

'Bringing an end to violence'

Church honors victims, reveals action plan



Candles symbolize the city's homicide victims. "Each has a story. Today we remember them for their life, not for their tragedy," said Bishop John R. Schol. (Sun photo by Glenn Fawcett / December 7, 2007)

By Sumathi Reddy | Sun reporter
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The names filled two scrolls at the front of John Wesley United Methodist Church yesterday morning.

Bishop John R. Schol slowly began to read some of them to the hundreds of congregants filling the pews.

"Ty'wonde Jones, age 13," he said, pausing.

"Terrance Regan, 16 years old.

"Virginia Jones, 81.

"Troy Lamont Chesley Sr., a detective in the Baltimore City Department of Police."

Each was a memory now, a life lost this year in the city's relentless cycle of homicides. "Each has a name," Schol said. Each has a story. Today we remember them for their life, not for their tragedy. Today we remember them as children of God."

There were 275 homicides in Baltimore City last year. As of Friday, there have been 269 homicides this year, compared with 252 at the same time last year.

Hundreds of members of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of the United Methodist Church gathered to pay homage to the city's homicide victims of past and present, while vowing to dedicate themselves to the cause of reducing violence in Baltimore.

Schol announced an action plan that will include free camp scholarships for children who have lost a sibling or parent to violence; free counseling services for affected families; a gun give-back program; and a "Shalom Zone" training program to bring together groups to address issues of violence and poverty.

"United Methodism commits to a long legacy as partners with the residents, businesses, social institutions, government and other denominations in bringing an end to violence, creating Shalom Zones where hope emerges out of the ashes of violence and the destruction of poverty," Schol said. "Today the United Methodist Church commits to stand with the families who have been victimized by murder and the good residents of Baltimore who are determined to create a city of hope."

The homicide rate accelerated earlier in the year, setting the city on pace to exceed 300 for the first time this decade. The pace has slowed over the past few months, but the numbers are large enough to have alarmed community groups and residents, and spurred them to take action, though not always in the numbers or in the way anticipated.

In September, a group of women called Sisters Saving the City gathered on corners to pray for an end to violence. The goal of putting 10,000 people on Baltimore's streets fell short. Instead, hundreds of participants occupied 20 corners.

In October, what was billed as a "historic lie-in event" to attract at least one person to represent each of the 246 victims up to that point ended up with closer to 175 people.

And in November, a vigil marking the one-year anniversary of the fatal shooting of 16-year-old Shawn Tiller in East Baltimore was interrupted by gunshots around the corner as

another person was shot.

Yesterday's event drew a diverse audience from congregations that make up the Baltimore-Washington Conference. Marvin L. "Doc" Cheatham, president of the NAACP's Baltimore chapter, and City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake were among those who attended the service.

But it was more than just a vigil to honor the city's victims, more than just a service to remember and pray for them.

The church's steps of action are part of a long-term plan developed over the past year by a team of church leaders. A study found that from 1996 to 2007, United Methodist membership has decreased 14 percent and worship attendance has fallen nearly 9 percent.

The plan set forth yesterday includes starting eight congregations, working to get every congregation to adopt a school and starting a fund with a goal of raising \$15 million to transform the city's ministries.

The two-hour service was followed by a three-block walk to 3400 Clifton Ave., the site of the fatal shooting of Neil Rather, 18, on May 29.

There, a group of about 60 people, led by Schol, prayed as freezing rain fell.

Later in the day, Schol and a smaller group visited the scenes of two 2006 homicides.

The group traveled to Park Heights to honor the memory of Jamelle Carter, 18, a college student and nephew of a Methodist pastor who died in September last year while visiting a childhood friend. From there they went to the 600 block of Aisquith St. to honor Robert King Jr., 38, who was killed in June last year.

Relatives of both victims spoke at the morning church service.

"We miss him when we play softball," said Wayne Carter, 17, one of Carter's cousins. "We miss him on Thanksgiving, Christmas and his birthday. We miss him as part of our family and an only child to his mother.

"There is a hole in our lives," he added. "It makes no sense to us that a man with a gun took his life, his beautiful life."

Tammy Webster, 34, spoke of King, her cousin. "We take comfort in knowing that one day we will see him in a better place," she said.

Following their comments, Webster, Wayne Carter and dozens of other families who have lost loved ones were invited to the front of the church.

One by one, they lit candles in memory of a life lost, a man or woman, mother or father

or child, fallen victim to violence.

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