

# COMMUNITY OUTREACH

## Gun Sense Talks with Russel Balenger

Gun Sense Ministry Team

*Russel Balenger is a member of Unity Church and organizer and facilitator of the Circle of Peace Movement (<https://tcopm.org/>).*

### **Would you describe the work that you do?**

The Circle of Peace Movement (TCOPM) is an award-winning model that produces sustainable change in individuals, organizations, and communities. The Circle of Peace Movement promotes racial healing, equity, and an end to violence through meaningful conversation that crosses cultural barriers and builds authentic and inclusive community. The sharing of stories in a safe, equitable, and respectful circle fosters relationship; broadens understanding of injustice, oppression, and the roots of violence; and promotes healing. TCOPM is deeply rooted in restorative justice and Beloved Community and uses the circle process to honor and accept individual differences, celebrate the courage to speak truth, model reconciliation, and inspire hope. The result is individual, family, and community healing, and action to create and restore authentic justice.

### **Could you speak about the impact of gun violence on the people that you work with?**

We work with youth in the criminal justice system on probation by providing mentors for them and their families. Many of these children have been referred by the county and are living in impoverished situations, a life that offers little hope and no one to give them any. These kids and their families worry, and live in fear, of being seen and being shot. None of these kids can legally buy a gun, but have easy access to find one or purchase one illegally. When you are non-white you know that if shot by a white person, it seems to be pretty simple to find justification.

### **You have a sizable extended family with many young people in it. Do you see any impact on your family with the presence of gun violence in our society?**

Minnesota is number one in the nation for disproportionate minority contact with the criminal justice system and has been for the last 20 years. The statistics say that one in three Black people will have an encounter with this system.

I have 22 grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren and I pray 24/7 for their safety. Many of my grandchildren moved to Tampa, Florida, to make a better life for themselves. My eldest grandson has been shot twice and has lost good friends to gun violence. He has two children, ages 5 and 10. He and his brother have a clothing store in Tampa and they work as rappers with some demand (recently opened for a headliner in an arena). All the grandkids there are enjoying life and are school bound and career oriented.

And yet, guns still represent a troubling part of their experience. My grandson was here recently for a friend's burial, became inebriated, and shot a gun into the air. Police were called and he went to jail. I went to a hearing where a public defender said he might have to serve ten years in prison.

### **Would you like to share any thoughts about gun violence prevention efforts?**

I think children should learn about the devastating effects guns can have on their life. People who wish to obtain firearms should have to take a safety course.

*Unity's Gun Sense Ministry Team is grateful for Russel's thoughts and personal reflections. These observations raise deep societal issues that underlie some of our gun violence problems including easy accessibility, proliferation, the need for education, and their effect on people's lives. Russel's description of kids and families living in fear of being shot at any time, and the disproportionate contact of minorities with the criminal justice system, speaks to how guns are used to feel powerful to overcome that fear and the systemic racism that exists in our justice system.*

## Living Out Our Values

Obama School Ministry Team

It's important to live out our values in the world.



The service that Unity's volunteers provide at Barack and Michelle Obama School is an excellent way of moving toward two of our church's Ends statements: "Working within ourselves, among our church community, and beyond in the larger world, we the people of Unity Church-Unitarian: Discover and pursue our individual and collective work to advance justice, wholeness, and equity for people, our Earth, and all life on it," and, "Know each other in all our fullness and create an ever-widening circle of belonging for all people."

Please consider joining us next year in our work with the scholars and staff. The application process to be a volunteer at Barack and Michelle Obama Elementary School begins in April as we collect applications and background check forms. More information will be available in the coming months.

## Volunteer: Foodmobile

Keystone Community Services' Foodmobile is a mobile food shelf that visits 30 sites and serves over 3,000 people each month. Volunteers spend two hours helping people with food selection and product restocking. Daytime, weekday hours are available. For more information contact the Keystone volunteer coordinator at [volunteer@keystoneservices.org](mailto:volunteer@keystoneservices.org) or call (651) 797-7725.