

Optimism abounds in most troubling city areas

Three young men sat handcuffed on a corner at the intersection of Druid Hill Avenue and McMechen Street Aug. 18. The reflection of blue and red lights of city police vehicles flashed across their faces and the dilapidated buildings of the crime-plagued neighborhood in West Baltimore.

As the men waited to be taken to a local jail, “We Shall Overcome” could be heard in the distance. As the anthem of the 1960s civil rights movement started faintly, the three men turned to watch an approaching group of some 75 community activists.

The corner just happened to be the first stop of a Prayer Vigil For The Healing of Violence in Our Neighborhoods, the third in a series of marches through troubled city blocks.

“That was the drug violence we’re praying to stop in this neighborhood,” said Father Sylvester Peterka, C.M., the pastor of Immaculate Conception, where the prayer vigil began and ended.

Father Peterka led a march consisting primarily of his parishioners.

Residents of Spencer Gardens row homes sat on their porches as the vigil passed. A few joined the procession down Pennsylvania Avenue and then made their way back to Immaculate Conception.

The city skyline was visible as the candle-lit march provided hope.

Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, helped lead all three summer vigils, the first of which came in June at St. Cecilia, where Father Peterka is also the pastor, after a shooting severely injured one parishioner there. After a large turnout, there was concern attendance might drop at the second vigil, which was held at St. Gregory the Great, and the third.

“We’ve had a consistent, large number of people turn out,” Bishop Madden said. “I

think the one underlying thing is people are concerned about the violence in our city, but there's a great deal of hope. They feel empowered and that God will truly bless them."

Peace is a constant battle for the community surrounding Immaculate Conception.

Parish council president Gary Pulliam said that on the route of the prayer vigil, parishioners routinely engage prostitutes and drug dealers in conversation.

Mr. Pulliam described a night when parishioners comforted a mother of a recently raped teenager, then witnessed the conclusion of a neighborhood shooting, as they eventually found the body of a slain teenager. Prayer got them through that tragic moment.

"We have no fear," Mr. Pulliam said. "The one thing is, most people of faith have no problems in a drug-ridden community. They (the drug dealers) really don't mess with us. But, we just leave it in God's hands. If it's meant to be, it's meant to be."