

Interfaith leaders join mayor in vigil against violence

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Eighteen months after his youngest son was murdered and just three months after his nephew was also murdered, Pastor Bruce Haskins stood before a crowd of about 100 outside Baltimore's City Hall Dec. 17, and begged God to let his peace rest on "every home and every heart" in the city.

"We know what it feels like to cry," said the leader of John Wesley United Methodist Church in Baltimore. "We know what it feels like to hurt. We also know what it feels like to be supported and uplifted and undergirded by people of faith and love and goodwill."

Pastor Haskins spoke as part of an interfaith prayer vigil called by Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake to bring an end to violence in the city and to support those grieving the loss of loved ones.

Archbishop William E. Lori was among a diverse group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders who spoke at the event, held at the War Memorial Plaza just steps from the city's outdoor Christmas tree.

Archbishop Lori said there is no greater weapon against evil, no greater response to "senseless violence," and no great source of hope in the face of despair than prayer. Victims of violence and their families are not alone, he said.

The archbishop added that now is the time to pray for mutual understanding and the strengthening of relationships in the city.

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Addressing Baltimore Police Commissioner Anthony Batts and the family of Police Officer Andrew Groman, who was recently shot during a traffic stop, the archbishop said Groman was among those held in prayer.

"We owe our gratitude and prayers to all who sacrifice themselves to keep safe each of us who calls this city our home," the archbishop said.

The mayor, a cousin of Pastor Haskins, noted that violence has touched her own life and the lives of many others throughout the city. When she asked those in the crowd to raise their hands if they had not lost loved ones to violence, only a few arms went

into the air.



Jasmine Anderson, niece of Pastor Bruce Haskins, leader of John Wesley United Methodist Church in Baltimore, said two of her cousins have been murdered. "It hurts because they were like my brothers."

(Olivia Obineme | Special to the Review)

Rawlings-Blake spoke poignantly of attending the funeral of McKenzie Elliott, a 3-year-old girl killed this year by a stray bullet in Waverly. She also expressed frustration at knowing that there were people who attended the funeral who knew the girl's killer, yet the murderer is not yet behind bars.

"Black lives matter," the mayor said. "White lives matter. Brown lives matter. Yellow lives matter. The young matter. The old matter."

The mayor said it "breaks my heart and tears at my spirit that we have lost so many precious lives to senseless violence in our streets."

So far, there have been 204 murders this year in Baltimore. Among major American cities, Baltimore was ranked as the fifth most deadly last year.

Alluding to tensions between the community and police, the police commissioner said he "won't stop" until the police become "more aligned" and more a part of the community.

"Our officers remain courageous in the face of danger," Batts said, "concerned about the people they protect and committed to making Baltimore a safer city."

Lisa Barnwell, who attends New Creation Church of Jesus Christ in Southwest Baltimore, bowed her head in prayer as she stood shivering in the cold during the service. At its conclusion, she told the Catholic Review she wouldn't have missed it for anything. Several family members, including nephews and cousins, have been murdered, she said, along with young people she works with at the Youth Development Center run by her church.

Never underestimate the power of prayer, she said.

"It has the greatest impact," Barnwell said. "God can do all things. There's nothing God can't do, and I think prayer is the answer. We have to come together - all different races, all different religions. This is just the beginning."

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