

Gun collection reveals trend

For the second time since May, St. Gregory the Great is encouraging citizens to bring guns to its rectory July 21 to get them off of the street in response to an escalating violent-crime rate in the city.

The Baltimore City parish - which will pay \$50 to each person who turns in a gun between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. - expects to hold two more fire-arm collections before the year is out.

It's a growing trend for religious communities of many denominations throughout Baltimore to not only pray for an end to violence, but to be proactive in reducing an alarming murder rate that is on course to surpass 300 by the end of 2007.

Empowerment Temple A.M.E. Church in Bolton Hill has also held a gun turn-in this year and has participated in a coalition of city churches - including Macedonia Baptist and St. John's A.M.E. - in holding numerous anti-violence rallies throughout Baltimore.

St. Bernardine, Baltimore, held a gun collection earlier this summer and a peace assembly in the spring, and St. Frances Academy transformed its literacy youth camp this summer into a peace camp in an attempt to teach children how to resolve difference in a non-violent manner.

The faith communities are deeply invested in the city and want to do their part to make it safe for all of its citizens, said Monsignor Damien Nalepa, pastor of St. Gregory the Great.

"The need for us to do our part is ever so great, with a murder rate that has risen above 175 so far this year," Monsignor Nalepa said.

"The city is better off when any organization chooses to take a stand against the violence, but particularly religious organizations because of their loyal following," said Shaun E. Adamec, a spokesman for Baltimore City Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. "As a deeply spiritual person, the council president relates with other religious followers in their desire to make the streets safer for this and future generations."

Baltimore hasn't had this kind of murder spat since 1999 - the year Martin O'Malley became mayor - and Mayor Sheila Dixon responded to the violence July 18 by asking for, and receiving, the resignation of Baltimore City Police Commissioner Leonard D. Hamm.

When church leaders at St. Gregory the Great offered \$50 to each of the 17 citizens who voluntarily brought handguns and rifles to its Baltimore rectory at 1542 N. Gilmor St. last May, they hoped it keep the firearms out of the hands of would-be violent offenders.

Monsignor Nalepa approached William H. Murphy Jr. - a prominent black lawyer in the city - to fund the reward money and was overwhelmed with the undisclosed amount of money this non-Catholic gave for the cause.

"He gave us enough money so that we can hold these gun collections at least two more times this year," he said. "Most of the people who have turned in the guns just wanted to get them out of the house so they wouldn't get into the wrong hands."

The guns collected so far have all been turned over to the city police.