

The City of the Living

by Barbara Wheeler

“THE CITY OF THE DEAD”

The oldest African American cemetery in the city of Baltimore, Md. is located next to Mt. Winans United Methodist Church. The cemetery is often called “The City of the Dead.” Mt. Winans church and Community of Shalom can be called “The City of the Living.”

Mt. Winans is a small church in south Baltimore; a community challenged by poverty, crime, drugs, under-funded schools and high rates of unemployment. Pastor Rev. Dr. Patricia Johnson shares that Mt. Winans was one of the first congregations to take part in Communities of Shalom training in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference 12 years ago.

LIVING OUT THE PRINCIPLES OF SHALOM

Faith in Action

Communities of Shalom are based on the principles of faith in action, collaboration, asset based community development and systemic change. Mt. Winans Community of Shalom recognizes the importance of being a witness in the community through worship, outreach, and education. There are 160 active members of the Mt. Winans congregation.

“We teach that the church is not this building.” says Rev. Johnson. “The church is out there,” she continues as she opens her arms and points outside.

Collaboration

The Mt. Winans Community of Shalom offers many programs and resources focused on health and healing. Many neighbors live with addictions to drugs, alcoholism, or HIV/AIDS. Mt. Winans works in partnership with Hesed Ministries (a drug and alcohol addiction recovery assistance program), Baltimore City Schools, the Department for Juvenile Services, and other local congregations.

Young people who complete community service hours through the Social Responsibility Program of the Department for Juvenile Services clean and care for the cemetery next to Mt. Winans. Because the cemetery is not under perpetual care by the city of Baltimore, volunteer efforts are needed to mow the grass and remove trash from the grounds.

Asset Based Community Development

The Shalom principle of asset based community development is easily seen at Mt. Winans. There are strengths and gifts in the neighbors of Mt. Winans. Community leaders, some who are recovering from addiction, take on the roles of drug and alcohol abuse counselors, health workshop leaders, and volunteer with programs including a youth community outreach program. A focus on leadership development sustains communities and empowers individuals.

There are eight students in the church who are currently attending college. Rev. Johnson motions around the sanctuary and calls each one by name while indicating their seat in the pews. A church scholarship fund is available and several of the students receive other scholarships from The United Methodist Church. There are also seventeen certified lay speakers who are members of the Mt. Winans congregation.

Systemic Change

The success of Mt. Winans' college students is linked to the Community of Shalom's support of local education. Schools local children attend have been under-funded and are struggling from a lack of resources. In addition to a youth-focused outreach program, Community of Shalom volunteers work with local schools as are advocates for students. A computer center in the basement of Mt. Winans church is also open for neighborhood use.

EASTER WALK

"This is a community that was given up for dead," says Rev. Johnson. "They were ready to throw the dirt on us."

This statement makes the living and active faith of the Mt. Winans Community of Shalom all the more real.

On Easter Sunday, members of Mt. Winans church walked through "The City of the Living" as a witness to the power of resurrection. They distributed tracts that announced "Jesus is Risen" and were a living testimony to resurrection, a theme well understood in the Community of Shalom. As neighbors continue to work together they find strength and opportunities for rebirth in the work of the Community of Shalom.