



Communities of Faith

Recognizing and valuing of the sacred breath within each human being is essential to building relationships that ultimately can reduce violence and increase respect and tolerance for oneself and others. Indeed, practicing spiritual disciplines can help people understand the meaning of the suffering and frustrations of others, channel their anger constructively, and reduce violence. Faith communities have an extremely important role to play in the transformation of communities and are, therefore, asked to do the following:

- **Reclaim** the spirit and culture of making communities of faith welcoming to *all* people and provide opportunities, through dialogue, prayer and service to eradicate the barriers that keep people and neighborhoods divided, Communities of faith can offer a safe haven for people impacted by the violence in our communities.
- **Restore** the rich tradition of African American spirituality and faith as a strong foundation for promoting values that reestablishes the dignity of people, reconstructs relationships, and reinstates mutual respect, trust, compassion and justice.
- **Provide** opportunities among faith-based leaders for candid, truthful and continuous dialogue on how the church and community can develop and institute solutions for reducing the violence in our communities.
- **Encourage** the various faith denominations to increase advocacy and action. Hold all branches of government accountable for implementing strategies that combat violence.
- **Organize** actions at government facilities to petition and pressure our elected officials to be more responsive to community concerns, needs, and aspirations. Where possible communities of faith should partner with community-based organizations and agencies which have initiated positive actions that impact the community.
- **Connect** faith communities with community activists and representatives of social service agencies, (utilizing agencies and groups such as those listed in the Great Pittsburgh Coalition Against Violence Community Services Directory).
- **Initiate** partnerships with ministerial associations and agencies such as Christian Associates of Southwestern Pennsylvania, the Greater Pittsburgh Coalition Against Violence and area community service programs and agencies to reduce crime and violence.
- **Avoid** duplication of efforts by finding the strengths of each church, agency or organization; support their mission and enhance their specialties. Yet, work together by sharing information and resources.

Create sustainable “Street Ministries” in high-risk areas of communities that provide creative, non-traditional, interactive and experiential approaches to reaching youth and

young adults. Gather youth of various faith communities and backgrounds to be in continual discussion concerning violence and faith.

- **Institute** a communication system to share emergency and other important information to mobilize the faith community quickly in the event of violent incidents such as homicides.
- **Consider** the possibility of creating “healing centers” that provide assistance to trauma victims, especially when trauma and/or community crises occur.
- **Give** support to families who have experienced trauma or loss due to violence and crime, letting them know that the faith community cares; assist them in attending court hearings, write letters of support; provide transportation, etc.
- **Build** community by establishing a shared treasury for community empowerment. The community must be the first “Mission Responsibility.” Tithe back to the community chest and give according to the size, strength, and portfolio of the organization and church.
- **Acknowledge** that unity of a communal mind is a model for action. Establish a unified mission and vision involving ministers who are committed, involved and visible in the community.
- **Open** and expand facilities to the community. Support the establishment of safe zone initiatives. Actively communicate the availability of programs for families and youth in the community.
- **Provide** support and facilities for youth with the goal of keeping youth in school and helping them achieve higher educational success. Establish study centers that would supplement the educational system, with topics such as African American history and civic leadership. With special emphasis on the African American community and its experiences, such centers also should encourage the creation of multicultural non-sectarian youth group activities.
- **Advocate** for youth and families at all levels of government for legislation, regulations and programs, which promote the health of the community.
- **Collaborate** (across geographic areas and faith groups) with street level workers, school personnel, city and county police departments, etc., to teach and practice peaceful conflict management and resolution.
- **Partner** with schools to conduct/teach anger management, mediation, conflict resolution, negotiation skills and for community rebuilding initiatives.
- **Seek** assistance from foundations and local and national faith organizations to obtain consulting services and leadership training to address violence in the community.
- **Initiate** forums and trainings within the religious community related to violence prevention and intervention that can be shared with and implemented within the community.

Reaching out to the Youth and Young Adults:

- **Admit** to our children that we, as a community, have not had a stronger presence in providing nurturing, guidance, safety, and protection.
- **Seek** to reach youth and build their spirituality. Provide safe places for youth to explore their faith and learn ways to apply that faith to daily living. Interact with youth rather than “preach at” them.
- **Create and cultivate** relationships with youth who are “outside of the church” and create neighboring relationships throughout the community.
- **Form** prayer groups with youth to pray for peace and renounce violence.
- **Gather** youth of various faith communities and backgrounds to be in continual discussion concerning violence and faith. Encourage cross-community interactions and relationships between youth to build love, respect for self and others, and to provide opportunities for future interaction.
- **Develop** projects that engage youth in dialogue *and* in action.
- **Institute** a “youth outreach day” at least once per month in which communities of faith open their facilities to encourage their members to meet and interact with youth. Acknowledge the spiritual gifts of young people and their ability to lead.
- **Train** youth to be servant leaders within their communities from a faith perspective, to re-affirm the value of humanity.
- **Institute** and promote mentoring programs that provide direct one-on-one positive influences for all youth, especially males. The Church should see itself as “Extended Family” in mentoring relationships.
- **Support** mentoring programs for all youth, especially including those of incarcerated parents.
- **Provide** support and facilities for youth with the goal of keeping youth in school and helping them achieve higher educational success.
- **Talk** with youth about the negative effects of rap music and video games which advocate and promote violent behavior such as drug use, drug dealing, robbery, promiscuousness, prostitution, rape, torture and even murder. Help youth to disengage themselves from the psychological effects of violent images. Extend these conversations to parents, guardians, and members of support groups.
- **Lift** up youth and help them to create positive images of self and life through the arts such as poetry, music, dance, hip hop, spoken word, and videography.
- **Play** a key role with and for youth in redefining what is considered “cool.” Encourage, support and promote positive and healthy youth activities, some of which may be nontraditional sports such as gymnastics, fencing or jujitsu.

- **Create** opportunities for youth and others to participate in community beautification projects.

Ways Communities of Faith Can Help Families:

- **Provide** a venue for family life skills. “Knowledge is Power” to build on existing skill and strengths of families and communities.
- **Teach** marriage enhancement skills to help reduce the risks and stresses that all couples and families deal with on a daily basis. Knowledge and information can provide tools for individuals that would show them how to negotiate, resolve conflicts and to grow and work together to create loving and successful families.
- **Teach** parenting skills to help parents model and teach love and respect. Help couples and singles to find support and/or learn to support each other in working with their children and teens to keep them safe and to succeed as a family.
- **Give** teens and young adults the skills to develop healthy relationship and conflict resolution skills.
- **Help** individuals and families most likely to be involved with crime and violence to educate themselves in existing strategies and opportunities to reduce violence and make communities safe. Encourage them, as well, to take advantage of opportunities to pursue education and jobs.
- **Respect** and encourage Elders to take an active and visible role in their communities. Elders in the church and the community are essential role models for family members. They are also valuable resources of wisdom, knowledge, information, life experience, talent and skills any many areas. Communities of Faith can provide a platform for giving and receiving honor and visibility of our Elders.
- **Consider** establishing safe-havens for youth and families where they can discuss issues they may be facing and receive culturally relevant treatment or find solutions for the causes that can lead to violence.

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