

Parishes respond to violence with gun collection, peace vigil

St. Gregory the Great, Baltimore, parishioner Alenthia Epps may live in sleepy Woodstock, but gun violence has preyed on a member of her family and she is applauding her parish's efforts to rid city streets of firepower.

The Sandtown-Winchester parish will be giving \$50 rewards for each workable gun turned in between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. May 26 – with no questions asked – the same day St. Bernardine, Baltimore, will be hosting a Peace Prayer Vigil at the Edmondson High School baseball diamond in an effort to purge the city of violence.

More than 100 people have been murdered in Baltimore since the start of 2007 and Ms. Epps said churches and members of the community need to rally round the police and political leaders' efforts to stop the violence.

With the help of funds supplied by the Baltimore law office of William H. Murphy Jr. & Associates, St. Gregory pastor Monsignor Damien Nalepa said his parish's gun collection is just a small effort to address the citywide bloodshed.

"We did this about 10 years ago and collected about 100 guns," Monsignor Nalepa said. "It was a little different, because we collected them over the period of a month and a half, so our results might be a little different this time."

What struck the pastor most during the gun collection in the 1990s was that a large portion of the artillery was turned in by mothers who confiscated firearms from their children.

The woman's club and the men of St. Gregory will also sponsor a community outreach celebration 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. the following weekend on June 2 with Baltimore Police Commissioner Leonard Hamm as an 11 a.m. featured speaker addressing gang violence in the city.

"Guns are at the heart of the problem," Monsignor Nalepa said. "We have deep concerns of how violence is escalating throughout the city."

The parish events and gun collection follow an announcement by Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon that she is establishing "GunStat," a program designed to track guns and analyze weapons used in violence crimes.

Mayor Dixon also announced a plan to establish more community policing, with officers assigned to neighborhoods throughout Baltimore.

Several years ago, Ms. Epps brother - Alton Barnes of the West Baltimore neighborhood Paradise - had a gun put to his head while he was robbed of his jacket and cash.

"By the grace of God he is still here," she said. "But the violence is absolutely horrendous today. I pray this initiative will help."

For more information about the St. Gregory the Great May 26 gun collection and the June 2 community outreach celebration, call the parish at 410-523-0061. For more information about the May 26 St. Bernardine Peace Prayer Vigil, call that parish at 410-362-8664.