

Churches remember murder victims, pledge shalom



Family members of murder victims light candles during a service of remembrance at John Wesley United Methodist Church in Baltimore. A UMNS photo by Christine Kumar.

By Melissa Lauber*

December 18, 2007 | BALTIMORE (UMNS)

Three days after Ty'wonde Jones, 13, was stabbed to death last month, his blood still stained the grass and dirt in northwest Baltimore.

Police identified Ty'wonde as the 268th of 269 homicides in the city this year, the 28th under the age of 18. Family remembered

Ty'wonde as a boy who loved to read Harry Potter books. They said he had begun to hang out with a different group of friends this year in the seventh grade.

For the more than 300 United Methodists who gathered Dec. 7 at John Wesley United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Ty'wonde was a name read and honored by Bishop John R. Schol. He was a child of God.

He is among the reasons United Methodists have committed to moving outside of the church doors and into the streets of Baltimore.



The Rev. Alfreda Wiggins prays for victims and their families at the site of a recent murder. A UMNS photo by Melissa Lauber.

"What worth are we as a church if all we can do is sing and pray?" asked the bishop, who challenged those present to practice authentic discipleship. "God doesn't want us coming to him crying, 'Lord, Lord.' God wants to see us in the marketplace, in the streets and with the children of God."

Offering hope

Historically, Baltimore is the birthplace of American Methodism, but today it has the second highest murder rate in the nation and is "struggling to keep its head above the water," said the Rev. Patricia Johnson of Ames United Methodist Church, who offered the opening prayer.

The city's 61 United Methodist churches exist to give people hope, Johnson said.

That task isn't always easy, said the Rev. Wanda Duckett, pastor of Monroe Street United Methodist Church, located in a neighborhood with the highest rates of HIV/AIDS and heroin addiction in the United States.

At summer camp this year, Duckett heard children pour out their sorrow, fascination and fear about a 15-year-old friend whose throat was slit July 10.

"Violence is a symptom of spiritual disease," Duckett said. "I'm excited about the people of faith coming together with this common focus."

Several community and civic leaders spoke out at the worship service about the importance of the church partnering with others to bring about meaningful change.

"You know where the answers come from. You're looking up to the right place," said City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, calling churches "the rock on which the city stands."



Family members seek healing at the Dec. 7 service, which drew about 300 worshipers. A UMNS photo by Christine Kumar.

Forging a partnership

Schol and other church leaders already have begun to forge this partnership. "The United Methodist Church commits to a long legacy as partners with the residents, businesses, social institutions, government and other denominations in bringing an end to violence and creating zones of shalom where hope emerges out of the ashes of violence and the destruction of property," he said.

To illustrate the urgency, nine churches met with national instructors to receive training for the creation of six Shalom Zones in Baltimore. The

zones will address issues of community development one neighborhood at a time.

In addition, the Board of Child Care and the conference's camping program announced they would provide free camping experiences to children who have lost family members to violence.

Pastoral counseling for those affected by violence will be offered, efforts to encourage people to turn in their guns are under way, and prayer is being sought in all United Methodist churches to undergird these ministries.

The measures are part of a comprehensive 10-point action plan that conference leaders announced in November called "Hope for the City: Adventure Pathways towards Transformation." Its long-term initiatives include creating seven new churches in Baltimore, partnering with local schools and creating a \$15 million fund to invest in Baltimore's future.

Seeking shalom

Schol said the foundation for all of these new ministries is the passage from Jeremiah 29:7: "Seek the shalom of the city where I have sent you, for in its shalom, you will find your shalom."

"God's shalom is the life-changing work of the spirit, transforming people and neighborhoods into prosperous, healing, safe communities in which all become one and one becomes all," the bishop said. In God's shalom, when one is hungry, all are hungry; when one is homeless, all are homeless; and when one is murdered, all lose life.

"We are all interconnected. We have the power to join together with God to cast out the darkness," said the Rev. Joan Carter-Rimbach of First United Methodist Church in Hyattsville, whose nephew Jamelle Carter, 18, was murdered in Baltimore in 2006.

Jamelle was remembered during the worship service and later that night as Schol and a

handful of others traveled to the site of his and other murders.

"I hope we're moving beyond words now," said Carter-Rimbach. "My prayer is that we will make a difference. Each of us needs to do whatever we can to be the light."

*Lauber is the editor of the UMConnection, the newspaper of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

News media contact: Marta Aldrich, Nashville, Tenn., (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org.