

Shaky Peace: Catholics labor to lessen violence in Baltimore City

By Elizabeth Lowe

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On New Year's Day, 48-year-old Frank Turner and his son, Anthony, 21, were shot and killed on a street in Southwest Baltimore.

The murders struck at the heart of Sharon Rock, a parishioner of St. Bernardine in West Baltimore. The victims were her relatives.

"I just pray every day that things and times will change," said Rock, 55, who suspects that the Turners were murdered as retaliation over an alleged physical altercation.

Nineteen days after her family members died, Rock turned her pain into action and attended a prayer walk at St. Bernardine Church.

"It was uplifting because a life is a life," Rock said. Being a part of it and letting people know and see us, it was awesome. You try to make a change in this world of destruction. I know I cannot save everybody but if I can save one person ... It might have made somebody say a prayer or go to church."

Prayer walks, which are held across the city, last less than an hour, but their spirit lingers.

"What it does is bring together the people who are interested in changing the way we live," said Deacon Wardell Paul Barksdale, temporary administrator of St. Bernardine. "I look at them as an opportunity to do the walk that Jesus would be doing if he were here today."

Five days after the St. Bernardine prayer walk, as a Jan. 25 double homicide and suicide at the Mall in Columbia made national news, Baltimore's murder rate continued to climb.



Following a candle-lit vigil in remembrance of those killed in the shooting at The Mall in Columbia Jan. 26, Jennifer Fowler, who works at the mall, places a bouquet of flowers at the memorial erected outside the mall Jan. 30. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

The Turners were two of the 44 people killed in the city between Jan. 1 and April 3, according to Baltimore Police.

The murder rate slowed from 26 in January to seven in March, the month with the fewest reported homicides in the city since 1983. While not on pace to repeat last year's 235 homicides, the murder rate in the city is horribly disproportionate to surrounding jurisdictions.

The five counties in the Baltimore metropolitan area number nearly 2.1 million people. Thus far this year they have endured a combined 10 homicides. The city, with approximately 622,000 residents, has had more than four times as many.

Beyond St. Bernardine, what are Catholics in the Archdiocese of Baltimore doing to make the city more peaceful?

HARD NUMBERS

The murder rate in Baltimore is concurrent with an epidemic of drug abuse.

Baltimore consistently ranks first or second in the U.S. for the highest per capita heroin addiction rate, according to Gary Tuggle, assistant special agent in charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's Baltimore District Office.

In Baltimore City, there were 128 heroin-related deaths attributed to overdose in 2012, and 112 in the first nine months of 2013, according to the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Philip Leaf, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Prevention of Youth Violence and a professor in the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, cited a concentration of poverty; the economic climate; and the lack of a social support system and a strong public school system as contributing factors to the twin scourges of drugs and violence.

"Hurt people hurt people," said Leaf, who noted the value of urban churches in combating those evils.

In February, Karsonya Wise Whitehead, assistant professor of communication and African American studies at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, penned "A never-ending war," an op-ed about race that appeared in The Baltimore Sun.

A former Baltimore City Public Schools teacher, Whitehead remembers bars on windows and bathroom stalls without doors. She felt like she was in a prison, rather than a school, she told the Catholic Review.

"We are training them (youths) with that prison mentality," she said. "Take a look at that environment. Let's get them at (age) 7, let's find those intervention points. I tell my own son, you can turn around if you believe you're going in the wrong direction."



Karsonya Wise Whitehead, an assistant professor of communication and African American studies at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore and mother of two, says providing youths with healthy activities in safe environments helps steer them away from making poor decisions. (Courtesy Karsonya Whitehead)

Whitehead, whose sons are 11 and 13, said that providing youths with healthy activities in safe environments helps steer them away from making poor decisions, such as using drugs. She suggests creating additional community centers and better public schools.

FAITH AS A RESOURCE

On any given day, approximately 2,700 people - not all city residents - are incarcerated and awaiting trial in Baltimore City, according to a Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services spokesman.

"Faith communities have played a major role in galvanizing resources and people to take on some of these issues," said Leaf, the Johns Hopkins professor. "Faith is a very important component to success. It's often changing their relationship with God that has helped them turn their lives around.

"Everybody can do something (to help others)," he said. "It's not somebody donating \$1 million. It's somebody using their time to support other people."

In her State of the City address Feb. 10, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake highlighted anti-violence initiatives, including Operation Ceasefire, and encouraged community engagement in fighting crime. More recently, in response to questions from the Catholic Review, she said churches have "a vital role in helping to reduce violence."

Faith-based institutions are important for "a number of public service projects that help to reduce crime, such as tackling recidivism by working to help find employment and housing for convicted felons or creating opportunities for young people to reduce youth violence," Rawlings-Blake wrote in an email.

YOUTH MOVEMENT

As St. Cecilia's director of youth ministry, Michael Middleton helps expand the horizons of the youths in the West Baltimore parish. Last summer, he took a group on a camping trip to Western Maryland, and plans to do so again this year.

"We're practicing evangelization," he said.

Middleton pushes summer jobs for youths, rather than idleness.

"By filling their time with positive opportunities, the better children we will have, reflected in what they give back to society," he said. "We have the power to do what we want to do as a community."

Middleton is a consultant to the Cherry Hill Development Corporation and chairman of the Cherry Hill Community Coalition, which offers residents decent and affordable housing, early childhood education opportunities and recreation centers.

"I don't think you get peace until you have (social and economic) justice," said Middleton, referencing the message in Pope Paul VI's 1972 World Day of Prayer for Peace. "Until we have that justice you won't have that long-lasting peace."

Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Fells Point serves students from low-income families

in Baltimore City. Beyond giving them valuable job internships, its mission includes forming productive, faith-filled citizens who perform acts of service.

"If you form a strong citizen, you are going to form a strong city," said Jesuit Father John W. Swope, president of Cristo Rey. "We feel compelled to have our students provide service."

CLOSE TO HOME

An A-frame sign outside St. Mary of the Assumption reads "Open for Prayer." Last summer, the Govans parish began to open its sanctuary during the day to offer Catholics - and non-Catholics - a refuge, said Father Patrick E. Besel, pastor.

"People come in during the day and it's a blessing," said Father Besel, who acted after realizing that a nearby bank was open longer than the church. "That's the first step we took."

Deacon Barksdale agrees.

"We need to be more open and accessible as churches with the doors much more wide open and maybe they will come in," he said. "People in the community look for the church because they see it as a beacon."

St. Bernardine is a haven in West Baltimore, hosting everything from community karate and GED classes to Narcotics Anonymous. New All Saints in Liberty Heights also hosts an array of community meetings.

Father Donald A. Sterling, pastor of New All Saints, champions collaboration between Catholic parishes and non-Catholic churches.

"The issue is coming together collectively," he said. "Otherwise, we are just islands out here."

MOVING TOWARD PEACE

About once a month, urban Catholic parishioners and their neighbors step out in peace walks. They sing hymns and carry signs with messages about peace, pause at locations tarnished by violence, read Scripture verses and pray. Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden is usually at the front.

"We try to act as people of peace," the bishop said to a group of about 20 who participated in St. Anthony of Padua's first walk Feb. 18.

"This is an opportunity for the parish to be more engaged with the community," said Father Ty S. Hullinger, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua/Most Precious Blood and St. Dominic in Hamilton. "It's good to have opportunities to pause and pray."

The group paused at a barber shop on Frankford Avenue, across from St. Anthony of Padua. David Porter, 41, was getting a haircut there in November when a masked gunman burst into the shop and killed him.

"We're here," Father Hullinger said, "to mark this place by hope, peace, a brighter future."

After liturgies, St. Bernardine parishioners say the Prayer of St. Francis - "Lord,

make me an instrument of your peace.”

“It’s been working because we have been much more patient with each other and hopefully that goes beyond the church,” Deacon Barksdale said. “Peace has to start in the heart of the person, then the family, even before you get to the church. If you don’t have it, you can’t give it away.”

JARRING NUMBERS

The murder rate in Baltimore City dwarfs that of the other jurisdictions in the Baltimore metropolitan area. Populations are 2013 estimates, from the U.S. Census Bureau. Murder counts are through April 2.

JURISDICTION	POPULATION	2014 MURDERS
Baltimore County	823,000	2
Baltimore City	622,000	44
Anne Arundel County	550,000	4
Howard County	305,000	3
Harford County	249,000	1
Carroll County	167,000	0



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