

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette pens verses on gun violence to church hymn tunes

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [January 6, 2016](#) issue

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette creates “sung prayers” for a problem that seems difficult to solve while also spurring people to end gun violence.

Her hymn “335,609 (I Cried to God),” sung to the tune of “Be Still, My Soul,” speaks of the number of people who died in the United States from gun violence between 2000 and 2010. It was sung in November at a United to Stop Gun Violence event at Washington National Cathedral. The fourth verse includes the phrase “Give us the strength to make the killings cease.”

“I’m hoping that I’m helping people find the words to sing, to find the courage to do what God wants them to do in this world, and that’s to work for a less violent world, a world where we have more justice and more peace,” she said.

Gillette, 54, copastors a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregation with her husband near Wilmington, Delaware, a city dubbed “Murder Town USA” by *Newsweek*. She has written more than 300 hymn texts and paired them with melodies from hymnals. About half of them have a social justice theme. She sees them as tools for moving people beyond the paralysis they may feel when they hear the latest bad news.

“I think hymns shouldn’t just be sort of lofty otherworldly kinds of things,” she said. “They should help us relate, basically, to the events of this world and our daily lives.”

Gillette doesn’t write about every tragedy. But some of her writings timed to specific crises have helped people find words to lament on other occasions.

“O God, Our Words Cannot Express,” which she wrote after the 9/11 attacks (using the tune “O God, Our Help in Ages Past”), was sung at a recent college chapel service where students were wrestling with gun violence.

Its first verse reads: “O God, our words cannot express / The pain we feel this day. / Enraged, uncertain, we confess / Our need to bow and pray.”

Though written in response to U.S. events, her words have reached beyond the country's borders. "They Met to Read the Bible," written days after nine people were fatally shot at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, spread as far as St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa.

That hymn, sung to the tune of "Beneath the Cross of Jesus," includes this third verse:

We grieve a wounded culture / Where fear and terror thrive, / Where some hate others for their race / And guns are glorified. / We grieve for sons and daughters lost, / For grandmas who are gone. / O God, we cry with broken hearts: This can't continue on!

Though mostly used in congregations, Gillette's hymns have reached other settings, especially through the 2,000 people who receive e-mail updates about her hymns. One of them, Jim Atwood, joined two dozen people for a monthly gun violence vigil outside a courthouse in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and sang the freshly written "335,609" in November.

"As soon as I saw that hymn I thought, 'We've got to sing that,'" Atwood said.

Pamela Griffith Pond, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in Vallejo, California, said members sang Gillette's "We Pray for Youth We Dearly Love" outside their church in May in response to the unrest in Baltimore after Freddie Gray, an unarmed black man, died in police custody. The verse, to the tune of "Though I May Speak," was written in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen, in Florida.

"Pastor Carolyn gives voice to feelings people have trouble expressing," Pond said. "Her music helps people understand their grief, their anger, their sorrow, and also their joy in light of their faith." —Religion News Service

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