wrong, or take even small steps to make your community better. It's what turns anger, grief, or frustration into action, letting hope and joy push us forward together.

Too often, our world ignores hope because it feels vulnerable, or it sees the hope of young people as unrealistic—dreaming of change, imagining peace, believing in justice. But that kind of hope is exactly what drives real change, and it's at the heart of resilience. Resilience is when grief and hope coexist within us, both calling us to deep love and faithful action. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “[we must accept] finite disappointment even as we adhere to infinite hope.” That means resilience is about facing setbacks, frustration, and pain without giving up—keeping hope alive even when things are hard. It's seeing the reality of the world, feeling the weight of injustice, and still choosing to push for something better, letting hope and joy fuel action and create safer, more just communities.

On October 31, 2023, in Decatur, Alabama, young people were already in the streets protesting the fatal police shooting of Stephen Perkins. Seeing their youth crying out for justice, Black pastors and churches joined in—not just with prayers, but with marches, chants, and public witness—turning grief and frustration into hope and action. They read scripture, spoke truth to power, and stood with the community, showing that hope isn't just a feeling; it's something you live out. And in that living, there's joy: the joy of standing with your people, singing together, marching together, knowing your voice matters.

Hope means knowing a world without gun violence can exist, even if it doesn't yet. It's the kind of hope that led Frederick Douglass to keep fighting for freedom despite decades of oppression, the hope that let Harriet Tubman risk everything to lead people to safety, and the hope that carried Martin Luther King Jr. as he marched for justice in the face of hatred and violence. That same hope—and the joy that carries it—lives in us today. It fuels movements like Black Lives Matter, drives young organizers to protest gun violence in their neighborhoods, and inspires pastors and community leaders to stand with families demanding justice after tragedy. It's the hope and joy that keep communities showing up, speaking out, laughing, dancing, creating, and believing a better, more just world is possible.

The fact is, hope in the midst of injustice isn't just a nice feeling—it's necessary for real change. It's the first step of faith, the spark that gets people moving, speaking out, and refusing to accept the world as it is. Throughout Black history, hope has been a constant companion in the fight for justice, and joy has been its secret fuel: from spirituals that celebrated freedom even in the face of fear, to protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement, to modern anthems like Kendrick Lamar's "Alright", reminding communities they will survive, resist, persevere, and celebrate life along the way. Hope and joy link generations, giving people the courage to stand up, demand change, and believe a better world is possible.

As we close, remember this: hope and joy aren't just nice ideas—they're real strength. Their power can keep us standing even when the world feels heavy and unfair. Choosing hope and joy in the face of injustice is an act of resistance. Jesus knew what it was like to live under an unfair system that pushed people down instead of lifting them up. And he pushed back—not with hate or violence, but with a love so strong it shook the world.

Having hope and joy doesn't mean pretending the pain isn't there; it means embracing it. It means believing that pain and injustice don't get the final word. There's more to life than violence. There's more to us than the struggle. And when holding on to hope feels impossible, that's why we've got each other. Community means we don't carry it alone—we lift it together. We hold the hurt, but we also hold the joy.

Perspectives from Culture



INSTRUCTIONS

Take a moment and slowly read the two different quotes out loud to students. Encourage them to listen quietly and attentively. Read through each quote twice.



READ

“Black Joy is not ... dismissing or creating an ‘alternate’ black narrative that ignores the realities of our collective pain; rather, it is about holding the pain and injustice...in tension with the joy we experience. It’s about using that joy as an entry into understanding the oppressive forces we navigate through as a means to imagine and create a world free of them.”

National Museum of African American History and Culture. (2023, January 23). *Black joy: Resistance, resilience and reclamation*. Smithsonian Institution. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/black-joy-resistance-resilience-and-reclamation>



READ

“Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

Where is God?



Now that we've explored some real stories of people who have been impacted by gun violence and read some quotes from voices that matter in our world, how would we share with others what we think our response should be to all of this?



- Where do you see examples of hope being actively lived out in the history of Black resistance movements?
- How do hope and joy connect or feed into each other? Where have you seen that?
- Thinking about Audre Lorde's quote, how does community give us hope, even when it's imperfect?
- In the face of gun violence and the pain it brings, how can we hold on to hope without ignoring the reality?
- What does it mean to be resilient? How does community help us with resilience?
- Who or what helps keep your hope alive in your own life and community?

Alignment activity

ALIGNING WITH GOD (10 MIN)



Today we're going to do an exercise that helps us think about the future—not just what we might do, or what we will achieve, or how much money we'll have—but who we want to *become*. We're going to focus on joy, connection, and emotional health, because imagining these things is a powerful way to practice hope. This isn't about checking off accomplishments or material goals—it's about your feelings, your relationships, and the ways you show up in your community. Be creative. Be honest.

Step 1: Picture Your Future Self

Take a minute to close your eyes or focus quietly. Picture yourself 5 to 10 years from now. Who are you? How do you feel? What do your days look like when you feel really good? Who are the people around you, and how do you connect with them? Really lean into the feelings and the internal experience rather than external accomplishments.

Step 2: Prepare Your Questions (The Reporter Role)

Now, as the 'Reporter,' write 3–5 questions you would ask your future self. Focus on identity, emotional health, relationships, and joy—not possessions or achievements. Some examples include:

- What does it look like to feel joy?
- How do you take care of your mind, body, and soul?
- What does your community look like? How is it different from what it is today?
- Who or what helps you feel seen and supported?
- How are you helping others feel seen, supported, and hopeful?

Step 3: Interview Yourself (Interviewee Role)

Next, each of you will play both roles: the Reporter and your Future Self. As the Future Self, answer your own questions thoughtfully. Imagine with hope the routines, habits, and relationships that bring you joy, a sense of being loved, and a good life. Think about what gives your future self peace, hope, and connection.

**Step 4: Sharing**

When everyone is finished, I'll invite volunteers to share a quick summary of their Future Self interviews. You don't have to share if you don't want to, but if you do, we'll celebrate and hold space for your hope for the future.

Step 5: Resources

There are some organizations in our community who are already doing this type of work. They're working to end violence in our streets or helping kids like you make your dreams a reality. I want to share about those organizations. If you want to get involved in any of them, let me know, and I can help you.

[Share about 3-4 organizations in your community who are doing good work surrounding youth development and/or gun violence prevention. If you need help finding them, [Everytown](#) and [Cause IQ](#) (search your town and youth development) are great tools to help your research.]



- How does it feel to have hope for your future?
- Where did you hear joy when people shared their interviews?
- What are the things that you can control in deciding what your future looks like?
- If not all of this comes to be, how can you show resilience and continue to work towards your hopes, dreams, and goals?

Prayer

CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 MIN)



INSTRUCTIONS

The following prayer is a call and response. The group will collectively respond “we gon’ be alright” after each leader statement.



READ

Leader: God of justice and joy,
Even when the world feels heavy,
We hold on to the truth:
All: We gon’ be alright.

You are with us—
in the protest and the praise,
in the pain and the rising.
All: We gon’ be alright

Let your Spirit lift us.
Let your love lead us.
Let our joy be our power.
All: We gon’ be alright, Amen.

God Section Worksheet

As you read the theological section, use the boxes below to take notes. As you listen or after completing the statements as a way to process the talk and quotes.

CONFUSED

These concepts, ideas, or points in the quotes don't make sense to me.

ASK: Who can help me figure this out?

MY EXPERIENCE

This helps me see my own experience of people, the world, God or myself in this new way...

ASK: Has anyone else had this experience?

MY BELIEFS

I'd never before thought about this idea that the quote presents:

Do you believe the quote is correct? Why or why not?

ASK: Who else doesn't believe it? Who does?

GRASP IT

Another way to explain one of the quote's main points is this...

ASK: Do others think that's the main point?