

Baltimore Shalom Sites Seek to Reduce Violence in the City

By Bishop John Schol, Washington-Baltimore Annual Conference, UMC

In the wake an alarming rise in violence and murder which has catapulted the city of Baltimore to be the second most violent in the nation the United Methodist congregations came together to develop a 10 point plan. A corner stone of the plan is the development of 20 shalom sites. Eight congregations - Unity, St. James, Ames, First, Mount Zion, Mount Winans, Monroe Street, and New Covenant UMCs - have committed themselves to be the first to be trained to become Communities of Shalom in the city of Baltimore. These congregations will create ministries of hope and daring in collaboration with community organizations, residents, businesses and other congregations. The Baltimore Washington Conference initiative is led by the Rev. Bruce Haskins.

Many of these churches, according to the pastors, 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. Some churches 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.

“The city of Baltimore, the birth place of United Methodism needs shalom - well being, prosperity, healing and wholeness,” said Rev. Dr. Anthony Hunt, United Methodist District Superintendent for the City of Baltimore. “It is battling a wave of violence and murder and its residents have few places to turn. As United Methodists, God has entrusted to us the responsibility to reach out with shalom. We need to be a place to which people can turn.”

Beginning June 28, the churches will undergo five months of training, with each congregation creating a training team of eight to 25 people from their congregation community 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.

The Communities of Shalom Initiative is part of the conference's larger Hope for the City plan for ministry in Baltimore. Its chair, the Rev. C. Anthony Hunt, applauds the creation of this pilot wave of Shalom Zones, and hopes additional churches will enlist.

This is a defining moment for communities as the church makes its presence and mission felt, It is important that the residents of the city be able to see the heart of the church and experience God’s justice and compassion and to look and see our commitment to God's city.