

Church seeking ways to end age of violence

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ders in Rochester, according to a report issued by the Community Mobilization Against Violence, a coalition of city churches, organizations and businesses.

In a statement accompanying the report, Clayton H. Osborne, chairman, said:

"Violence transcends neighborhoods, class, race and income. It affects all of us and each of us must do our part to mobilize the resources of our community to create a climate which rejects violence."

Observers of the violence in Rochester's metropolitan area repeatedly asserted that churches must play a greater role in creating the climate that

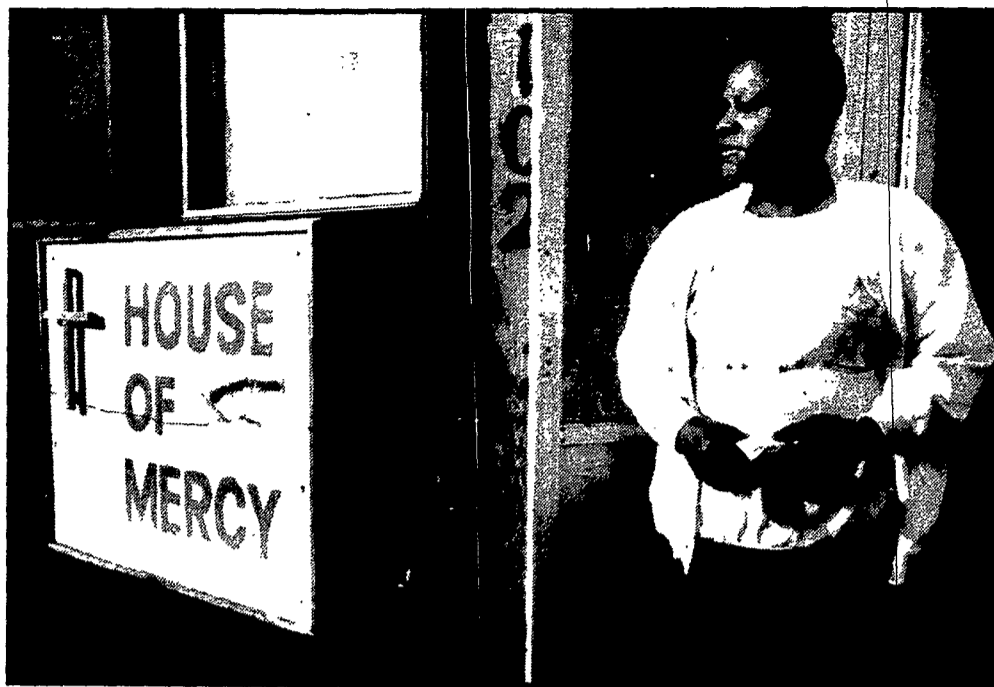
Osborne desires.

One such observer is the director of the Rochester Police Department's Victims Assistance Unit. As he bowed his head in thoughtful reflection, Sergeant Steve DiGennaro noted that he has seen dozens of promising lives snuffed out in momentary disputes with deadly consequences.

Musing on what it will take to end the vicious cycle gripping the city, the Rochester police sergeant said nary a word about more street patrols, more jails or more law enforcement.

However, his eyes lit up when asked what churches can do.

When DiGennaro was growing up in the neighborhood around St. Michael's Church, the parish's staff kept an eye



Lavon Horn, an active volunteer at the House of Mercy, takes a break on the agency's front stoop after preparing donated groceries. The food items will be distributed to visitors of the Rochester-based outreach center.



After covering the upholstery with white sheets and setting up a makeshift altar, Father Anthony Mugavero (left), pastor at St. Bridget Church in Rochester, celebrates Mass with House of Mercy volunteers and guests.



Shay Johnson (left) stays close to his mother, Belinda, a neighbor of the House of Mercy, while she sings during the Feb. 6 Mass celebrated by Father Mugavero.

Grace Miller, RSM. The house's director recalled one officer warning her that the neighborhood was a "dangerous place."

"Well this is where the church should be," she replied, adding that the police now tell her the agency has helped to decrease crime in the neighborhood.

Sister Mary Dismas, RSM, an outreach worker with Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, 53 Ontario St., also wants the church to put itself where it is needed most.

Sister Dismas belongs to Police and Citizens Against Crime — Pac-Tac — and Combat, two programs in which police and neighborhood residents work together in patrolling the city streets to scare off criminals and investigate suspicious happenings around the area.

"I think that people shouldn't just say, 'I'm sick of crime,'" she said. "We should help at least to take control of our streets."

To that end, Sister Dismas spends a few hours per week walking her neighborhood's streets with a police officer, attempting to rid the area of would-be disturbers of the peace.

But like so many other observers of violence in the city, Sister Dismas believes that churches must offer an alternative vision to those who turn to crime out of poverty and desperation.

Father Robert L. Beligotti, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua, 60 Lorimer St., hopes to provide just such an alternative by having his parish operate a drop-in center for teenagers on the first Saturday of each month. The program started at the beginning of this year.

The parish has also cooperated with other Christian denominations in holding prayer services for women who have been slain in the city over the past few years, he said.

Other Catholic churches and organizations are using tools to build a harmonious community.

Father Tracy said his parish is applying for a grant from the Diocesan Urban Subsidy Program so St. Michael's can hire a youth coordinator for his parish's kids.

Father Enrique Cadena, pastoral associate at Corpus Christ Church, 864 Main St. E., said the parish's Hispanics have formed meeting groups for adults and teenagers who can share their concerns with one another. In part, these groups are focusing on issues which lead to violence.

Some Hispanic parishioners convinced others to turn in their guns to the church when it served as a site for the city's gun buy-back program in January and February, Father Cadena added.

on him and his friends who viewed the church as a home away from home.

"We had basketball, bowling ... dances on Friday night," recalled DiGennaro. "It was not unusual for Father to come over to the house if you didn't show up for bowling."

More important than ensuring he kept his commitment to the parish's extracurricular activities, the visits by priests showed that someone beyond his family members — someone representing the broader community — cared about his life.

"It was an all-out effort for the youth that was reflective of many parishes," DiGennaro mused.

Those days are mostly gone in many city neighborhoods, DiGennaro said, wishing the commitment that marked that era could come back and reclaim young people who are lost to violence and crime in 1993.

DiGennaro's comments were echoed by volunteers such as Wendy Beasley of the House of Mercy, an outreach center operated by the Sisters of Mercy.

The mother of two children, Beasley, 21, agreed that the sisters' ministry kept numerous people off the street and concerned about one another.

"You just need somebody to talk to," she observed. "The majority of people drink and go about their business. A lot of people come here because it's the only place where they can socialize."

Ironically, the police were skeptical of the House of Mercy when it first opened in 1985, according to Sister

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