

Blue hearts

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 9, 2013](#) issue



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During the days following the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, it didn't take much to bring me to tears. The photos of the first graders who were killed did it, but so did the sight of almost any child—in a mother's arms, or walking hand in hand with a father down Michigan Avenue, or singing in a choir. It is Christmas, after all, and beneath all the noisy commercialism is a story about a child, a newborn as fragile and vulnerable as any human infant, totally dependent on his parents and on adult society for sustenance, nurture and protection.

That is one of the things that is so dreadful about what happened. Adult society failed the children.

The late John Fry used to say that social and political policy ought always to be made from the perspective of an infant child of a single, unemployed mother living in an urban slum. So now it is time to think about what happened from the perspective of the children.

President Obama appears to be committed to gun control—and it is about time. Mass shootings of young people and now little children are a new and deeply disturbing phenomenon. It is clear that one of the reasons these shootings are happening repeatedly is that the people who plan and carry them out have access to brutally efficient firearms.

I grew up in a hunting culture. All my neighbors and most of my relatives owned guns. I am in no way antigun or anti-gun ownership. But I cannot understand why a military-style, semi-automatic rifle, with the capacity to fire multiple rounds—a weapon designed specifically to kill quickly and efficiently—should be in the hands of anyone not in uniform. I cannot understand why armor-piercing bullets should be available to anyone except those in the military.

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, more people seem to agree. Public and political sentiment appears to be changing. The will to craft and pass meaningful gun control legislation will require resolve and courage on the part of Congress. My hope is that religious leaders and pastors who address congregations—among which are gun owners—will urge people of good will, of all political persuasions, to contact public officials and demand action in the form of a ban on assault-type weapons.

Two days after the shooting I went to church with my daughter. The air was heavy with a sense of loss. As it happened, the pastor had just announced to her congregation that she had been diagnosed with ALS and was resigning for health reasons and that this would be her last Sunday and sermon. On the Third Sunday of Advent, with the events in Newtown very much on our minds, this brave 52-year-old woman confronted and revealed her own fragility and mortality. It was an extraordinary moment, loaded with emotion.

When it came time for the children's sermon, I wondered what could possibly be said to the little ones in light of what had happened two days before and with their critically ill pastor sitting directly in front of them. (My discomfort was amplified by memories of my own experience trying to present children's sermons, most of which fell flat.) But what happened on this Sunday was an instance of the church being the church at its best.

The minister for Christian education sat down among the children and asked them to tell her some of the things that make them sad. The children responded softly, talking mostly about the loss of a pet or favorite toy. With gentle skill the minister talked about how we all lose favorite things and sometimes favorite people, and how we feel very sad. Then she handed each child a blue paper heart. She told them it was to remind them that their parents loved them very much and would always love and protect them, that God will always love them and all of us—and will come close to us when we feel sad and afraid and when we lose something we cherish or someone dear to us.

It was as eloquent an articulation of the gospel of Christmas as I've ever heard.