

# St. Paul pastor won't let East Side victims of violence be forgotten

Candlelight vigil tradition follows him from L.A. to East Side

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Article Last Updated: 12/17/2008 11:18:14 PM CST



When the Rev. Howard Dotson was a pastor in Los Angeles, he vowed to hold a candlelight vigil for every homicide victim from his neighborhood. But in an area where there were once 15 homicides in 15 weeks, Dotson recalled it was almost too much for one person to handle.

Now, as interim pastor at St. Paul's Arlington Hills Presbyterian Church, Dotson has brought the candlelight vigil tradition to the East Side.

St. Paul doesn't have anywhere close to the number of homicides as L.A., a city with roughly 14 times as many people. There have been 18 slayings in St. Paul this year and 357 in Los Angeles, as of Tuesday.

Still, the need for vigils carries over to St. Paul, Dotson said. He said he plans to hold gatherings when there is a "traumatic act of violence" on the East Side.

"There is a spiritual component when the community comes out and says, 'This isn't going to be tolerated,'" Dotson said. "It does have an impact."

Dotson is planning a vigil today for the city's most recent homicide victim. Leon Dewaun May, 32, was fatally shot outside his girlfriend's home at 417 Jessamine Ave. on Dec. 11. Four people have been charged in the apparently drug-related case.

Sarah Banashak, who said she and May had been together for more than 10 years and have two children together, said she liked the idea of a vigil for May.

Of May's killing, she said, "This is definitely something he did not deserve."

Since Dotson came to Arlington Hills Presbyterian on July 20, he has organized two other East Side vigils.

One was for Jaques Jamir Dortch, an 18-year-old woman who police said didn't appear to be the intended target of a fatal shooting. The other was for a woman named Tammie

who was brutally beaten by strangers with baseball bats while walking around Lake Phalen in August.

Betty Brandt Passick, an Arlington Hills parishioner who lives in Oakdale, brought some youth from the church to Dortch's vigil. She normally wouldn't have attended, but she said she was glad she did.

"I got a firsthand experience of what it feels like to be living life in a more dangerous community, where gunshots are fired and people are trying to keep their children safe," Passick said.

At the vigils, there are "songs of peace," remembrances of the victim and biblical passages, Dotson said.

"It's not about proselytizing, but trying to reach youth that have some connection to the church and may have lost their way," he said. "If you were baptized in the church, you're called to be a peacemaker."

Dotson, who has master's degrees in psychology and divinity, has a particular interest in gang violence and helping victims of it. He said he's working on a doctorate of ministry through the San Francisco Theological Seminary about "how clergy can be empowered to be crisis counselors."

He is looking into how communication and response time can be improved between L.A. police and volunteer clergy councils and is assessing the benefits of a similar model in St. Paul and other cities.

Dotson, originally from Maple Grove, worked as a pastor in Los Angeles for three years. He was also an HIV/AIDS counselor in Kenya for a year.

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IF YOU GO

What: Candlelight vigil for homicide victim Leon D. May

When: 5 p.m. today

Where: In front of 417 Jessamine Ave., St. Paul