

The
ARMOR *of*
LIGHT

A film by Abigail E. Disney

DISCUSSION GUIDE

www.ArmorOfLightFilm.com

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CREDITS

This guide was developed by Faith Rogow, Ph.D., InsightersEducation.com based on work by the Public Conversations Project with input from Peace is Loud and Fork Films.

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WELCOME

Thanks for joining with thousands of people across the country who are ready to change the conversation about guns in America. With your help, *The Armor of Light* can spark a new dialogue that lifts people out of the muck of unproductive rhetoric and into a more authentic relationship with others and with the topic.

Using This Guide

This guide was created to help you use *The Armor of Light* to engage members of your community in a respectful, substantive conversation about gun violence in America, our shared responsibility to protect our children and families, and the value of every human life. The goal is to use the film as a springboard for conversation that brings new insights, deepens understanding, and identifies shared values.

In these pages you'll find tips for dialogue facilitators and discussion prompts. (For step-by-step instructions and advice on setting up your screening, please see the accompanying *Planning Your Event* guide.)

These tips and discussion questions are designed to meet the needs of a wide range of audiences and situations, from faith-based congregations to secular university classrooms, and small group meetings to large community forums. That means you'll find recommendations that will meet your needs and also some that make little sense for your particular event. Just skip over those that don't apply.

In the discussion questions section, the guide offers more variety than you will be able to use, especially if you are planning a single event rather than a series of meetings. Typically you'll only need a couple of prompts and the group will take it from there. Don't feel like you need to cover everything, or use questions in any particular order (though we noted some that are especially useful for starting and ending a discussion). Stick to what is most meaningful to the people in the room.

For every event, choose strategies that allow you to create a safe space where people can speak and listen with open hearts and minds. And thanks for taking on the important challenge of opening a pathway for dialogue about the meaning of safety and security in a society that celebrates life.

ABOUT THE FILM

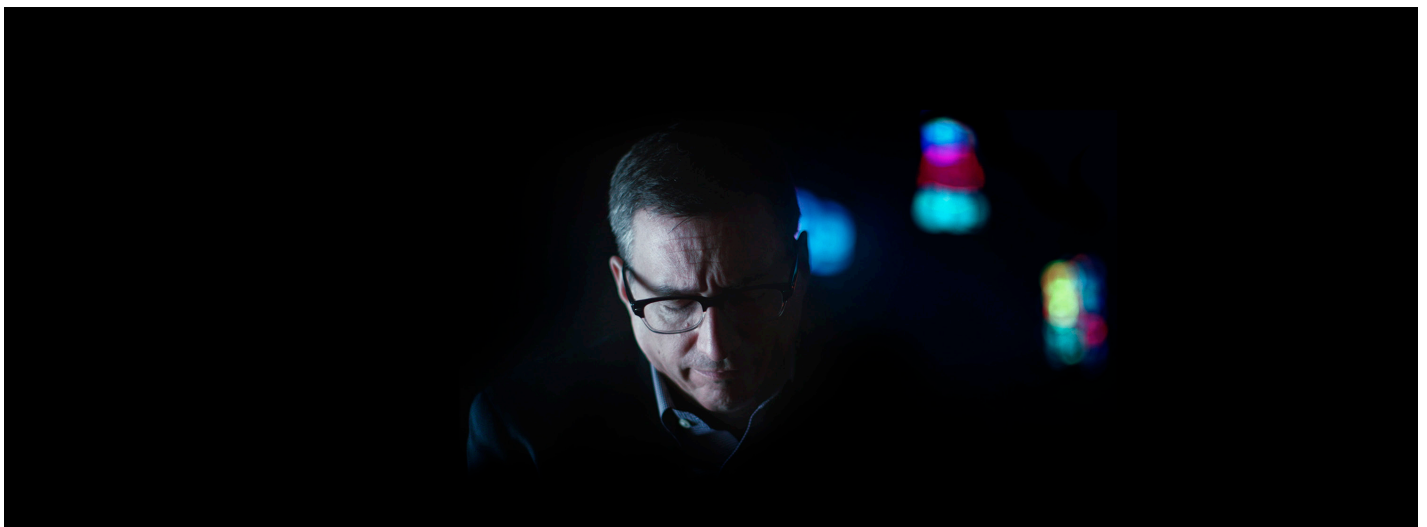
Synopsis

Running Time: 84 minutes

In a gripping portrait of courage, director Abigail E. Disney follows the journey of an Evangelical minister trying to find the moral strength to preach about the growing toll of gun violence in America. *The Armor of Light* tracks Reverend Rob Schenck, anti-abortion activist and fixture on the political far right, who breaks with orthodoxy by questioning whether being pro-gun is consistent with being pro-life. Reverend Schenck is shocked and perplexed by the reactions of his long-time friends and colleagues who warn him away from this complex, politically explosive issue.

Along the way, Rev. Schenck meets Lucy McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis, an unarmed teenager who was murdered in Florida and whose story has cast a spotlight on “Stand Your Ground” laws. Also an Evangelical Christian, McBath’s personal testimony compels Rev. Schenck to reach out to pastors around the country to discuss the moral and ethical response to gun violence. Lucy is on a difficult journey of her own, trying to make sense of her devastating loss while using her grief to effect some kind of viable and effective political action—where so many before her have failed.

The Armor of Light follows these allies through their trials of conscience, heartbreak and rejection, as they bravely attempt to make others consider America’s gun culture through a moral lens. The film is also a courageous look at our fractured political culture and an assertion that it is, indeed, possible for people to come together across deep party lines to find common ground.



Message from the Film's Director

I was raised in a filmmaking family. We talked about “story” and took apart other people’s films over dinner. To me, it was just business, and when I was young I didn’t think about making my own films.

My family was also church going. I was raised on the Bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ. But along with filmmaking, I left faith behind when I left home for college. So it’s interesting to me that when I did finally come to filmmaking I was drawn to stories about people of faith—remarkable people who put themselves on the line for what they believe. They succeed because of, or possibly in spite of, doing the unexpected. They can be contrary, they can be bold, but they are willing to take risks for something bigger than themselves.

Reverend Rob Schenck is one such person. The subject of guns was not on his front burner when I approached him about an idea for a film in 2013. I was looking for someone—anyone—from the pro-life movement who would be willing to entertain the idea that there were some logical and even theological inconsistencies in the positions that many conservative evangelicals were taking on abortion and guns. In short, I wanted to know how a person could be both pro-life and pro-gun.

For instance, most conservative Christians back Stand Your Ground laws. Those laws essentially say that when a person carrying a weapon feels threatened, he or she can shoot



Abigail E. Disney

Abigail E. Disney is a filmmaker, philanthropist, and the CEO and President of Fork Films. Disney’s longtime passion for women’s issues and peace building culminated in producing her first film, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* (winner, Best Documentary Feature, Tribeca Film Festival 2008). She then executive produced the five-part PBS series, *Women, War & Peace*. Her executive producing and producing credits include Fork Films supported films *1971*, *Citizen Koch*, *Family Affair*, *Hot Girls Wanted*, *The Invisible War* (2012 Academy Award Nominee, Best Documentary Feature), *Return and Sun Come Up* (2011 Academy Award Nominee, Best Documentary Short).

Her most recent projects include Fork Films original productions *The Trials of Spring*, which she executive produced, and *The Armor of Light*, her directorial debut.

Disney is also the founder and president of Peace is Loud, a nonprofit organization that uses media and live events to highlight the stories of women who are stepping up for peace and resisting violence in their communities.

without first trying to deescalate the situation. From my perspective, shooting first is not a pro-life ethic. To me, if the law relieves citizens of the burden of retreat from conflict, then it is stating that there are some things that are worse than taking a human life. Whether a life is that of a good person or a bad person is irrelevant—Jesus charged us with loving all of them.

So, I wanted to find someone who could explain why so many Christians are arming up these days. I called many faith leaders and got nowhere. I was just about to give up when Reverend Schenck invited me down to Washington for a conversation.

I was worried. Reverend Schenck had spent a lifetime fighting with all his heart and soul on the opposite side of every social issue I believed in—most importantly abortion. He was a founding member of Operation Rescue. To my friends he was the “devil.” Yet Reverend Schenck was full of surprises. He said the growing gun violence in our culture could no longer be ignored; he wondered why so many Americans were living in fear and taking up arms. And it goes without saying that far from being the devil, Rob is extremely nice, smart, literate, and tolerant. Shame on me for my preconceptions.

I have learned some important lessons on this journey, the most important of which is that if you approach people with genuine respect and an open heart, they will almost always respond to you in the same way. Reverend Schenck and I formed the most unlikely friendship and it was in that spirit that we went forward on this journey together, poking into the darkest of political corners, asking the hardest, most sensitive of questions and pushing back on some of the most dearly held American creeds.

Lucy McBath, also a deeply faithful person, was far easier for me to meet and to understand. She is warm, eloquent and passionate. The story of her love for the son she lost in what can only be described as a monstrous act of cruelty was too awful to listen to, and too compelling to turn away from. Her honesty, her willingness to fight against the “shoot first” mentality that contributed to her son’s murder, and her deep convictions as a Christian moved Rob to take more risks and to dig yet deeper for his moral courage.

Miraculous things can happen when people put aside their differences and choose to inhabit the spaces they share. Those spaces tend to be way above politics. That’s what Rob and Lucy and I chose to do. And I think we have all been changed for the better.

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk about this film. May it inspire deep introspection and the spirit of cooperation in each of you.

Abigail Disney

Message from Reverend Rob Schenck

Thank you for your interest in *The Armor of Light*, a documentary by Abigail Disney and Fork Films. I joined this project because I believe the question of Christians and guns is a relevant one for all of us. I think it is urgent for Christians to seek prayerful and biblical answers to the moral and ethical questions surrounding the use of lethal weapons.

My hope is that this film stimulates a desire to look at the issue of guns and gun violence from a different perspective—one of scriptural integrity and ethical reflection. For me, this issue is not about “gun control,” which is a government concern, but rather, “self control,” which, as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, is a church concern. Attempted legislative solutions, up to this point, have simply not worked. My goal is to explore this difficult challenge in the context of Christian morality, the will of God, and our personal disposition toward our neighbors.

Within a framework of Christian discipleship, I think we ought to be asking questions like:

- When, how, and against whom may a Christian use lethal force?
- Is it right for a Christian to live his/her life ready to shoot someone dead in a confrontation?
- Are there non-lethal ways to protect ourselves and others; and is it better for Christians to choose non-lethal means over lethal means?



Reverend Rob Schenck

The Reverend Dr. Rob Schenck is an ordained Evangelical minister and president of Faith and Action in the Nation’s Capital, located in Washington, DC. A leader among American Evangelicals, Dr. Schenck is the Immediate Past Chairman of the Evangelical Church Alliance (ECA), America’s oldest association of independent Evangelical ministers, missionaries, and chaplains.

Dr. Schenck holds a B.A. in Religion, M.A. in Christian Ministry, D.Min in Church and State, and is a senior fellow at the Oxford Centre for the Study of Law and Public Policy at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford.

Dr. Schenck serves on numerous boards and committees, including the National Advisory Board on Community Engagement in the State Courts. His professional memberships include the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Academy of Religion, the Capitol Hill Executive Service Club, and The University Club of Washington.

I also think it's important to ask whether it is right for Christians to look to non-Christian, secular sources for answers to these questions.

In my opinion, the most important questions around gun ownership and use are principally theological ones—not political or even legal. That's why I believe it's time for pastors and Christian leaders to boldly speak to this issue as they help form the consciences of the Christians under their care.

In talking with pastors, I often ask them, "How do you deal with the challenge of armed discipleship? Do you train your people to pray before they shoot another person? Have you equipped them to make biblically responsible decisions when it comes to whom they may kill, how they may kill, and under what circumstances they may kill?" These are paramount questions for a violence-prone society awash in guns and ammunition.

My prayer is that we as believers will be guided in our approach to this sometimes inflammatory issue by looking at the life and teaching of the greatest source we have, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Yours in the name of the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
Rev. Rob Schenck



Message from Lucy McBath

Thank you for your support and interest in this most important film *The Armor of Light*. In the three years since the loss of my son, Jordan Davis, I have found a deeper and more guiding sense of faith, and in that I have felt a deeper responsibility to preserve human life.

Since Jordan died, God has been revealing to me a greater purpose for my tragedy. I am truly learning to walk by faith and not by sight. I continue to grow and move in greater revelation of the bigger plan that God has for the life and death of my son.

It's my earnest hope and prayer that *The Armor of Light* will spark a conversation that inspires you to participate in the growing gun violence prevention movement. It is our charge as Christians to love, care for, and serve our fellow man. I truly believe that this film is part of the move of God upon His people. I feel the film is inspired by God for us to move and act on protecting our children, our families, and our communities from senseless gun violence.

Be a peacemaker.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." —Matthew 5:9

Lucy McBath



Lucy McBath

Lucy McBath is the mother of Jordan Davis, an unarmed teenager who was shot and killed in Jacksonville, Florida in November 2012. Since his death, McBath has advocated for solutions to the problem of gun violence as a national spokesperson for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. In her work as a gun safety advocate, she has been invited to the White House, testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, and appeared on CNN and MSNBC. She recently founded the Walk With Jordan Scholarship Foundation.

FACILITATION TIPS

Introduction

Controversial topics make for excellent discussions. By their very nature, those same topics can evoke passionate exchanges as people experience deep emotions and defend strongly held beliefs. As a facilitator, you can channel that passion into productive dialogue by creating an atmosphere in which all participants feel safe, encouraged, and respected.

Your role is to shepherd a process that enables people to:

- share honestly and respectfully
- learn from one another
- stay on track
- use the available time in a purposeful manner
- work through any challenges that may arise

To accomplish that, you'll want to remain calm, even (or especially) if tensions rise; speak with grace, even when you're enforcing ground rules; and express interest in what every person has to say (not necessarily with words, but with your facial expressions and body language).

Facilitators should avoid:

- telling people what they will experience, think, or feel this almost always provokes resistance.
- providing answers to participants or interpreting the film for them.
- taking sides or using language that might be heard as putting you on one side of the issue.
- making yourself the center of attention by responding to each comment or thanking people after they speak. This practice directs attention toward you and breaks the circle of the group, and could be perceived as unfair if you don't thank everyone in the same way.
- asking your own questions (except for clarification) or making interpretive comments.
- speaking more than a little about your background or content expertise.

- taking exclusive responsibility for the success of the conversation. If there's a concern about how the dialogue is unfolding, raise it matter-of-factly. If the concern is shared by the group, guide everyone to work together to figure out how to address it. If the group doesn't share your concern, move on.
- losing your cool. If you are having a hard time managing feelings, find the right spot in the agenda to take a break, go off by yourself to collect yourself, call on your resilience, remember your strengths, and remember your role.

Even the most experienced facilitators benefit by preparing themselves in advance. So...

Before the Event

Preview the film.

View *The Armor of Light* and reflect on your own values and emotions around the issues it raises. Process your own raw reactions before engaging others in a dialogue.

Anticipate potential glitches.

Plan your strategies for dealing with things that might derail the dialogue (e.g., offensive language, raised voices, a person who wants to dominate the time, or people who interrupt while others are speaking). See the "Responding to Challenges" section for suggestions.

Educate yourself on the issues.

Though the facilitator should not take on the role of expert, it can be helpful to know important facts. For example, the film deals with "Stand Your Ground" laws, which vary from state to state. Knowing what the law says in your state, or knowing exactly where to point people so they can find factual information (like the exact text of the law) can help you bring closure to arguments between participants who make competing factual claims.

For discussions in Christian communities, having a copy of a Bible with relevant passages tagged can also be useful. Without offering interpretation, you can read what a particular Scripture says (especially if someone is misquoting or mis-remembering a text).

During the Discussion

Use words, body language, and tone to create a welcoming atmosphere where people feel comfortable expressing all sorts of views. Convey the feeling that “we’re all in this together.” Steer participants away from rhetoric that seeks to identify enemies rather than work towards solutions.

Explain your role. Be clear, concise, and transparent.

Together with the group, establish basic ground rules for the discussion. These are intended to create safe space and keep the discussion on track. Rules would typically include things like:

- Speak only for oneself.
- Don’t generalize or presume to know how others feel.
- Use sentences that start with “I,” not “we” or “everyone” or “people.”
- No yelling.
- No use of personal put-downs.
- Start by sharing your name the first time you speak.

As you establish guidelines, take care not to be seen as demanding “political correctness” or asking people to code switch from the routine way they speak. Help the group distinguish between language they may not like but can tolerate and “fighting words,” which should be off limits. Define “fighting words” as language that makes someone so angry or upset that they can no longer hear what the speaker is saying. It’s off limits not because it is offensive, but because it actually blocks the communication we’re striving for. Racial, sexual, and gender slurs often fall into the category of “fighting words.”

Distribute and review the Conversation Agreement and Self-Help Tools for Participants handout. After you introduce the agreements, ask if anyone has questions or wants to make edits. Make sure that what is created is acceptable to all. Ask for some sign of agreement before moving on.

Responding to Challenges

It's common for people to respond with strong emotions when they are asked to speak about things they hold dear, like family or religious beliefs. As a facilitator, there are a range of strategies you can use to de-escalate if that emotional response overheats. Those strategies fall into two categories: prevention and response. Prevention strategies make it less likely that tensions will escalate in the first place. Responses are strategies to address tensions as they arise.

Prevention

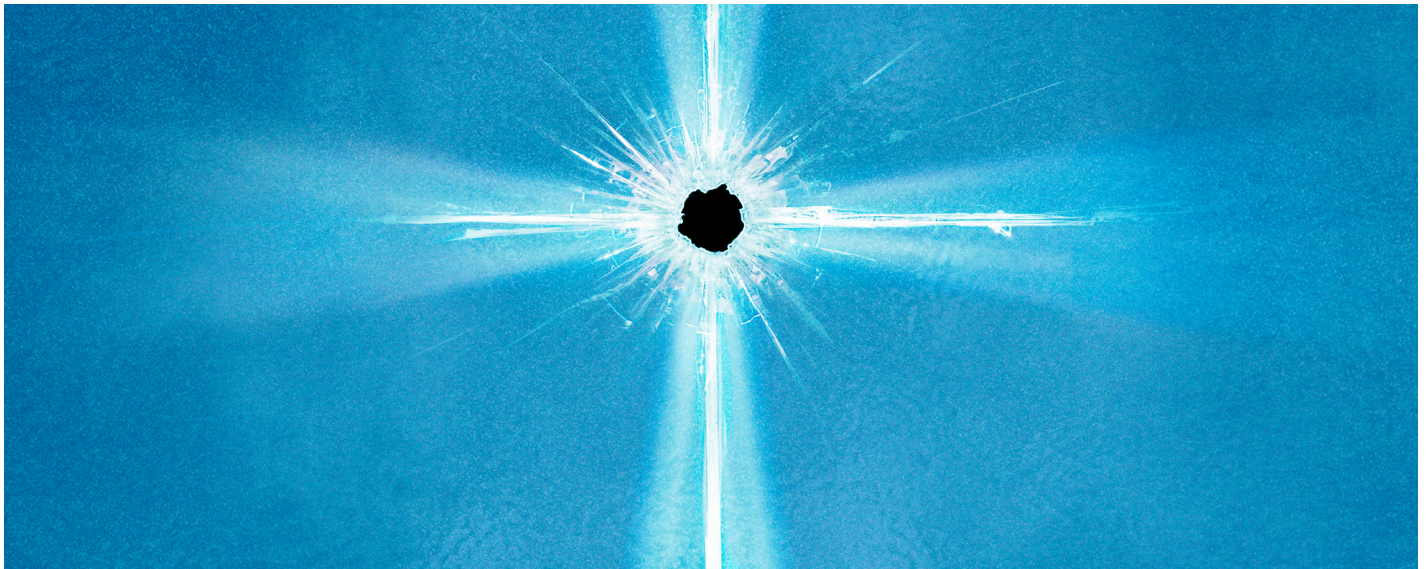
- Structure the discussion to provide everyone who wants to speak a chance to be heard. Depending on the size of your group, strategies might include using go-rounds (where each person takes a turn speaking), limiting opportunities to speak for a second or third time until everyone has had a first chance, and/or dividing the audience into small groups or pairs. You may also want to appoint a timekeeper and place time limits on speakers.
- If your event has a particular purpose (e.g., encouraging participation in a local initiative), be sure that everyone understands the goal in advance. If the discussion strays too far off topic, get things back on track by validating the importance of other concerns and then gently reminding speakers that the purpose of today's event is [fill in the blank]. Or politely ask the speaker to explain how what they are saying relates to the purpose. They may see a link that you don't and can provide the group with valuable insight.
- At the beginning of the discussion, remind people that they will be engaging in a dialogue, not a debate. A debate is about staking out a position and trying to convince everyone else that you are right and they are wrong. A dialogue is about exchanging ideas in order to learn from one another. That means actively listening as well as talking.
- Be consistent about intervening when people stray from the group's Conversation Agreement or ground rules. If you let things go with one person, it will be harder to be seen as fair if you redirect another later.
- If you need to intervene, gently interrupt with a reminder of the applicable agreement. If the speaker needs help, offer an alternative way of phrasing or engaging that's in keeping with the agreement.
- Plan ahead to convene more than one meeting to address the topic. The prospect of having more time can alleviate a sense of urgency, so no one feels the need to say everything they are thinking before the end of the screening event.

Response

Take the floor.

Should people begin to argue or shout, the first step is to call a time-out. Once you have regained control of the room, choose an action, or combination of actions, that interrupt the energy without shutting down the conversation. For example:

- Use the film, and Rev. Schenck and Lucy McBath as models. Ask the group to think about how the Reverend or Lucy might respond to the situation or the controversy.
- Acknowledge the depth of feeling and importance of the issue and pause the discussion to give everyone a chance to write down a one or two sentence response. Quick poll the group—do a go-round and give everyone a chance to say something brief (or pass) before anyone else can speak.
- Summarize the major opponents' points of view. If they feel heard, they will feel less need to shout. Start with a phrase like, "Let me see if I understand..." If people are calm enough, you might ask those most engaged in the argument to summarize what they think the other person is saying.
- Transform the core issue under debate into a question and break into dyads or small groups to discuss that question. After several minutes, bring the group back together and ask for volunteers to share what came up for them in the breakout discussion.
- Remind the group that the purpose of dialogue is to increase understanding, not to win an argument—and that everyone in the room has good intentions and is trying to do their best. If the group has already identified common ground (e.g., we all want to protect our families; we all think life is precious; etc.), remind people of the views they share. Then ask if people feel ready to resume the discussion or if they want to take a short break.



Take a break.

In instances where there has been a major blowup, change the energy in the room by interrupting it and giving people a few minutes to cool down and regain their composure. Depending on what has actually occurred, you may want to take additional steps:

- If someone appears to have hurt or offended another, pull those involved aside during the break. Work with them on examining the intention of what they said and check in with the offended party about whether that matched the effect that the speaking had on her/him. If there is a gap, work with both until the person/people offending can deliver their statement in an acceptable way.
- During the break, check in with people who are visibly upset. If someone is having a hard time controlling anger, grief, or other strong feelings, speak to the person away from the group. Ask about the feeling, what sparked it, and what's helped them to move through it in the past. Explain that you want to ensure that their perspective is heard by others and that you want to work with them to make that possible. Ask them how you can best support them when the group comes back together.

When you reconvene, start the discussion by acknowledging what happened, noting that it is evidence of how important and meaningful this conversation is. Let people know that intensity is normal when we dialogue about things we care about. Express appreciation for people's willingness to stay invested in the process. Depending on the situation, you may also want to take some time for

- speakers who have offended or disrupted to apologize to the group
- allowing others in the group to share their experience of what happened



Conversation Agreement

We will keep confidentiality.

People may want to express sensitive opinions. We agree not to share what we hear from others in a way that they can be identified, without permission.

We will participate voluntarily.

If we don't feel comfortable answering a question at any point, we may feel free to "pass" or "pass for now."

We will use respectful language.

Productive discussion requires that we not disparage others' opinions or beliefs. We will refrain from attacking or criticizing others, and instead ask questions to deepen our understanding of how they came to their views.

We will be open.

We will attempt to recognize and set aside assumptions we may have about the experiences, beliefs, and motives of others. We will do our best to be open to learning from one another.

We will listen attentively.

We will give speakers our full attention and listen without interrupting.

We will speak for ourselves.

We will avoid using generalizations like "we all" and "nobody." We don't want to assume where everyone is coming from or isolate anyone from the conversation. Let's use language like "I believe" or "I think."

We will stay on topic.

Staying on topic allows us to explore the many viewpoints and beliefs that stem from this issue.

We will do our part to make sure everyone has a chance to be heard.

Once we have spoken, we'll refrain from commenting until others have had a chance to speak.

For More Information

Visit: ArmorOfLightFilm.com  Facebook.com/ArmorTheFilm  Twitter.com/ArmorTheFilm

Self-Help Tools for Participants

Controversial topics often make for excellent discussions. But by their very nature, those same topics can also give rise to strong emotions. These strategies can help you be an effective communicator, even when feelings run deep.

If you feel cut off, say so or override the interruption. (“I’d like to finish...”)

If you feel misunderstood, clarify what you mean. (“Let me put this another way...”)

If you feel misheard, ask the listener to repeat what she heard you say and affirm or correct her statement.

If you feel hurt or disrespected, say so. If possible, describe exactly what you heard or saw that evoked hurt feelings in you. (“When you said x, I felt y...” where “x” refers to specific language.) If it is hard to think of what to say, just say, “OUCH” to flag your reaction.

If you feel angry, express the anger directly (“I felt angry when I heard you say x...”) rather than expressing it or acting it out indirectly (by trashing another person’s statement or asking a sarcastic or rhetorical question).

If you feel confused, frame a question that seeks clarification or more information. You may prefer to paraphrase what you have heard. (“Are you saying that...?”)

If you feel uncomfortable with the process, state your discomfort and check in with the group to see how others are experiencing what is happening. (“I’m not comfortable with the tension I’m feeling in the room right now, and I’m wondering how others are feeling.”) If others share your concerns and you have an idea about what would help, offer that idea. (“How about taking a one-minute Time Out to reflect on what we are trying to do together?”)

If you feel the conversation is going off track, share your perception, and check in with others. (“I thought we were going to discuss x before moving to y, but it seems that we bypassed x and are focusing on y. Is that right?” [If so] “I’d like to get back to x and hear from more people about it.”)

Sample Scripts

Sample Welcoming Remarks

Thank you for coming, and welcome. [If the group doesn't already know you, briefly introduce yourself: I'm your name, and if applicable, your position – e.g., the Executive Director of the group that is hosting this event].

Tonight we are going to view and discuss the film *The Armor of Light*. The film features two people who, despite differences in experience and perspective, work together to restore a moral framework to the dialogue about gun violence in the U.S.

Our intention for this screening is to follow their lead. Our goal is for every person in this room to walk away with a deeper understanding of their own beliefs and also the beliefs of those who may see things differently.

After the film we'll discuss our reactions in a structured way that will help us talk and listen. We are fortunate to have _____ with us to facilitate your conversation. [or: I'll be serving as your facilitator.] We'll go over the discussion process after you've seen the film.

[If applicable, introduce any panelists/speakers who will be involved in the discussion. And introduce any other hosts, funders, or key event partners.]

As you watch the film, if there are things you want to remember to speak about, you might want to jot them down so you can refer back later. When the film is done we'll take a quick break, then go over some guidelines for the discussion.

Now, *The Armor of Light*.

Sample Discussion Starter

Good evening. My name is _____. I'm tonight's facilitator and I'm looking forward to hearing your reactions to the film.

My job is to guide you through a conversation format that is designed to let you to share your perspectives in ways that others can hear and understand, and to listen with the intention of understanding others, even those with whom you disagree. I'll work with you to resolve any questions or challenges during the discussion.

Our goal is dialogue, not debate. In a debate we try to convince others that we are right and they are wrong. Tonight, we're going to do something different. We're going to use our conversation about the film as an opportunity to reflect and understand. You win if everyone in this room walks away with new insight and a deeper understanding of the issues.

To make sure that everyone feels comfortable speaking, let's establish some guidelines about how our discussion will proceed. Think about our rules as being like traffic lights. They sometimes require us to put the brakes on when we'd prefer to speed along without stopping, but their purpose is to make it possible for traffic to flow. Even though they might require us to alter our normal speaking routines, our rules aren't about censoring anyone's speech or requiring some version of "political correctness." We created them to make sure our conversation can flow.

Share and review the Conversation Agreement...



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Opening Questions

If you were going to tell a friend what the main message of this film was, what would you say?

If they were standing here, how would you respond to Rev. Schenck's and Lucy McBath's call to reflect on the role of guns in our lives?

What scene from the movie most affected you, and why?

What was your major "takeaway" from what you just saw? Was there a particular moment in the film that "spoke truth" to you?

General

The film begins with a quote from anti-Nazi dissident and Lutheran Pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." What does this mean to you? Why do you suppose the filmmaker chose to frame the discussion of guns this way?

If you could ask Rob or Lucy a question, what would you ask?

What was one ethical question the film raised for you?

Basics

How do possession and use of firearms promote or diminish the sanctity of life?

What can we do as a community—collectively or personally—to reduce the unjust taking of human life after birth?

Through a Christian Lens

Rev. Schenck asks a congregation, "As a Christian, as a believer, what are your feelings when I say the phrase Christians and guns?" How would you answer?

Guns are a modern technology, so the Scripture never mentions them directly. Without an explicit reference, what do you use as guidance to determine what the Christian position should be?

Rev. Schenck poses a "big question": "When is a Christian permitted to use a weapon in a lethal fashion to take a life?" What's your answer? What evidence or authority did you use to determine your answer?

Rev. Schenck asserts that "fear should not be a controlling element in the life of a Christian." What does this mean to you? In what ways does fear impact your life, and how do you respond to it? How does fear influence your thinking about guns?

Rev. Schenck says, "When we champion the Second Amendment over and above the Word of God, then we must be very careful that in respecting the Second Amendment we don't violate the Second Commandment." How do you see the relationship between the Second Amendment and the Second Commandment?

Rev. Schenck suggests that "There is a certain irreconcilable difference" between a pro-life and a pro-gun position, "like two opposing magnets." Why does Schenck see these positions as being in conflict? Do you agree?

Rev. Schenck suggests that "When pastors, preachers, Bible teachers ignore [gun violence] questions, it creates a vacuum and other voices fill that vacuum." He notes that neither the NRA nor Fox News are appropriate spiritual authorities, yet many Christians take guidance from these secular sources. What voices do you accept as authoritative when it comes to guns? What motivates those sources?

Rev. Schenck challenges the notion that the “best response to a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” The Bible says, “All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” In many instances of gun violence, the perpetrators were people who did not have a record of violence and were not known to be criminals. Anyone, including followers of Christ, can experience moments of rage and despondency that can lead to “bad” actions. If we are all capable of this behavior at a provocative moment, is the good guys/bad guys dichotomy a helpful distinction? Is it a Biblically moral construct?

Based on the Biblical fact that God loves all people and desires that all come to know Him, Rev. Schenck suggests that a Christian does not have the right to create a category of people “whose lives don’t matter or can be easily taken.” God values every person’s life, even those labeled as “bad guys,” and expects us to “love them as we love ourselves.” Do you often categorize people in your mind or in your life? For those you do categorize, how would the Lord want you to treat them?

Rev. Schenck cites Romans 13:12: “The night is far gone. The day is at hand so then let us cast off the works of darkness—fear, ignorance, hatred, vengeance—and put on the armor of light.” What do you learn from this Scripture that is relevant to guns and gun violence? What is the armor of light? What would change in our society if people who identify as pro-gun “put on the armor of light?”

Rev. Schenck repeats Jesus’ summation of the Ten Commandments and the entirety of the Word of God with the following: “Love God, and love the person next to you. It’s as simple as that.” How does your position on guns demonstrate that you “love God and love the person next to you”?

Rev. Schenck’s says he is concerned that “the NRA promoting the idea that the best way to solve the most vexing problems in our society is to be prepared to shoot people dead. That doesn’t sit well with me as a Christian moral vision.” How do you respond?

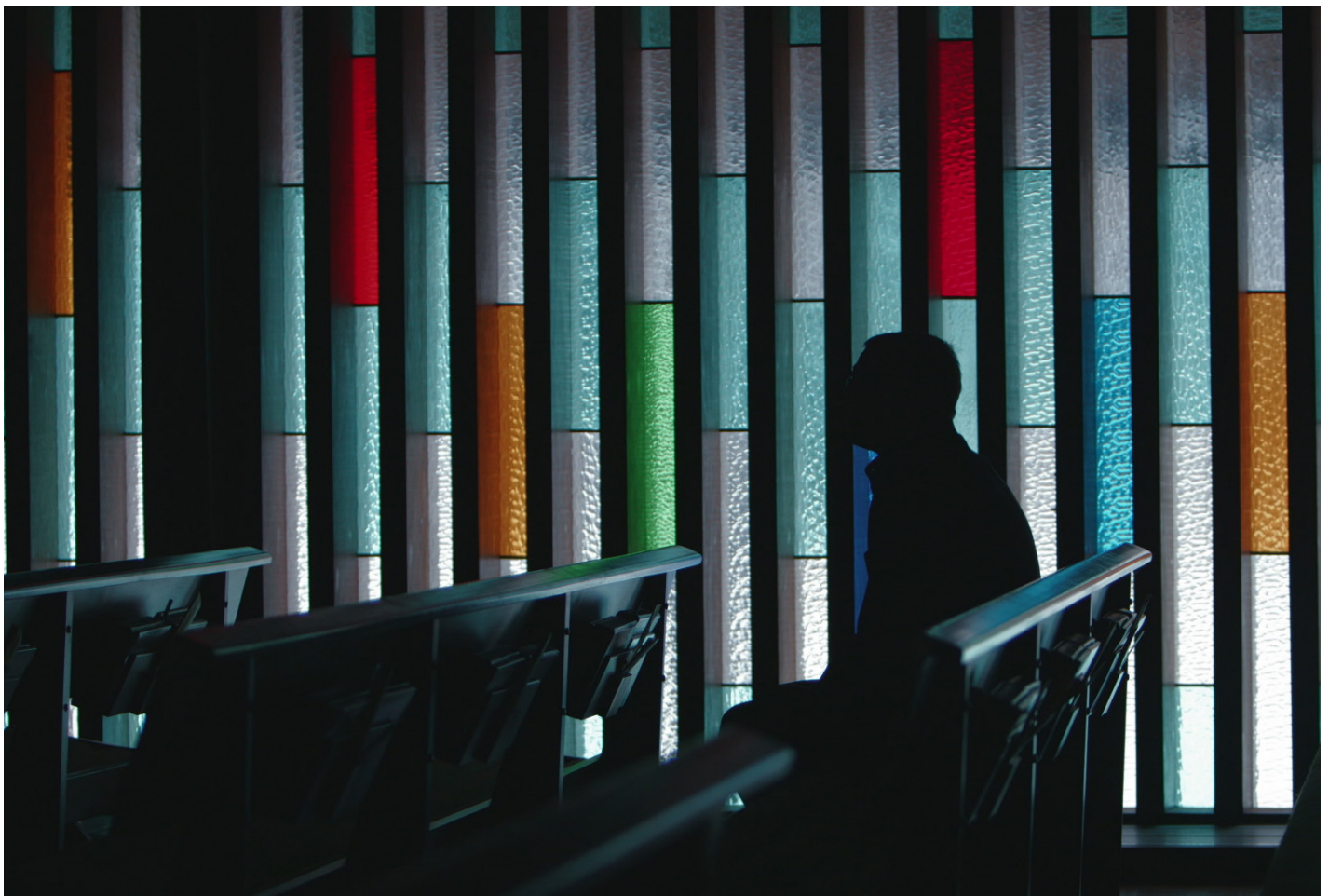
One of the women in the film reminds us that in church teaching, “We are not to be the judge, the jury, and in some cases the executioner.” What are the implications of this belief for Stand Your Ground laws?

Lucy McBath challenges those who argue that guns are essential for protection. She says, “Instead of looking to God righteously as the protector, we have replaced God with our guns as the protector.” Another woman expands this challenge saying,

“I don’t think the Bible calls for us to be active warriors. And to me that’s what carrying a gun is doing. It’s saying, ‘I’m ready for war. I’m a warrior.’ Ephesians tells us to have our full armor on, and our full armor is in the Lord Jesus Christ and our sword is the Bible—the Word of God.”

How do you understand Christian teachings on the subject of protection? Do you agree that “we have replaced God with our guns”? If you disagree, how would you explain your position to Lucy?

Rev. Schenck says that his faith tradition teaches that, “in any confrontation, if given the opportunity to safely retreat, you retreat” because you aren’t supposed to “prefer another life above your own... even if it’s a criminal.” McBath concurs, noting that “Jesus never advocated violence. Despite how bad it gets, we’re never to advocate violence. Ever... You do everything you possibly can to retreat before you use that violence. Yes, you have a right to protect yourself but God did not give you the right just to shoot to kill because you think that you’re threatened or because you’re empowered ‘cause you have a gun. That’s not the will of God.” In your view, what are the implications of these moral teachings about retreat and non-violence for Stand Your Ground laws?



The Lenses We Use

Schenck suggests that asking “Do guns make us safer?” is the wrong question. Instead he suggests that we ask, “What’s moral [about our current approach to guns and violence]?” Does your thinking change in any way when you look through the lens of “ethics” rather than “protection” or “rights”?

Rob says, “There are many people... who are arming themselves because they’re fearful. Terribly fearful about potential or imagined threats to them, to their families, even to their churches.” What role does fear play in your perspective on gun issues? In what ways is fear a useful lens and in what ways does it distort our thinking?

Rob says, “In my community we talk about the value of every human life. Usually that’s in the context of abortion.” What happens when we apply our beliefs about the value of life to our views on the place of guns in our lives?

Lucy says that before her son was murdered, “I was one of those people that when I would hear about shootings and gun violence and I would pray for the people, but I never thought it would ever happen to us.” And Rob isn’t really jarred into thinking about gun violence until a mass shooting forces his neighborhood into lockdown. Have you or anyone you know been affected by gun violence? If yes, did it change your perspective on the issue, and if so, how? What’s your (or their) story?

How do labels such as “gun control,” “gun rights,” and “pro-gun,” shape the debate and the way people think about the issues? How do the terms that people use to frame this debate accurately or inaccurately describe your positions? What would accurately describe them?

Rev. Schenck says, “I’ve asked pastors where and how they get their information on gun issues. Most tell me FOX News or the NRA.” Where do you get information relevant to your stance on guns? What role do news organizations play in shaping beliefs about the need for guns? Given that news, by definition, only reports things that are out of the ordinary, how might watching the news distort your perspective of danger in the world?

Exploring Support for Guns

When describing the need for guns, the theme of protection often comes up. One man talks about preventing a child from being abducted and another says he wants to be prepared to take out a shooter who might show up at his church.

- What do you think is the origin of these fears?
- Have you, personally, ever been in a situation with an active shooter or witnessed a child being abducted?
- What is the likelihood that you would ever encounter such scenarios? How do you determine the likelihood?
- Rev. Schenck says that he believes it's unlikely that a "good guy" with a gun could stop an active shooter "in a violent confrontation when bullets are flying. Drawing a bead and firing the silver bullets and ending the melee and everything comes back to peace and quiet does not comport with reality." How do you respond to his perspective?

Rob describes a mental exercise:

"I mentally put myself in that school room at Sandy Hook and thought about those children and the sound, the crack of that weapon is so intimidating, so overwhelming, so frightening, and I thought of those bullets flying rapid fire at children and that thought wouldn't leave me."

Give yourself a moment to repeat his exercise. What's your takeaway from that experience?

When Rev. Schenck introduces the gun discussion to his colleagues, they respond with these arguments:

- "It's like outlawing our automobiles, there's more killed by automobiles than there are guns, but we don't outlaw those."
- "If we take guns away, people are just gonna kill people with something else."
- "Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

From a moral perspective, are you persuaded by these arguments? Why or why not?

Attorney John Phillips describes getting a Florida carry permit:

“You had to show that you could... use it safely. And then when you were ready to fire [the examiner] handed it to you—it was his gun—you put it in the hole and you pulled the trigger. And that was you showing you’re proficient with a gun. That’s it.”

Are you comfortable that this level of training meets the ethical obligations of people who carry lethal weapons? What level of training do you think should be required to carry a weapon?

Rev. Schenck questions the truth of Wayne LaPierre’s assertion that, “Firearms in the hands of good people save lives.” From Rev. Schenck’s perspective, “bad people do good things and good people can do bad things.” How do you reconcile these viewpoints?

Rev. Schenck raises concerns that a culture overrun by fear could lead to violence. He comments: “I sometimes wonder about the ethical dimensions of... having a constant defensive posture... And the gun is almost an invitation to give into the temptation of fear.” Contrast this to Wayne LaPierre speaking at an NRA convention and arguing that we need unfettered access to guns because “we know in the world that surrounds us there are terrorists, home invaders, drug cartels, carjackers, knockout gamers, rapers, haters, campus killers, airport killers, shopping mall killers...” Which view is closer to your own perspective? How would you explain why you feel this way?

When abortion provider, Dr. Bernard Slepian, was shot to death by a pro-life activist with a high-powered rifle, Rev. Schenck said he

“was stunned. In fact, the widow of Dr. Slepian actually blamed me in part. She felt maybe that I had contributed with my language to inciting the violence against her family. That was very, very hard to hear. I thought no one in our world would ever perpetrate such a thing. I was naive. And then to see that they would left me in doubt. Our own people are capable of this. People under my spiritual care are capable of this. That probably means I’m capable of it.”

What does it feel like to acknowledge that we are capable of violence? Of error? Of anger? How should the acknowledgment of these human traits factor into our position on guns? If we grant individuals the right to use guns, what is the corresponding individual responsibility for the collective impact of our decisions and actions when the societal outcome is bad?

What leads Lucy and Rob to question the morality of Stand Your Ground laws? What moral principles guide your thinking on the subject?

Looking through a lens of ethics, what are the possible responses to Lucy’s concern that in Stand Your Ground situations, racism—intentional or not—makes people of color like her son into targets?

What We Teach Our Children

Lucy McBath's attorney, John Phillips, recalls, "Growing up, the Second Amendment was somewhat sacred." Later, another man says that guns are "in our DNA." Growing up, what were you taught about guns? What did you learn about the meaning of the word "sacred"? Do you think it applies to guns?

One woman notes that "you don't have to have the same conversations with a white male that you have to have with a black male. The fear is always in the back of your mind that your son may get shot..." What sorts of conversations about safety do you have with your children (or did you parents have with you)? What do you say to them about guns? What do you teach them about their role in creating a society that values life?

How is listening with your heart different than listening with your head? When you hear stories about people like Lucy, who have lost children to gun violence, do you tend to listen more with your heart or with your head? How about when you hear political arguments? Would your thinking change at all if you listened to grieving parents with your head and political leaders with your heart?



Finding Common Ground

Lucy and Rob come together across an ideological divide to find common ground. What do you think allows them to do that? What do you see as possible in bridging divides on gun-related issues?

What questions do you have for those who see this issue differently from you? Think about how you can phrase your question as genuine with the intent to understand, rather than purely an attempt to persuade.

Lucy's gun violence prevention advocacy work comes from a desire to provide protection for children that wasn't provided to her son Jordan. In contrast, her attorney's response to a threat to his family (when his house was broken into) was to buy a gun. How might the shared desire to protect children and families increase empathy, understanding, and the chances of finding common ground?

Rev. Schenck says, "I think sometimes conviction can turn quickly into contempt for others." Have you ever seen this happen? If so, what were the circumstances? Were there any efforts made to re-focus on valuing all human life?

One man asks, "How can we defend our families without the right to guns?" Putting aside the gun issue, what are possible answers? Name some ways to defend one's family without owning guns.

Identifying it as the elephant in the room, Rob says, "you can't ignore the racial dimensions to this whole subject." What do you see as the role of racism in the debates over gun policy?

Lucy McBath questions Stand Your Ground laws because she believes that they are based on "a perception of fear... That is the ambiguity, that is the problem with the law... How have we gotten so far with the laws that the law doesn't value human life?" What are some things we might be able to do in our community to diminish fear and help make it feel safer for all?

Rob seems surprised to feel more aligned with members of a black church than with his home constituency. Why might predominantly black churches have a different take on gun issues than predominantly white churches?

Rob acknowledges that his “natural affinity” is for very conservative Tea Party Republicans. With whom do you have a natural affinity? Under what circumstances do you reach out to others to discuss important issues? What makes it hard to reach outside our natural affinities to connect with others? How can communities help people to overcome those obstacles?

Rob offers a warning: “Maybe the greatest temptation for me over the years was to rely on simple answers. And simple answers can be like heroin in your vein. In an instant you’re relieved of all that tension. But in the end it’s very harmful, very dangerous, can be fatal.” How do we get past “simple answers”?

Lucy McBath says that she can work toward change without yet seeing it, the same way she can have faith in God without seeing Him. Putting aside Lucy’s mission, which you may or may not share, what is your own personal hope for your community on this issue? Your prayer to God for your community?

Closing Questions

Complete one or both of these sentences:

- Rev. Schenck’s story is important to me because...
- Lucy McBath’s story is important to me because...

What is one thing you learned from this discussion (or the film) that you wish everybody knew? What do you think would change if everyone knew it?

Today (or this evening) I learned that _____.
Now that I know, I will _____.

How, if at all, has the film or discussion changed or broadened your thinking about guns? Can you identify any shared values between different perspectives that you didn’t see before?

Selected Scripture

Here are a few Bible passages you can use to begin a study of moral teachings related to guns. Ask: What lessons does this offer about gun ownership (or assertions like, “the only way to defeat a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun”).

On the Value of Every Human Life

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. [Genesis 1:27]

As it is, there are many members yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. [I Cor. 12:20-21]

And since Jesus told us how highly God values human life: Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. [Luke 12:6]

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. [Jeremiah 1:5]

Use of Violence

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” [Matthew 26:51-53]

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord. [Isaiah 31:1]

If a thief is found breaking in, and is beaten to death, no bloodguilt is incurred; but if it happens after sunrise, bloodguilt is incurred. [Ezekiel 22:23]

And Jesus said to them, “But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.” [Luke 22:36]

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