

The Beloved Community reached out with a special kind of love on St. Valentine's Day

Article and photos by Mike Costanza

The basement of St. Bridget's Church in the north of Rochester filled with voices, music and the smell of good food last Saturday morning, as over 50 clergy, community activists, city residents and suburbanites gathered for a mission. After sharing breakfast, they headed out to knock on the doors of nearby homes, intent upon helping city residents join against the violence that plagues the Rochester area.

The St. Bridget's meeting was the first of 10 planned by the Beloved Community, a loose coalition of community activists and local clergy. The Genesee Regional Council of Churches, the Faith Community Alliance and the Baptist Council of Churches formed the coalition in 2005.

"It happened in response to the amount of violence that was going on in the community, particularly the high amount of homicides," said the Rev. Roy Hedman, pastor of the Antioch Baptist Church and a member of the Beloved Community. While many might think violence is only a city phenomenon, he disagrees.

"The issue of violence is not an inner-city issue," Hedman said. "It's a county-wide problem." In order to attack the problem of violence, the coalition held a series of 10 forums around Monroe County.

"The basic premises of these forums were information gathering, as to what the community thought needed to be done," Hedman said. "We needed community input into what we did, or intended to do."

City and suburban residents, activists, members of law enforcement, government officials, educators and others were asked to speak their minds in local churches and other locations. The coalition even talked to Monroe County Jail inmates and students at Rochester's School Without Walls.

After reviewing what it had learned, the Beloved Community formulated ten community standards. The standards, which can be found in the "Litany for the Beloved Community" (printed below), call for a range of behaviors, from the use of universally respectful language

to helping heal those touched by violence. Hedman said that coalition plans to highlight each of them at a separate event in the coming year. The theme for its first effort, on Feb. 14, was "We move out of our pews and into the streets."

"That came out of the community's idea that churches could do more by being more publicly aware, and active in the community," Hedman explained.

Saturday's event began with breakfast, after which those present broke into small groups. Under the leadership of Slater's Raiders for Peace, a local non-profit dedicated to helping youth lead productive lives free of crime, the groups then spent close to an hour tramping nearby streets.

"When you get multiple people doing something together, it can create a tidal wave," said Lenzy Blake, founder of Slater's Raiders. "What we're trying to do is create that tidal wave of love in the community, and to put an end, finally, to some of this senseless violence." Blake founded the organization after the 2007 death of a friend, community activist James Salter.

Knocking on door after door, group



Group members went door to door talking to neighbors about violence in the community

members talked to anyone they could about the violence in their communities, and what could be done to decrease it. After that, they returned to St. Bridget's for lunch with any guests who were interested in hearing more. Slater's Raiders served the free meals, and local musicians provided live music for the event.

Patricia Partridge of Irondequoit came to St. Bridget's that morning to help out at the gathering.

"I grew up here," said Partridge, who's a member of the Beloved Community. "I want to do something to help the community; to bring people together." According to Hedman, about 10 people returned with the groups to share lunch and talk about ways to decrease street violence.

Rosemary Rivera, one of the organizers of Saturday's gathering, said she was pleased with the event's overall turnout. Rivera said that the Beloved Community hopes to reach out to those beyond the city limits in the future.

"We have to do something about eradicating those geographic lines that separate us," she said.



Rev. Roy Hedman
Pastor, Antioch Baptist Church



Rosemary Rivera
'Beloved Community' organizer



Lenzy Blake
Founder, Slater's Raiders

Litany for the Beloved Community

One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: We use language that respects everyone.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: Every child is our own.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: We move out of our pews and into the streets.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: Our County is a community of shared power.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: Law is the servant of a loving community.

One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: We build families.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: Everyone works; all work is valued; each has resources to live with dignity.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: Every school is a safe community of learners.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: We build front porch neighborhoods.
One: We covenant to be the beloved community. We are one another's keepers.
Many: We foster healing communities with all who are touched by violence.