

## **Church's Shalom Program to Mark 10th Anniversary**

by Frances S. Smith

Ten years after a civil uprising rocked the Los Angeles area, the United Methodist Church's response to the tragedy continues to bear fruit in communities across the United States and in the African countries of Zimbabwe and Ghana.

Following the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers charged in the beating of black motorist Rodney King, people took to the streets to vent their frustration. The resulting destruction, coupled with years of poverty and neglect, cried out for a response.

The United Methodist Church, at its 1992 General Conference, created a "Shalom Zone" in Los Angeles. It also expressed the hope that the Shalom Zone concept would be a prototype for "proactive ministry" in other places. A National Shalom Committee was formed, and the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries was assigned responsibility for the national Shalom Initiative. It offers to annual conferences and local sites initial training, start-up funding, technical assistance, a newsletter, brochures and videos, and biennial Shalom Summits.

The program, now known as Communities of Shalom, focuses on geographic areas where churches collaborate with local organizations, businesses, institutions and residents to transform the conditions that affect people's lives – to change negative forces within the community to positive actions for shalom (peace).

This year, the 10th anniversary of the General Conference action, "Shalom Summit VI" will bring together leaders from most of the 40 annual conferences that are participating in the program. They will gather at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Washington Dec. 12-15.

Through Communities of Shalom, United Methodists and others are serving the homeless, helping troubled youth, providing job services and doing countless other ministries in urban and rural communities around the United States. In 1999, church leaders in Zimbabwe established the first Shalom community outside the United States, in an impoverished suburb of Mutare known as Sakubva Township, where crime and HIV/AIDS are prevalent.

Shalom ministries are under way in about 40 U.S. annual conferences, Zimbabwe and Ghana. Inquiries about the program also have been received from parts of Europe and the Philippines, says Lynda Byrd, who staffs the Shalom initiative as assistant general secretary/director of development for the Board of Global Ministries.

### ***Where it began***

A visitor to Los Angeles would find some of the first Shalom communities still active in South Central Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, Koreatown, Long Beach and the East Valley.

"When the Shalom Zones were designated, the clusters began to meet and develop plans for effectively impacting their communities," says Jim Conn, urban strategist for the California-Pacific Annual (regional) Conference. "Some plans were realized more than others, and some never developed."

Conn points to four that he terms "the strongest outgrowth of the Shalom program in the Los Angeles area."

Zaferia Shalom Zone Agency, operated by Wesley Church in Long Beach, has linked Wednesday morning Bible study with its food ministry. People waiting in line for food are invited to engage in Bible study led by the Rev. Cherrye Cunnigan.

"We've had some interesting discussions," she says. Some 25 percent of those in the class have started attending Sunday worship, and 15 percent have joined the church. New members help in the kitchen, serve as ushers and greeters, and take leadership in church committees. From an all-white congregation, the church has become racially integrated.

"Yes, there has been controversy," Cunnigan says, "but we've taken time to discuss differences. New members have the same rights as old members."

CASE (Creating a Safe Environment) is the center's domestic violence prevention and education program, run in partnership with Interval House. To reach the African-American community, CASE is going through the faith community. Workshops for pastors explain what domestic violence is, how to discuss it with victims and resources to prevent recurrence. The 40-hour program, "Domestic Violence 101," uses state resources. Eventually, two lay people from each congregation will be trained to serve as resources.

"We've been able not only to provide services but to offer a church home for people in the community who would not have come to worship otherwise," Cunnigan says. "The community is calmer, less violent."

Rakestraw Community Education Center in South Central Los Angeles illustrates a major principle of Shalom philosophy. "We provide a place where members of the community can come together, assess the community's assets and decide what they want to do," says Addie Clark, a volunteer at Rakestraw since 1990.

In addition, the center enables the community to access resources from a variety of places. These include such city services as transportation, pothole repair and tree planting. DarEll T. Weist, head of the United Methodist Urban Foundation, has trained 40 community leaders in asset-based community development. Rakestraw brought existing block clubs together with the police to work on neighborhood safety. AmeriCorp workers do after-school tutoring. The California Youth Authority sends young men doing community service to clean up after weekly food and clothing distribution.

Rakestraw's pride and joy is a new 17-by-92-foot mural on an outside wall titled "A Beacon of Hope," with wording in Spanish and English. Neighborhood matching funds

made the mural possible. With a \$200,000 grant from the Board of Global Ministries' Millennium Fund, Rakestraw raised matching funds from local foundations to refurbish its facilities, putting on a new roof, replacing wiring and plumbing, and adding a new gym floor.

"Rakestraw illustrates how a combination of government and private resources were put to use to bring blighted areas back into shape, with the emphasis on service to young people and economic development," says Cornish Rogers, retired professor of Claremont School of Theology and a member of Rakestraw's board of directors.

Sepulveda Shalom Zone sits in a densely populated, drug- and gang-infested area known as North Hills, northwest of downtown Los Angeles. The Rev. Jim Hamilton works with police to keep children and youth in his neighborhood safe. A basketball tournament, taekwon do (passive resistance), a weight room and free play night in the gym are all part of this effort. Shalom summer camps provide kids opportunities for field trips and offer instruction in conflict resolution.

Karen Rodriguez works with adults on housing and immigration problems, legal rights, licenses for sidewalk vendors and shelter for the homeless. Three Head Start sessions a day accommodate 180 children, and their parents attend English-as-a-second-language classes (45 in the morning, 30 at night).

The Soledad Enrichment Association staffs computer classes using new computers donated by the Lauback literacy program. And tutors from Penny Lane, a continuing education school, help students with homework. An 84-year-old woman and her helpers serve breakfast to homeless people three days a week.

Another Community of Shalom in Long Beach is the Wilmore Urban Agency. "A Movable Feast" is the name of its catering business, which trains single mothers – some recovering addicts – and pays them for their labor. Profits from the business underwrite a five-days-a-week tutoring program. Long Beach is "a big convention town," according to the Rev. Paula Ferris, pastor of First United Methodist Church. Thanks to word-of-mouth, the catering service gets business from corporations and individuals – enough to keep three full-time and 24 part-time employees busy.

"4elements Teen Leadership" draws 60 to 200 young people to the Wilmore center every Friday night for a teen-run program featuring music, dance, art and the spoken word. The program offers an alternative to the pervasive drug and violence culture, Ferris says.

### ***Fostering new ministries***

Since 1992, the Shalom program has trained more than 5,000 people representing more than 500 sites, Byrd says. About half work for systemic change in their communities, and others provide services such as food or clothes pantries and after-school programs. More than 1,500 churches inside and outside the denomination are doing Shalom work.

When the program began, officials learned through experience that a top-down ministry wouldn't work, Byrd recalls. "We put funding in and we identified where we wanted to be in ministry, but we didn't enlist the commitment and ownership of the people that we were seeking to be in ministry with." As a result, some of the initial Los Angeles sites and all of those in Miami folded.

Now, Byrd says, the Shalom program meets with annual conference leaders and interested churches before doing any training. It also ensures the presence of an annual conference coordinator who provides assistance to the sites.

The program exceeded its goal of having 300 sites by the year 2000, but Byrd says she's more concerned about quality than quantity. "My sense is that where a Shalom site is very strong, it begins to mentor other ministries." She emphasizes the importance of the program not becoming institutionalized at the general church level. "Shalom belongs to the community. That's been a real challenge to us as the church, to give it its wings."

Bishop Felton Edwin May, leader of the denomination's Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference, served as the first chairman of the National Shalom Committee, and encouraged the program's spread to Zimbabwe. "The beauty of the Shalom concept was the eagerness of local congregations to coalesce with social service and government agencies in their communities to meet human needs," he says.

Adds Conn: "In the churches and communities where Shalom Zones realized their goals, congregations have been changed, neighborhoods have been changed, and lives have been changed. Jesus didn't ask us to do more than that."

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