What would Jesus do?

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It’s Advent. The color of the season is purple for repentance, and the purpose of the season is to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. But this year I am afraid we are not going to be ready for Christmas. December 25th will come, but the enormity of the tragedy at Sandy Hook School will still be with us. Answers will still be partial, and the grief of a community and 26 families from Newtown, Connecticut will still be raw. But maybe, just maybe, our not being ready for Christmas will be the most hopeful thing that can happen to us as a nation.

Merchants and stores and newspapers full of special Christmas advertisements will try to remind us we have only 7 shopping days left until Christmas, as if presents under a tree can heal the wounds of a nation or somehow fill the void in the hearts of those who are grieving. According to the Los Angeles Times, 270,000 families lost a loved one to unthinkable violence in the past decade. No matter how lavish the present, it will not fill the void for the grandparents, parents, siblings, cousins and friends of these 20 children whose only mistake was they went to the same school one troubled young man once attended:

Charlotte, Daniel, Olivia, Josephine, Ana, Dylan, Madeleine, Catherine, Chase, Jesse, James, Grace, Emilie, Jack, Noah, Caroline, Jessica, Avielle, Benjamin, and Allison.

So… what are we to do?

• We can throw up our hands hopeless that anything can be done;
• We can become like the growing number of doomsday preparers, who, with walls and guns and caves and gated communities, think they (we) can create enclaves where they and their families are safe;
• Or, as the President suggested in his eulogy and address to Newtown at the interfaith service, “We can do better than this,”

For us who are mindful that we are living in this season of purple, repentance, what are we to do? For us, who know, and who, in spite of what we may feel this Christmas season, believe that…

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Is. 9:6) …what are we to do? As people of the “way”, a community of “faith, hope and love,” what are we to think? How are we to respond?

The prophet of old, when he introduced us to the need for this season of purple and Advent preparations, as echoed by John the Baptist said:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Luke 3:3-6

So...how do we in our time, and with the complexities and tragedies and lack of simple solutions, prepare? I wonder what Jesus would do? WWJD? I am not sure, but I think Jesus would suggest I start with myself... and then share in a community of faith where we can talk, and then, as Christians in every age have been called to do, become “salt and light” for our time and culture.

For me, I am going to start with a 1000-year-old prayer from St. Francis, and I hope many would pray it as well. Maybe just then, instead of all of us throwing our arms up in despair, or gun control advocates blaming the NRA or the NRA refusing to listen to common sense, or political parties just responding with the party line, or children living in fear, we may find a way and the spirit to not only pray for the healing of nations, but help lead the way. As I read the gospel, I think that is why the church, as the Body of Christ, is in the world.

So in these 7 days left until Christmas, I am going to pray, and may we all pray and live the spirit of that prayer:

**Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.**

**O, Divine Master,**

*grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love;*

*For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.*
And after we all pray for a while, maybe we will be ready to talk... and listen... and in a small way be ready to create communities and enter into conversations that makes room for the one who comes as Prince of Peace, and so we pray.

Graham
Graham Hart
General Presbyter
graham@peaceriverpresbytery.org

P.S. Attached is a letter related to the work of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Also, the following resources may be helpful to you and those in your congregation at such a time as this. View or Download Free NDIN Disaster Tip Sheet for U.S. Religious Leaders "Children & Disasters": [click here]

View or Download Free NYDIS Manual for NYC Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response and Recovery: [click here]

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More About the Response of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance

this letter is from the Presbytery of Southern New England

Dear Presbyters and Friends,

I want to update you on how we can respond to the staggering tragedy at Newtown within our Presbytery [the Presbytery of Southern New England]. As you might guess it is a fluid and changing situation.

Just 24 hours after the tragedy a team from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) had arrived. The team of four experienced persons have not only been of huge support to Adele Crawford and I, but also they have been instrumental in networking many religious and volunteer organizations as they try to respond to the needs of the Newtown community and beyond.

The outpouring of care and offers of help and support have been overwhelming. So much so that the need now is to hold back on these offers so that the caregivers can focus on immediate needs, such as funerals and counseling. Newtown has in hand already great resources for all these immediate needs. Among those resources are the strong and organized relationships of an active ministerium.

Gratefully FEMA will very soon have a VAL (Volunteer Agency Liaison) working in Newtown. That person’ work
will be to coordinate the long-term recovery which is done in large part by religious and volunteer organizations. Do what Presbyterians do very well: stick with this for the long haul and make your offers of help over the next two years. PDA and the VAL will let us know what needs arise and you will be informed through the Presbytery about what you can do.

Here is what you can do now.

- Pray for healing for the worldwide hurt this event has brought, and pray for strength for the caregivers who attend to those who are hurting.
- Give financial gifts for the future work to address family needs and to support the ministry of PDA (such as a support retreat for the pastors and first responders in Newtown, or the expenses of the response team).
  - Send gifts to the Presbytery of Southern New England, 123 Elm Street #200, Old Saybrook, CT 06475 marked for Sandy Hook, or to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance by mail, online, or phone to account #DR000188. Details are at this link: [http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/pda/become-involved-pda-ministries/](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/pda/become-involved-pda-ministries/)
- As the impact of this event reaches into every community focus what help you can give in your local community: schools, first responders, churches.
  - Create strong support communities, like ministeriums.
  - Get to know and support local mental health professionals.
  - Create a disaster response process in your congregation.

We received a touching email from a congregation in Dunblane, Scotland that experienced its own school shooting incident. They expressed their understanding and support for us with words that touched our hearts and spoke to us of the enduring grace of God. We are grateful for your prayers and your compassion.

**Rev. Dana F. Lindsley, Presbyter to the Spiritual Community**
Presbytery of Southern New England

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**PRAYER NEEDS**

**Please pray for:**

The family of Cynthia Bolbach, for peace and comfort following her passing (see article below).

**Please continue to pray for:**

Judy Parrish, Alesia Sharpe’s mother – recovery from heart bypass surgery

Rev. Steve Nagy, Stated Supply Pastor at Lely – health

Rev. David King - recovering from hip surgery

DeAnne Sawyer, Chair of our Mission and Justice Committee – health

Lee Martin, member of Board of Trustees – health


Rev. Craig Countiss, Stated Supply Pastor at First, Lehigh Acres - health

Graham and Linda’s daughter, Laura, who is expecting her second child and their daughter-in-law, Eileen, who is expecting twins.
Rev. Dr. David Uhl - health
Rev. Rosemary Gremban
Rev. Dr. Bob Rea
Beth-El Farmworker Ministry
Misión Peniel
Cedarkirk Camp and Conference Center
Dan and Elizabeth Turk, PCUSA Mission Co-Workers in Madagascar
Pastors and Educators in transition
Nations in crisis

**Church Prayer Guide for December 2012:**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Pastor(s)</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>December 2</td>
<td><strong>Presbyterian Church of the Covenant, Sarasota</strong>&lt;br&gt;Pastor: Rev. Mike Mansperger&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:covenant.presbyterian@comcast.net">covenant.presbyterian@comcast.net</a></td>
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<td>December 9</td>
<td><strong>Siesta Key Chapel, Sarasota</strong>&lt;br&gt;Pastor: Rev. Dr. Kathi Wiggins&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:pastork@comcast.net">pastork@comcast.net</a></td>
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<td>December 16</td>
<td><strong>Whitfield Estates Presbyterian Church, Sarasota</strong>&lt;br&gt;Temporary Supply Pastor: Rev. Jane Jones-Norris&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:jin7416@gmail.com">jin7416@gmail.com</a></td>
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<td>December 23</td>
<td><strong>Trinity Presbyterian Church, Venice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Pastor: Rev. Dr. Chuck Wiggins&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:cjw049@gmail.com">cjw049@gmail.com</a></td>
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<td>December 30</td>
<td><strong>Venice Presbyterian Church, Venice</strong>&lt;br&gt;Pastor: Rev. Chris Romig&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:cromig@venicepresbyterian.org">cromig@venicepresbyterian.org</a>&lt;br&gt;Associate Pastor: Rev. Lyn Olson&lt;br&gt;e-mail: <a href="mailto:lolson@venicepresbyterian.org">lolson@venicepresbyterian.org</a></td>
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**Former GA Moderator Cindy Bolbach dies**
LOUISVILLE -- Cynthia (Cindy) Bolbach, Moderator of the 219th General Assembly (2010), died peacefully on December 12, 2012, after fighting a brave, nearly yearlong battle with cancer.

A ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Bolbach was elected Moderator on the fourth ballot as the only ruling elder in a field of six candidates. In a July 4, 2010, news release, Jerry Van Marter of the Presbyterian News Service (PNS) said that Bolbach’s brief answers and her “winsome sense of humor” won over the General Assembly commissioners.

"Cindy Bolbach was one of the most authentic faith leaders I have ever known,” said the Rev. Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly. “She had a huge capacity for grace and conviction. She loved to laugh and to listen. She was the best of us in every way.”

Bolbach was born and raised in Lancaster County, Pa., where she was baptized and confirmed as a Lutheran. Predestined at an early age to be part of the Reformed tradition, she had a hamster named Luther and a guinea pig named Calvin. She became a Presbyterian when she joined New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., where she was ordained as a deacon and elder and served as clerk of session. After moving to Arlington, Va., in the mid-1980s, Bolbach transferred her membership to First Presbyterian Church, where she was also elected as clerk of session. At the General Assembly level, Bolbach most recently served as co-moderator of the Form of Government Task Force (2006-2010).

A graduate of Wittenberg University (Ohio) and Georgetown University Law Center, Bolbach served as executive vice president and corporate secretary of BNA, Inc., formerly the oldest company in the United States owned entirely by its more than 1,600 employees prior to its acquisition last year by Bloomberg.

When Bolbach was diagnosed with cancer in February 2012 following abdominal surgery, Parsons immediately called Presbyterians to prayer as she began treatment.

In an interview with PNS on June 26, during a break from her chemotherapy, Bolbach said, “I’ve been so uplifted by the outpouring of prayers by so many people. I’m astonished at how many people really care.” She told PNS that she planned to mention her illness during her sermon during opening worship at the Assembly, where she preached on the same text referenced in her platform speech as candidate for moderator in 2010.

In a June 30 news story, General Assembly reporter Meg Flannagan wrote that Bolbach’s focus from the text in 2010 was on the paralyzed man, suggesting that the PC(USA) was the paralyzed one suffering fatigue over constant battles, uncertainty and fear over the effective proclamation of
the gospel in the 21st century.

“Two years later, I have a different focus and a different point of view,” she said. “I do not believe the PC(USA) is paralyzed ... although we are light years removed from the 1950s during which denominationalism and church structure thrived, we are actively engaged and concerned with what God would have us do and be.”

“At the heart of the gospel, at the heart of each community of faith that seeks to proclaim the gospel, is not structure or Form of Government. At the heart of the gospel lie disciples like these in Mark who are willing to take risks, willing to do whatever it takes to help others see Jesus. Not just [carry] those whom they like, but maybe even [carrying] those they don’t know, those they don’t like. Willing to go up to the roof, willing to cut a hole in it.”

She continued, “Over the past two years, I have seen those disciples at work in every nook and cranny in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ... and over the past few months, I have felt those disciples. While struggling with cancer, I have been uplifted and supported by those disciples. Many disagree with me, but they have reached out to help me to the roof, and carried me to see Jesus.... None of [our disagreements] matter without disciples who are willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel. Let’s not worry about process and structure; instead, let’s pray that we will be given the faith that Jesus saw in those disciples. Let’s commit ourselves to be those disciples who will take risks, who will carry others up to the roof.... If we commit ourselves to lift someone we don’t know, someone we don’t like, we will soar on wings like eagles, we will run and not grow weary, we will walk and not grow faint because we will be helping people see Jesus. What more could we ask for?”

Bolbach became a foster parent to teenager Jimmy in the 1980s. In addition, her life was enriched by the lives of her two nephews – a priest in the D.C. area and a journalist in New York City – and her sister, also a Presbyterian elder in Washington, D.C.

Arrangements will be announced at a later date.

Read the story online →

The articles below may interest you. I have found some of them in my reading, and others have been passed on to me. Just click on the underlined phrases.

The slaughter of the innocents
Daily Episcopalian: We can't make Sandy Hook meaningful by looking backward, but only by moving forward, by working alongside a God Who is for us, says Marilyn McCord Adams.

My Take: Obama's Newtown remarks show presidents as pastors in chief
CNN Belief blog: President Obama's remarks at an interfaith service in Newtown wasn’t a speech but a sermon, says Stephen Prothero. And it is worthy of the talents of our current pastor in chief.

The loss of the innocents
The New York Times: Ross Douthat says the only thing his religious tradition has to offer to the bereaved of Newtown -- besides a respectful witness to their sorrow -- is a story and the realism about suffering that it contains.

**The power of concentration**
Meditation and mindfulness: the words conjure images of yoga retreats and Buddhist monks. But, as Maria Konnikova writes in The New York Times, perhaps they should evoke a very different picture: a man in a deerstalker, puffing away at a curved pipe, Mr. Sherlock Holmes himself. The world's greatest fictional detective is someone who knows the value of concentration, of "throwing his brain out of action," as Dr. Watson puts it. He is the quintessential unitasker in a multitasking world.

**Survey: One in three Americans see extreme weather as a sign of biblical end times**
CNN Belief blog: Thirty-six percent of Americans say that the severity of recent natural disasters indicates that we are at the precipice of Jesus' second coming and the end of the world.

**Lillian Daniel: Advent and Christmas – Can’t We Do Both?**
How do you balance all that cultural Christmas hoopla with the quiet spirituality of Advent?

**PRESBYTERY CALENDAR** (for more details, go to [www.peaceriverpresbytery.org](http://www.peaceriverpresbytery.org))

**DECEMBER**

19
Preparation for Ministry Committee

21
Presbytery Office – Noon Closure

24-26
Presbytery Office Closed

31
Presbytery Office – Noon Closure