

Shalom comes to Baltimore

By Melissa Lauber

UMConnection Staff

Although the odds may seem stacked against them, seven United Methodist churches have recently committed themselves to creating an oasis of grace in Baltimore.

The churches are beginning training to become Communities of Shalom, a United Methodist initiative of community development and systemic change.

The neighborhoods in which these churches minister face a web of complex ills.

Some of the pastors report they are in communities where seven out of every 10 boys fail to graduate from high school and 80 percent of the girls are sexually molested. Others are located on blocks where at least one out of every three houses is abandoned and boarded up.

Heroin and crack dealers are a common sight on many corners and poverty seems to create a cycle of hopelessness. In Baltimore City, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average median household income is \$30,078. Less than 12 miles away in Howard County, the median household income is \$80,904.

On March 25, nearly 50 people from Unity, St. James, Ames, First, Mount Zion, Mount Winans, Monroe Street, and New Covenant UMCs gathered at Mt. Zion UMC in Baltimore for an orientation session.

"Shalom is God's preferred reality," they were told by J.P. Duncan, of the General Board of Global Ministries.

"God has already given and put into place elements of God's preferred reality to exist in your community," Duncan said. "This is not about finding and

fixing problems or looking for a project. You will be a catalyst to make shalom a reality in your community."

To accomplish this, said the Rev. Bruce Haskins, who is directing the Shalom Initiative for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, "we will seek to make systemic changes to address root causes; this is not about providing direct services."

Beginning on June 28, the churches will undergo five months of training, creating teams of eight to 25 people from throughout their communities who will develop a plan for Shalom.

Their plans will center around four areas: rebuilding and renewing spiritual growth, community economic development, strengthening multi-cultural relationships and empowering health, wholeness and healing.

"We focus here, on these things, because that's where God focuses," said Duncan.

As teams and plans are developed, collaboration with community organizations, businesses, government institutions and other religious groups will become paramount, Duncan stressed. "Even Jesus didn't carry the cross alone," he said.

While receiving a \$2,000 seed grant from the denomination's National Shalom Committee at Drew University Theological School, each creation of systemic change in a three-to-10 block radius around each church will depend largely on community-based assets.

To do this, said G. Lynn Taylor, pastor of Mt. Zion UMC, "a church needs to understand the pulse of a place," learning the strengths and challenges of their neighborhood and developing collaborations.

Such an idea is very Wesleyan, Taylor said. "In being pastoral, we have to be missional."

The Communities of Shalom Initiative is part of the conference's larger Hope for the City plan for ministry in Baltimore.

To accomplish the proposed 10-point action plan, a Hope Council has been formed and had its first meeting April 3.

Its chair, the Rev. C. Anthony Hunt, applauds the creation of this pilot wave of Shalom Zones, and hopes additional churches will enlist.

The churches begin their training June 28 and will meet monthly for day-long training sessions through October.

At the Hope Council meeting, Haskins shared how he had driven Duncan around Baltimore, introducing him to the sites where Communities of Shalom would be created.

A fifth generation Baltimorean, Haskins found it interesting to look at the city through an out-of-towner's eyes. He saw things anew.

"J.P. was looking at the boarded up buildings and block after block, he kept saying, 'this city needs Shalom,'" Haskins said. "In my head, I heard an answer, I heard the refrain, 'And the city shall have shalom.' It did my spirit good."

Training for Communities of Shalom will be held June 28, July 22-23, Aug. 23, Sept. 20 and Oct. 25.

Churches wishing to learn more about this program are encouraged to contact the Rev. Bruce Haskins at bhaskins@bwcumc.org.