Praying With Our Feet

Faith-based Activism to Stop Shootings & Killings in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Beyond

A project of the Crown Heights Community Mediation Center & the Save Our Streets Clergy Action Network

Includes profiles of leaders & tools for faith based-activism against gun violence.
Dear Reader,

This book profiles a few of the courageous and dedicated clergy leaders who work together to stop gun violence in the neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and beyond. Each is inspirational and visionary, dedicated to serving the community beyond the walls of his or her house of worship. These leaders demonstrate their deep faith that collective efforts to “pray with their feet” can help rid our neighborhoods of gun violence.

The clergy interviewed in this book are a few of the active members of the Save Our Streets Clergy Action Network, (S.O.S. C.A.N.) the clergy mobilization arm of the anti-gun-violence program Save Our Streets Crown Heights, (S.O.S.), a program that takes a public health approach to reducing gun violence. We view gun violence as a curable disease that has infected our neighborhood. To cure the disease, neighbors work together to create conditions where violence can no longer take hold, and houses of worship play a critical role in that effort.

We invite you to join us in the movement to end gun violence, or deepen your house of worship’s involvement in making our neighborhoods safer and healthier. We hope that the tips and tools such as the poems, prayers, and lesson plans for your youth groups or other affinity groups will be helpful in this effort. We look forward to learning from you about how your House of Worship is working to end gun violence, and hope to profile your work in future editions of “Praying With Our Feet.”

In Peace,

Amy Ellenbogen,
Crown Heights Community Mediation Center, Project Director

Reverend Kevin Jones
S.O.S. C.A.N. Clergy Liaison

Summer, 2013

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Credits:
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Editing by Ariana Siegel
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Book design by Laina Karavani
About S.O.S. C.A.N.

MISSION STATEMENT
To engage faith-based leaders in dialogue and action to end gun violence in our communities.

PURPOSE
To strengthen our witness and work for peace in our communities by inspiring hope, raising voices, and taking action.

MOTTO
You CAN make a difference!

S.O.S. C.A.N. will guide partnering faith-based leaders in exploring and celebrating the spiritual grounding of our individual and collective peace work and witness. Together we will explore the faith basis of our peace testimonies. We will:

- raise up current peace work and witness
- examine how we might better support and engage each other in ongoing peace work
- create new opportunities to witness together for more peaceful communities

S.O.S. C.A.N. is envisioned as a group of faith-based leaders who partner together to collaborate on projects and actions to enlarge our peace concerns, producing positive outcomes.

Partnering faith-based leaders will return to their houses of worship with a deeper commitment to our Maker’s call to nonviolence and peace building, with renewed energy, prepared for powerful peace action and with more attentiveness to the spirit that dwells within us all, calling all to restore our Maker’s communities for all God’s children.

INITIATIVES

AIM: To bring community awareness, information, and focus to the issue of gun violence.

1. Collaborate on shooting responses with the S.O.S. staff
2. Hold weekly mini-marches
3. Hold prayer vigils at hot spots
4. Fast against violence
5. Spread the message to our houses of worship

AIM: To sit down and dialogue clergy leaders to action, we will:

1. Meet quarterly by breakfast meetings, training sessions, seminars, or planning etc.
2. Discover what each of our leaders and houses of worship offer that can be used to facilitate healing and help a hurting community
3. Send weekly texts and emails

AIM: To highlight faith-based leaders who are actively engaged in fostering peace in our community, we will select a pastor of the month and:

1. Highlight his or her work and congregation on the S.O.S. and CHCMC blogs
2. Honor his or her work with a certificate of accomplishment
3. Have him or her meet with the CHCMC and S.O.S. team members for refreshments and conversations

AIM: To engage our congregants in dialogue and action, we will:

1. Mobilize our congregants to attend shooting responses, rallies, marches, and community events
2. Use the pulpit to preach nonviolence and help stop the shootings and killings
3. Incorporate nonviolence into our educational materials
4. Create a "peace zone" or "safe haven" at our places of worship
5. Sign the "Covenant for Peace and Action"
6. Share information regarding shootings with the S.O.S. Clergy Liaison
7. Post public education information and encourage congregants to do so at home
8. Dedicate a late night a week for youth to utilize our place of worship
9. Host an anti-violence event
10. Host a GED program or provide tutors for participants
11. Publicly support the S.O.S. program and our goal to stop the shooting and killings in our community
12. Invite S.O.S. to speak to our congregants
13. Encourage participation in "Arts to End Violence" and "Week of Peace" activities
14. Adopt a program participant; provide volunteer opportunities, jobs, work clothing, etc.

S.O.S. C.A.N. Facts on Guns & Violence

Gun Violence in the U.S.A.

From the Brady Campaign
- One in three people in the US knows someone who has been shot.
- On average, 32 Americans are murdered with guns every day and 140 are treated for a gun assault in an emergency room.
- Every day on average, 91 people kill themselves with a firearm, and 45 people are shot or killed in an accident with a gun.
- The US firearm homicide rate is 20 times higher than combined rates of 22 countries that are our peers in wealth and population.
- Although guns can and have been used successfully in self-defense in the home, a gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in a domestic homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting than to be used in self-defense.

Impact of Gun Violence on Youth

From the Brady Campaign
- Nearly one in four American teens have witnessed a shooting.
- An average of eight children and teens under the age of 20 are killed by guns every day.
- American children die by guns 11 times as often as children in other high-income countries.
- Youth ages 0 to 19 in the most rural US, counties are as likely to die from a gunshot as those living in the most urban counties. Rural children die more often of gun suicides and unintentional shooting deaths. Urban children die more often of gun homicides.
-Firearm homicide is the second-leading cause of death for young people ages 1-19 in the U.S.
- In 2007, more pre-school-aged children (85) were killed by guns than police officers were killed in the line of duty.

Gun Violence and Identity

From U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice statistics
- Most murders are intra-racial: From 1980 through 2008, 84% of white victims were killed by whites, and 93% of black victims were killed by blacks. For homicides committed by a stranger to the victim, only 26.7% were interracial. For homicides committed by a friend or acquaintance of the victim, only 9.7% were interracial.
- Males represented 77% of homicide victims and nearly 90% of offenders. Males were seven times more likely than females to commit murder in 2008. The victimization rate for males was three times higher than the rate for females. The offending rate for males was almost nine times higher than the rate for females.

References
- The majority of youth murdered are killed with a firearm and nearly half of youth suicide deaths involve the use of a gun.
- Between 1981 and 2010, 112,375 intimate partner children, and teens were killed by firearms. This is 25,000 more deaths than the number of American soldiers killed in the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, combined.
- Less than 1% of student homicides and suicides take place at school, on the way to or from school, or at a school sponsored event. In 80% of school-associated firearm-related homicides and suicides, the weapons used were obtained from the home or from a friend or relative.

PRAYING WITH OUR FEET 4
Reverend Kevin Jones

Reverend Kevin Jones is the Clergy Liaison for S.O.S., and has been leading the Clergy Action Network for the past three years. He pastors at Peterson Temple Church of God in Christ and has also served in the 77th Precinct and Brooklyn NYPD Clergy Council.
Tell us about your work with S.O.S. CAN.

My basic job description is to mobilize clergy around the S.O.S. model, to keep clergy active in helping the community and in our events. This year we’ve expanded with several new initiatives and created planning committees for each event.

Tell us about some of these events.

We meet regularly through “clergy breakfasts,” which are a way of bringing faith-based institutions under one roof so they can find out from me and from each other what resources are out there for them. At our last breakfast in March we had 35 faith leaders and six volunteers.

This year in particular we’ve been working on adding more initiatives to reach out to the community, so clergy have organized into special committees to help plan those. In April we had a “Stop the Violence” town hall meeting with Defense Attorney Hynes and various elected officials, who came and spoke to a group of 100 or more people about issues of violence in the community.

Then in June we held a “Faith March” that was attended by somewhere between 150-175 Clergy Leaders and their congregants. That initiative started with two congregations coming together; they both wanted to get more involved in the community, so they decided to organize a march down St. Johns Place and end in an open-air service. Since those pastors are part of the Clergy Action Network, I decided to include the march as part of our events and support them. In May we had an anti-violence rally with the Grandmother’s Love Over Violence group and the Brooklyn Clergy Task Force, which was attended by NYPD Commissioner Kelly and several other politicians.

Another pastor in our network, David Wright, had a basketball tournament as a memorial to his father in June, which S.O.S. C.A.N. supported. That was an all-day event with six basketball games and 12 teams, including one all female team and one team of S.O.S. outreach staff. All together, they gave out food and drinks to some 80-100 people.

There are also some smaller pieces we do for the community, like the health fair, or a gun buyback program. I have personally turned in 2 handguns and one sub-machine gun to the NYPD Amnesty Program. So we do a lot. It keeps me busy.

What do you think are some of the root causes of violence?

There are people who are crying inside, and they need to be recognized. They don’t feel respected or seen until they have a gun, I think about how this community’s biggest gang got started. It was when the Police Athletic League closed down, the public after-school programs closed down, and the Summer Youth Employment Program became a lottery for a select few, so these kids had nowhere to go, they were bored to tears, they start smoking rear in the park, and they start harassing people because they have nothing else to do. Eventually someone decides, let’s become a gang. And if we’re going to be a gang we need street credibility, so people know we exist! So they decided to walk around the street and punch random people in the face. So there’s this gang now in the community doing just that, and breaking into houses and cars.

I got this information from the gang members themselves when I sat down with them a year ago. It was a meeting between 15 gang members and the Brooklyn NYPD Clergy Taskforce. The gang leader just told them to meet at a certain spot. They didn’t know they’d be talking to clergy, but they were comfortable with it because we were there to listen.

Their story told me that if the government fails them, and if the public school system fails them, then the churches have to answer. I met a gang leader in May? I talked to him and found out that his parents were separated, and his mother brought in a boyfriend who didn’t know they’d be talking to clergy, but they were comfortable with it because we were there to listen.

A house of worship can become known to a community as a listening board, to assist and guide people if they want it. When they want to get married, their baby is being dedicated, they’ll come to us. So they start to understand that we’re here for them.

What do you think are some of the root causes of violence?

I have a man in my ministry who is a murderer, went to jail for years, and I’ve seen his life transform, He’s giving back to people.

We do these prayer walks wherever we go asking around people, do you want to pray for anything today? This group of women saw a young man sitting where a stool, and as they approached him he stormed off the steps, angry, and slammed his jacket down on the ground. He said, “What do you all want? You all pray?” They said, “Yes, we’re here for you.” He said, “You all have a church? Where is it?” They said, “Just down the block.” He said, “Come on, let’s go,” and led them there. When I got there this kid was bawling, a river of water. He shared his story of how the mother who abandoned him, the girlfriend who broke up with him. He had nobody to love him. He was a member of a gang, because that was his sense of family and togetherness. He said he was on his way to go hurt or kill somebody, he was so hurt and tense himself. I called Lavon, who’s an S.O.S. Outreach Worker, and a police officer who’s a friend of mine to come help. By the end of the day he was smiling.

About three or four weeks later, he got in touch with us and said, “I want to thank you people, you all saved my life that day. I would have taken somebody’s life, ended up in jail or been killed.” That’s my biggest joy, watching people see the light.

Who are your mentors or role models in this work?

My bishop is the pastor of a large church in Harlem. His former pastor never did anything outside the building, but my bishop loved going out in his community. When he became a pastor he shifted that emphasis to community work. He was on a tough block; during the crack epidemic that was a drug-infested area. My bishop’s church bought most of the property on that block, renovated multiple buildings and turned them into nice apartments. Not far from him there’s an addicts’ rehabilitation center; maybe half of his membership came from there. The ministers, evangelists, the choir, those serving in the kitchen—they’re clean now, but they were once junkies in the street. My bishop always talks about helping people, loving people. That’s always been me, too. It comes from my mother; she’ll give anyone food, clothes. Everybody knows her for that. So I think I picked her up.

What else from your background motivates you to do what you do?

I was hurt a lot as a kid. I have scars that I don’t know where they came from, I stuttered badly, so I was a shy, withdrawn kid, and stayed that way for a long time. I didn’t think I was wanted or loved. Now it’s part of my life’s mission. I understand loneliness, I understand the underdogs. I understand that isolation and pain, I believe that most people are hurting, but nobody knows how they act out and fight because they’re in pain.

I knew one kid whose mother said he was a terrible kid. He used to be an A student, perfect grades, until May. So what happened in May? I talked to him and found out that his parents were separated, and his mother brought in a boyfriend who...
had molested this young man's sister, and she had come crying to him about it. Soon after that his father died, and then his best friend was stabbed in the eye. All this trauma, and nobody to talk to. Who accepted him and listened to him? The Albany boys, a local gang. So he started skipping school, not doing his homework, smoking reefer. Age 13. The Police Department picked him up as a truant. I went to the precinct with Marlon from the Mediation Center, and he opened up to us. We told him we would be at his court hearing, and he didn’t believe us because he didn’t trust anybody. But we showed up, and when he saw us he smiled so wide. I know I could have been that kid, but somebody caught me before I got there.

How did you get involved with S.O.S.?
For the first five years of pastoring my church I was trying to heal the membership, who were wounded by a lack of leadership over the years—when I took over there it was 5-10% filled, but right now it’s filled 80-90% on Sundays.

So I was taking care of internal stuff, but after the fifth year I decided, it was time to get involved in the community. I went to the clergy council meetings for the 77th precinct, and that’s where I met Ife Charles and got involved with the Mediation Center and S.O.S. So this project became an extension of my ministry. I was organizing before I started here, planning events, mobilizing young people and putting clergy passion into action.

What's your relationship with the 77th Precinct police?
The police need the clergy, and the clergy need the police. They need us because the community is anti-police for the most part, especially the black and Hispanic community. But the churches have leverage with the community, and if we tell our congregants that not every cop is bad, and that we need to repair our relations—imagine the power of that. And we need the police too because our kids and congregants get in trouble, and we need their help to navigate the system. Plus they have a lot of services to offer.

If you had endless time and resources what would you do to help the community?
You have these gangs saying we’re doing these things because we have no place to go, so if you give them a place to go, then you can intervene. A community center would not just be a place to go, but it would offer referrals, services, counseling on the premises, one-stop-shopping for kids who want a route out of the lifestyle they’re living. There would be seminars, parent training, so that home is a better place that they can go back to. Otherwise these kids have no safe haven, no safe and loving place. It’s been a dream of mine to build one for a long time—I’d call it Noah’s Ark, a safe haven for children in a storm.

How do you see S.O.S. C.A.N. growing in the future?
It’s growing now. As I make connections with clergy they help connect me to others I can’t reach myself. I told one pastor that I had heard people say his church was not there for the community, that they were closed to the public. Now that church is having a town hall meeting to talk about gun violence, S.O.S., and any issue that affects the neighborhood. So as more pastors see what we do, they’ll say, what can I do, how can I get involved? That’s how I see it growing.

I’m very satisfied doing what I do with these clergy and for the community. Is it perfect? No. But even with all of the ups and downs I have made a lot of headway in two years.

What is your strategy for organizing clergy?
My bishop has this phrase, “We’re better together.” I’ve adopted that. I don’t get stuck on the title, whether it’s Muslim, Hindu, Jewish. Whoever you are, let’s just help our kids. I’m always looking to connect houses of worship. You may be working with a small church with a certain kind of resource, and a large church with another kind of resource. One has money, one has vision. If I can partner them together, it’s stronger. I want to get these guys to see beyond their four walls. You’ve got to pastor a community.
Reverend Kenneth Bogan has been the pastor of Greater Restoration Baptist Church for 13 years. Under his leadership the church provides services through various programs: summer camps, after-school tutorial, music and GED courses. Rev. Bogan has been involved in many community partnerships like the James E. Davis Stop Violence Foundation and Project CARE. At the Mediation Center, Rev. Bogan has been a conflict resolution trainer, intergroup dialogue facilitator, S.O.S. clergy liaison and co-creator of our Youth Entrepreneurship Program. Rev. Bogan is a graduate of Wiley University and has done graduate studies in theology at Duke University.

You've expressed a devotion to nonviolence. What led you to that philosophy?

I'm motivated by my faith. My philosophy of nonviolence comes from Jesus’ teachings in the New Testament, which center around the ideas of nonviolence and sacrificial love.

My wife taught me a lot about compassion. I always tried to love people, but I was ready to fight those who would take advantage of me. She taught me what it means to love people in a sacrificial way. Even when they burn you, you keep moving, keep loving. That's a hard lesson to learn in the streets, but it's an important tool.

I wouldn't call myself a pacifist. What I mean when I talk about nonviolence is, we won't initiate violence, but if you try to attack our families, we're going to defend ourselves. I do believe, though, that we should lead with nonviolence and lead with love.

I'm often disappointed with the talk about nonviolence, because there's no talk of the sacrificial love as a central feature. It's as though the absence of warfare is going to resolve the issue of violence. But unless people learn how to love each other, in spite of and not simply because of who they are, we won't be able to transform our community and the world.

How did you first become an activist?

Growing up in Texas, I witnessed a lot of violence. I remember the first time that I stumbled upon a Klan rally right in the middle of the woods. They had fires burning, and I was crouched there in the bushes. It was really scary. I recognized some of the folks under the hoods as white pastors.

Several of my friends were killed and nothing was heard of them. One of my friends had been dating this white girl, and when her father saw him, he killed him in front of everybody. Never had a trial or anything. I had friends come up missing. So those things had enormous impact on the way I think and the way I see.

My mother was the musician for our church and my father ran for mayor, and they've always been very active, so I was encouraged by that. I tried to use it as a tool against the violence I was experiencing. My family and I were very much a part of the civil rights movement. Out of any preacher or theologian, Dr. King was, for me, the person who truly lived out the principles of Jesus.

One of the things I used to hear in that era of my life is that nonviolence is not only about not fighting, but it's about making sure that people are taken care of. That reminds me of a story about a lady in our congregation who was a bootlegger. She made whiskey in her bathtub and she had a still in her backyard, and someone told the Sheriff. Now, she had two boys, and if the Sheriff came to arrest her, she was going to go to prison for a long time. As an African-American woman, she wouldn't have had any real trial, and she would've done 50 to 60 years for bootlegging.

My pastor said, we're going to go to her house and dismantle her still, and we're going to take all of her whiskey, and put it in the back of our cars, and take it to the church and put it in the basement. So that's what we did, and she averted being arrested. It was a controversial thing to do, but my pastor said it was the nonviolent thing to do because of all the violence that would have taken place—particularly to those young men who would've grown up without a mother. A lot of hurt. So that's part of what our nonviolence looked like.

Another time, when I was in high school, the town was trying to decide whether it was going to be a "wet" or a "dry" town, meaning whether you could sell whiskey. As this whole thing took place, people started to hate each other. We had a big backyard, and my mother decided to host a dinner for everyone in the town. At the dinner she said to everyone, we've come a long way, through many trials and great difficulty to get where we are. Surely we're not going to let a vote over whiskey destroy all of the stuff we built up. So that's part of our nonviolence looked like.

How did you first become an activist? How did you end up in New York?

I was in several different places before I came to New York. I was in graduate school at Duke University, and then I went to the seminary. In 1990, I came up here for vacation after the seminary, and then I decided not to leave.

Shortly after I got to Crown Heights, the—some people refer to it as a rebellion, others refer to it as a riot—broke out right in the midst of a witnessing. I'd never been in the middle of violent protest in my life; many of the protests that we were a part of became violent, but not on our part. This was the first time I saw black people and Jewish people at each other's throats, and it was scary.

I was very disappointed in the leadership on both sides of the issue. I felt that young black men were scapegoated for a lot of the wrongs, which was disturbing. There was not enough effort to really break through some of the deep things that were going on in the community. The truth is that African Americans and Jews share some of the same concerns about police brutality, economic concerns, poverty, substance abuse and all of those things.

My wife was very involved in trying to help. She was part of a group that used theater to address divisive issues. Ultimately, she and I decided to plant a church here to address the strain between communities and the violence that was taking place.
What do you see as the main issues affecting Crown Heights today?

I think that all the “things” that help produce violence—poverty, unemployment, and people not talking and understanding each other—all of those things play into the deep problems that we have. I’ve been a part of programs to try to address those issues. When the Mediation Center brought African American and Jewish young women together about three years ago, I co-directed the program. Those young women got a chance to work together to do some very meaningful projects, and that’s the kind of stuff that really transforms people. I don’t think there’s enough replication of that in the community.

Can you tell us about some of the other initiatives you work on?

We do a lot of work to support children in the community. For years we’ve done an after-school program that primarily works with kids having great difficulty in the community. I run once-a-week classes for youth where we talk about real issues that have an impact on people’s lives. We support parents, too. They had difficulty advocating for their children at open school night, so we go to help them talk to the teachers and advocate a plan so the kids can get where they need to be.

Around the holidays we also do a lot of work. On Thanksgiving we hosted a community meal for 130 people. On Christmas we have a toy “store” with brand new donated toys that we sell inexpensively, so that even parents who don’t have anything have a chance to buy something for their child’s gift. That way, they feel they’ve contributed something.

In the summer we run two camps over six weeks for children from Brooklyn and Manhattan. We write a curriculum around a theme every summer, like, “Welcome to the Neighborhood,” or “Be the Change,” and we do some themes around violence.

We have teams of people who come from all over the country to volunteer at the camp. The teams that come are entirely white and most of them are upper middle class to wealthy. Many of them have never been to New York and many of them have never even talked to people in this kind of neighborhood in their own cities. We encourage them to have relationships with people in their own communities, and we also have them commit to helping us long-term with the work that we do here: repairing people’s houses who can’t afford it, helping us at the church. It’s usually a great interaction between the volunteers and the kids. At the end of each week the kids cry because they don’t want the volunteers to go.

Tell us about the work you’ve done with the Mediation Center.

Well, initially I got involved with them because they were trying to bring the black and Jewish communities together, and I was interested in that. I did the Rites of Passage program for young men. That was a program to help young boys have a different understanding about manhood and help them deal with issues of violence, which they really struggle with in our community.

Three of the kids from that program are playing college basketball, several kids are going to college, and one is an attorney now! They’re all come through that transformation because of the work that we’ve done. I’m very proud of them.

Of course for a while I was in charge of organizing clergy to do nonviolence work. I’ve done press conferences, led trainings.

Do you think that clergy have a particular strength in this kind of work?

They should. They don’t always. I think that this whole issue of nonviolence is tailor-made for the church. And for most religious groups it should be the organizing principle. There are a lot of issues in the community that the church can take the lead on.

If you had endless time and resources, what would you do to help the community?

I would create more programs like the one we did for those young ladies, where people have real contact with each other. You can have all the conferences in the world on racism, and usually its wealthier people who come to those kinds of conferences. But if you create community programs where people of different races are in each other’s faces all the time, if you get people to solve problems together, that makes a difference. For instance, there was recently an incident with police brutality in the neighborhood, and I think that if the black and Hasidic communities came together and tried to challenge the way police operated in this community, we would have a lot of power. I’m also really into music, and I think that we could bring the community together around the arts. That’s what I would create if I had more resources.
Tell us about yourself and your involvement in the Crown Heights community.
I'm interested in looking at the human condition and helping ease disparities within our community. I've been doing community work and support for over 25 years.

My family and I are very connected to this neighborhood. We've spent most of our lives within three zip codes. I am a Church of God in Christ baby, and I went to school in Crown Heights. Growing up, Crown Heights was more of a community. You knew the families next door, you knew the people on the block, you knew who the neighborhood watch person was. There was more unity in the community when I was growing up.

Around the time of the crack epidemic in 1985, the unrest in our community was unbelievable. When my sons went out there, there were elements that I had to be concerned about: crime in the street, and the Police Department, which was not friendly toward African-Americans. We lived in the middle of the Hasidic community then, and sometimes my sons would be accosted by groups of young men of the Jewish faith and asked for ID. So I was afraid for them to go out of the house.

We lived through the riots in Crown Heights with Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum. After that, my sons worked with Richard Green, who got them to be a part of City Kids, and they took on social issues. So we've always been a socially conscious family.

What led you to S.O.S. and anti-gun-violence work?
I would say that a non-violent philosophy is important to me because it supports my philosophy of following in the steps and the life of Christ. My faith has grounded me and taught me to not only read the teachings of Christ, but to have them manifested in my life and in the lives of those who are connected to me. Scripture tells us to be angry but sin not.

Sometimes, when I am impassioned about certain social issues, I have an internal dispute about how to live in a place of peace and harmony and still get the desired results. Growing up, I was like Angela Davis: I had a big Afro, you know, power to the people. I think I've grown to be compassionate and nonviolent over time. It's a process, and I'm still in the process.

In the same way, I think that young people have to have some experiences that show them that violence is not the answer in order to know that violence is not the answer. They have to see that there's a different way. One of my youngest son's friends got into an argument with a grown man over some marijuana in the park down the street, and the man shot him and killed him. The boy was 15 years old. I think that that was the first pain I had gone through with my son having a friend who was killed in the street in our community. I think that had a real impact on him, to know that an argument could lead to someone being killed. That was about 22 years ago, and now we live in a time when young people resort to a gun as their first option. I think we are not at the level that we need to be at with love and compassion. Young people need to know that they are loved, that they are valuable, that they have something significant to contribute to our community and to our society.

What kind of work do you think needs to be done to reduce gun violence?
Sometimes I don't know whether faith leaders have been given the resources to have the kinds of programs in our community that can provide that love and compassion. When we grew up, they had the gym open at night, there were recreational places, and guys had somewhere to go. Those places are few and far between now.

I think that in the current government mentality, the inner city communities of color have been written off. And unfortunately that idea has trickled down to our communities and our children, that their lives are not valuable. This expectation that they're not going to live past the age of 21 is something that we have got to reverse. They need to know that they're fearfully and wonderfully made and that God has a plan for their lives.

But even with the lack of dollars in our community, the economic challenges, we can do something.

There's a new leadership from the faith community. These young people are the children of our congregation, and if we speak truth to them they will utilize our services as mediators. That's when we get to really live out our faith because Christ was the great mediator between God and man, and we've become the mediator between our young people and our community.
Tell us about your church and the services you provide.

We are a socially conscious, inner-city ministry that provides services in a holistic fashion, which minister to the body, the soul, and the spirit of families.

When I first came into doing ministry, my spiritual dad told me, “Your church is not going to be one of these mega churches; your church is going to be the emergency room. Now, people don’t stay in the emergency room; they either get discharged to go home, or they go up on the ward. When people come to you they will either be going through some sort of death or a transformation.”

So at our church, we know that people are coming through with some specific need to be addressed. It is my job to analyze what's going on, give them a treatment and a formula, get them ready to go out to give away on Monday what they’ve received on Sunday. My ministry is not really about what we do on Sunday morning; it's what we do during the week that really makes the difference.

What are some of the specific programs you run to help the community?

We do gun buy-back. People don’t feel comfortable around the police, but they’ll come to us and say, I have a gun, and I haven’t used it but I’ve got younger siblings in my household and I don’t want them to find it. I want this gun out of the house, and I want to turn it over to you.

We also do work with young women around domestic violence. There is a domestic violence shelter here. We’re involved in Safe Surrender, where people can come at a certain time if they’ve got an outstanding ticket or warrant, and it can be taken care of without any repercussions. We also have a lot of men who want to mentor; there was talk of doing a weekly program on Sunday nights, where young men and their mentors watch football together and talk.

One of the main programs that we do is around recovery. We have a contract with New York State to give support to families that are in recovery from alcohol, substance abuse, or mental illness. We give them some support and wrap-around services in order to unify the family and the community. We do some counseling, we do financial literacy. People can get support with housing, anger management, communication skills, civic restoration after prison.

Today I’m going down to the district attorney’s office to talk about the issues with the 77th Precinct. One of my sons is going with me, and the other one has a meeting with City Harvest because we’re going to take on a project serving meals and teaching people how to eat nutritionally. It’s about holistic ministry for us: body, soul, and spirit. You cannot ignore any portion of it.

If you had endless time and resources, what would you do to help the community?

I would get a recreational center put in our community. A center where young people would be able to come, almost like a one-stop, where they could get help with homework, get help finding jobs. There would be workshops and information on parenting skills. It would have a component for child care, and teaching sportsmanship, and cultural competency stuff. And it would have a miniature golf course in there. And they would feel safe. They would know that they can come to a place that belongs to them.
Rabbi Eli Cohen

Rabbi Eli Cohen is the executive director of the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council (CHJCC). He presides over the administration of numerous services to many low-income people within the community and advocates for more services and better standards in Crown Heights.

How did you come to live in Crown Heights?
I was born in England. I came to Crown Heights when I was 18 to study at a yeshiva (Jewish religious school), and I’ve lived here for 40 years now. I’ve been in Crown Heights almost exclusively since 1973.

What was life like growing up in England?
Very different than here. We lived close to Manchester, which is a big city, but it had a small town feel. There wasn’t much crime or violence at the time, but there was quite a bit of bias—the local population was very intolerant of Jewish kids. They would chase us down the street and knock off our hats, or shout things at us from a car or bus. Not really injury-producing violence but definitely things that were uncomfortable.

How did the community respond to those incidents?
My family lived in one of the suburbs and we would encounter these confrontations as we walked closer to the main concentration of the Jewish community, in the city. But it wasn’t much of a supportive community. More recently Jewish communities like the one we have here have banded together and have civilian patrols to prevent such incidents, but in those days people were not so activist and you were on your own.

How did the community evolve in Crown Heights?
When I arrived in 1973 there was a lot more random violence. People were attacked in the street, there was violent crime, muggings and such. Maybe because of difference but maybe it was random. There was tension between communities living here because some people felt that certain groups were getting more attention from the city government than others. But mostly it was just a fact of living in a very violent city: You weren’t sure if you could go out at night. So that’s been a positive change in the last 20 years, that the city’s become safer and the government is more responsive.

How did you first get involved with the Mediation Center?
Well the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council’s connection with the Mediation Center predates my tenure here. I inherited this connection and have since nurtured and continued it. Two years ago we worked together on a big event for the 20th anniversary of the riots. It was a great success, and there was a very positive feeling.

The Mediation Center was founded in the wake of the 1991 riots and was doing a lot of mediation between communities at first. One of the first things I did with the Mediation Center was a mediation with a pastor on the corner of Brooklyn Avenue who would always have issues with the Jewish school next to him. After the riots I was on a working committee that brought together people from various segments of the community. We met regularly and talked about neighborhood relations. They even had some press interviews to pick up the visibility of what was being done so that everyone should know that, God forbid, something did happen again there would be direct communication between leaders, and something would be done.
How have you been involved with S.O.S.?

In a few ways—last year I judged the Arts to End Violence competition. The art was very creative, really thoughtful and deep messages. I also have been to some of the shooting responses. I get the text messages that the Mediation Center sends out when there's a shooting, and I try to go to as many rallies as possible. It's important that the Lubavitcher community be involved, because it shows solidarity and concern. You guys are doing great work, I'm a big fan of the "interrupting" idea of going to the source of the violence. I once was in a meeting with the mayor, and I mentioned that I'd love to see programs like S.O.S. in more places.

What motivates you to work on bridging the communities?

My experience within the community is that you want to always have good neighborly relations. Our priorities at the CHJCC are to take care of the needy, to advocate for the community, and to foster positive relations with the various ethnic and social groups that make up our community. So it's really part of why we're here. I'm also motivated by my own moral compass. Part of my role as a leading person, as a rabbi in the community, is to foster positive values and teachings like "love your neighbor."

What services does the CHJCC provide?

I have a list of a dozen items or more that we do. We help people get access to government services: if somebody needs food stamps or Medicaid, if an elderly person needs to freeze their rent or an Access-a-Ride car—any city service that people are unable to navigate, we help them file paperwork or enroll online. We have immigration services and crime victim services. When a person is robbed and they don’t have money to buy groceries for the week, need to change their lock, or need to go to the doctor; we reimburse them for that.

What is one of the most common problems among the population?

We help homeowners with eviction prevention. That’s a difficult one these days because of gentrification. Gentrification is a result of this sense of safety. It’s a problem that comes from success, but there are very negative effects too. Populations that have been living here comfortably for years are now feeling price pressure; rents are going up, and we’re dealing with a lot more evictions. Sometimes we can get private funds involved to help people avoid eviction, but the funding for that kind of thing is less and less. Where do you tell them to go? There are not affordable places in this area for many families. It’s something we’re seeing from our clients, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

Are your services open to everyone in the community?

Yes, everyone! Anyone who lives in the area is welcome. One thing we do that has very wide reach is our weatherization program. We’re one of the providers in the area, helping people get their homes insulated and more energy efficient. After the major heat waves last year we got so many calls coming in for air conditioners. We were able to squeeze 45 units out of the funds allocated for 30, and they saw we did it so well that they gave us another allocation. So we helped over 60 people get air conditioners, especially those who had breathing problems. And I would say that out of the 60 people, probably 55 were people of color. We help anyone who walks through our door.

There’s a perception among some people in the neighborhood that the Jewish Community Council is there to help other Jews. We don’t get to talk about that because nobody asks, they just assume. We’re here for the community and everyone in it. Our senior program is very diverse. There are some programs that necessarily focus on the Jewish community because of the distinct traditions and codes we have. For example, we have a prevention program funded by the state to talk in the schools about problems of addiction to drugs, alcohol and tobacco. In our community you don’t talk about sex and drugs with youth, it’s much more sheltered, so we adapt the material to talk to them in a more acceptable way. So that program is more focused on the Jewish community but otherwise we help anyone and everyone.

What other misconceptions have you encountered in your work?

A lot of people think there’s no poverty in the Jewish community. But I can show you my roster—there’s on Passover we were giving away matzah and grape juice for free, and over 200 families showed up to collect it. The need often overwhelms funding. We have hundreds of families who are willing to come to a food line. At that point you know they’re doing it because they’re not going to make it otherwise. There’s the Chessed Center across from the Mediation Center that has maybe 60 people coming every night.

Someone from the Jewish community once told me they went to the White House to meet Bill Clinton and told him, I work for the Metropolitan Council for Jewish Poverty. Clinton said, Jewish poverty? I go to New York to raise money from the Jews! So there’s that misconception. Part of the difficulty comes from the fact that we have additional burdens here—everyone wants to give religious education to their families, and many have large families. Once you make the choice to live a certain way, you incur extra expenses.
An interesting thing about the Lubavitcher community, though, is that there aren't the same class divisions you see in larger society. In the shul (synagogue) people pray together; they don't divide based on the size of the pocketbook.

**Is there a particularly Jewish value to the work you're doing?**

Which page of the Bible do you want to start from? Honestly, though, it doesn't have to do with a specific commandment. We have the general directive to love your neighbor as yourself, and you have the commandment to open your door to the poor: In Hebrew it's "patach tiftach" or "open shall you open." That's a double expression, meaning that you have to continually open your heart to the poor and needy.

The stories we read to the kids before bed at night are often about the benefits of acts of charity. There's a story about the daughter of Rabbi Akiva, who did an act of charity and then that night unconsciously stabbed a snake that was about to bite her. If you tell those stories enough the teachings become part of your nature. It's the reflex of constantly helping.

**What's one of the greatest challenges you face in this work?**

We try to be generous but sometimes we have to draw a line in terms of who we can help. Those are very hard to draw, especially when resources are very limited and you can't give everybody everything you feel they are entitled to. There's a searing sense of self-doubt. Did I do that with a spirit that was less than generous? But you do the best you can and pray that you didn't hurt anybody.

Sometimes I worry that some people would be more generous, and are not giving only because I don't ask them. Of course, we're not the only organization that's helping people, so maybe those with resources are donating to a variety of places.

**If you had endless time and resources, what change would you like to make in the community or the city?**

We should develop more affordable property. That's the biggest need not being met. We created a program a few years ago to help people save money and fill out an application to get into their first home. But in this community the homes are very expensive, so many people earn a bit too much to qualify for assistance but they don't have enough money for a home here either.

We also want to help people get out of poverty. One of the things we're doing here is job training. Some people are averse to getting a job because the job will earn too much to allow them to stay on the assistance programs that they live from. They would often rather earn money by the sweat of their brow, but they can't afford to lose their Medicaid. Those are very difficult questions: When you have to worry about children and health, it's very hard to navigate a system where you might be earning enough to be able to survive, but not enough to live.

**Do you see violence as a major problem in the community?**

Right now, for the Jewish community, it's much reduced from what it once was. We do see some gang initiations where they have to go out and hurt a random person, and these kinds of crimes diminish the quality of life here. But while it may not directly affect the Jewish community, in our broader community it's devastating. It breaks my heart to see young people with so much future ahead getting senselessly dragged into violence. A few months ago two women who live right next door to me were fighting, and even after the police came one woman was pulling out a knife. I thought, why are you getting yourself locked up for no reason?

We read in the Bible that "Pharaoh hardened his heart," but later it says, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Why is that fair? If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, is he to blame? The reality of life is that if you make a bad choice many times, you become captive to that choice. At that point, you're a victim of circumstance.

These shootings that are connected to circles of enmity based on one single issue are so senseless. Plus there could be random people caught in the crossfire. It's humanity that's just destroying itself for no reason. So I really feel that if there's anything I can do, to be there as a voice of reason, then I want to be there.

Recently my son went to put a candle on the memorial where there had been a shooting in the neighborhood. He said to me, "I just want to be a part of it."
Bishop Willie Billips

Bishop Billips is the bishop and overseer of Faith, Hope and Charity House of God. He is an executive member of the 77th precinct Clergy Task Force and singlehandedly mediates disputes all over the neighborhoods of East New York, Brownsville, and others. Billips runs bi-annual “cease fire” events, bringing together members of gangs to discuss violence and peacemaking in their community.

What was your experience like growing up in East New York?

I was the neighborhood DJ, and I never got heavily involved in gangs or crime. I had a few spots, but I never served time in jail. When I was a teenager I thought I knew it all, and at 18 years old I became a father for the first time. I got married at 19 and had four children with the same woman. After 15 years the marriage crumbled, and I ended up raising the children alone.

What motivated you to stay on a positive path?

I also had God in my heart. I thank God my mother would march us to church every Sunday, even when my father didn’t go. If she wasn’t a God fearing person, my siblings and I wouldn’t have been all over the place. My mother wrote a letter on her deathbed in 1983 that said, all of you were taught the way. Repent, do the right thing by God. I’ve had that letter hanging up through all my years, even when I was doing things in the street.

Mothers are a very important influence in our community. I think that’s something missing, a program to involve mothers in anti-violence work. There is a new program called Young Mothers Love that had 5 or 6 young ladies at their first meeting, talking about the issues and the pressure. My wife is part of that. It’s a very good start.

How did you come to do spiritual and anti-violence work?

While I was struggling to raise my children alone, surrounded by all this violence, I knew there had to be a better life out there because I grew up in the church. My sister is a pastor, so she brought me back to the church, and I realized that I was supposed to have been there all along. I started answering my call, became a deacon, and it went from there.

My anti-violence work started with one incident; I have a nephew who was part of the Crips gang in Brownsville. One day he told me he wanted to get out of that gang, but to get out he would have to be “jumped out” and get beat up. I knew the guy who runs the gang, so I went to him and said I want to get my nephew out. He told me about the rules, but I talked him down so that my nephew only had to fight one guy. That success moved me. I watched him get beat up and it was very hard to watch, but I knew that he would have to go through that process to walk the streets safely. After a bit I said, “That’s enough now” and they stopped. They respected me.

After that the Crips leader said he wanted to talk to me. I told him to come down to the church, and we spoke one on one. Now, this guy controlled as many as 300 guys, but he sat there and poured his heart out to me and cried like a baby. He told me about the pressure to keep up his image, and how everybody's depending on him. I listened to him and said, you’ve got a lot of control. We can get some peace out of this!

But I watched him transform as he went out the front door: He was no longer this soft guy. Still, I knew that seed was there, and that motivated me.

How did you translate that encounter into broader anti-violence work?

Around that same time the Daily News ran a story about my wife and I and our involvement with gang mediation. My brother was working down at Clara Barton High School, and he told me that the leader of the local Bloods gang, who went to that school, saw the story and wanted to talk to me.

So those two gangs linked up with me, and I heard the two leaders were talking about some of the same things, which meant there was a potential for peace. It’s not so much that everybody wants to be bad. I see two of the toughest guys in the neighborhood, one-on-one, and saw them break down and cry before going back out with their tough exteriors. That was the beginning of our first “cease fire” event. Our event wasn’t related to the national movement in Chicago, but it was about bringing gangs together to dialogue about the violence taking place.

We started this “cease fire” event biannually, and it grew every year. I listened to a lot of their complaints about schools, unemployment, and all that. So I decided at the next event to bring in employers, trade schools, GED schools, because I thought, we need to bring the resources to them. They’re not going to go after these things themselves. After seven years I thought, let’s bring the community in; the mothers scared to go to stores, the guys they’re robbing. So now you have the whole community talking about how violence, and the behavior of these young men, makes them feel. After that I brought in the emergency room staff, which deals with gunshot wounds, and the funeral director. We’re incorporating a schoolteacher now, and we’re showing them: This is what the world is made up of, and this is how you’re affecting it with your behavior. I’m still doing these events. Could be 50-100 people come to the events, folks from all segments of the community, I keep doing it because I live in the neighborhood, and it’s real to me. I go into these stores with these guys, and my nephew is there, my grandchildren are there!

Are the gang members you speak with connected to church or spirituality?

Yes. You talk to their grandparents and they say, “I don’t know what happened to that boy he used to go to church with me all the time.” I was sitting in front of the church the other day, and I saw a young man who’d recently been charged with gun possession, all dressed up, I said, where’re you going all dressed up? He said, “I’m on my way to court; I’m trying to stay out here in the street, Bishop, can you say a prayer for me?” So he’s got good sense enough to realize, I’m in trouble—I need a prayer!
When I walk down the street, I deal with the community. I communicate. There are those who don't want to be bothered, so you don't bother them if you can get three out of five to come to church, that's great. Otherwise you don't interfere. That's what keeps me safe.

Are you ever scared to deal with people involved with violence?

I asked some gang members one day, "Am I safe?" Because I thought people were looking at me funny. He says, "Bishop, you don't have to worry. Everybody out here on both sides knows you're neutral."

Wherever they're fighting, I go. It's my calling. I go by myself into housing projects at 3am when there's an incident. I think that's just the favor of God that allows me to go out there and stay safe. I made a request for a bulletproof vest as soon as possible, too. It was a little scary at first, but you have to try.

I told my wife and the people I deal with: If anything ever happens to me in the street, shot or killed or whatever, know that I died doing what I believe in. I'm out there to encourage peace. My wife is my soul supporter. She knows I do what I do. Whenever I leave out we pray, and she says, "Come home safe."

How do you go about doing mediations?

I'm connected to the police now, so I hear on the police scanner or get a text from the Police Department when something's going on, I'll go wherever I can help. I went as far as the Bronx, but for the most part I'm in East New York. The police ask me to speak to those young people: when I talk to them, it works. I don't ever tell them, you're wrong. I say, let's talk about it. I know the cops be buggin' sometimes. You have to deal with them where they're at; you can't talk police talk to them.

I think it's very important to keep having clergy involved with the Police Department. Sometimes I get to the scene of a conflict before the police! I get a lot of respect from them: Once when a police officer was shot, I went to the hospital to meet him, and one of the lieutenants there saluted me! I saluted him back, and he said, "Right this way, Bishop." He took me directly to where the commissioner and the mayor were, and the commissioner said, "Bishop, thank you for being here."

It sounds like you're a one-man S.O.S. team!

I've recently begun grooming a few guys to work with me. Not everyone can do it, but I've got two or three guys in the area nearby who can come with me and mediate.

Have you ever seen people you work with transform?

The guy from the Bloods gang, I've seen him through a process of going to jail after we met, coming home, and now working somewhere in Manhattan. The Crip leader who broke down in the church, he was recently shot in the eye. But that's just given him more stripes, so it's business as usual.

What other organizing and charity work do you do?

I'm one of the executive members of the Clergy Task Force of the 77th Precinct. I really try to help the less fortunate families. I adopted a shelter called Women in Need, and twice a month I go there and take food, clothes, and toys for children. I've organized a few stores to help support that effort. And we help other shelters that help whole families. I even have a little table I keep outside with things I put out there to donate every day. I tell them, if you need it, it's there. Because even for working people, it's tough!

If you had endless resources and time, what would you do to help the community?

That's a great question. I had endless resources and time I would first put computer systems in every single classroom. Our children are behind, and in today's times, if you don't know how to use a computer, we don't need you. I want to make sure to hold teachers and principals accountable. I think some of them don't care because they're going to get paid whether these children learn or not. That's not acceptable.

What do you feel are some of the biggest issues in the community right now?

Definitely the issue of guns. Everybody has a gun, and that's the bottom line. Also teen pregnancy; there's a lot of that. I look at the issue of housing, too. I go to the shelter with all these families and people don't have any housing, but right nearby there are all of these apartments boarded up. They're on top of every store. Why don't we use those spaces? It's a no-brainer! I also wonder about holding stores and community stakeholders accountable. You ask stores for donations, they say they have no money. But everybody has something to give, even if it's just a little bit. So it's time we open our mouths and hold people accountable to helping the community.
Reverend Carolyn Frasier is the Pastor at Greater Mount Carmel Deliverance. Originally from rural Alabama, Frasier took over her husband’s ministry after his passing and has successfully led it through an active street ministry and various charitable projects.

Tell us about your spiritual journey.

My desire to help people and make a difference in people’s lives started when I was very young. I was born in Hoppersville, Alabama, a small town near Birmingham. I’m the second oldest of 12 siblings. My father wasn’t a good provider, and my mom couldn’t work because of so many kids, so we had to work in the fields to provide food and clothing for ourselves. I wasn’t able to attend school full-time. When you were in a situation like that, where you’re looked down upon, you see a lot of other people in difficult situations. It gave me compassion for people who were hurting and needed help.

In 1964 we left Alabama because my father, who was a construction worker, had mouthed off to his white managers. They said, you will never get a job again down here. It was a real threat. So he moved up to Ohio with his brother and said he’d come back for us. We were left in Alabama for a while, and were living very poorly. Sometimes we didn’t eat. People gave us food from their gardens, but there wasn’t welfare or anything.

Soon after, when we accepted the Lord in the sanctified church, a lady prophesied that things would begin to change for us, and they did. We were sitting outside our house when a woman just pulled over and started giving us all of this food and clothing she had in the trunk of her car. She had been driving down from Chicago to visit someone and bring them supplies, and she said the Lord had just moved her to stop the car and give to us. Not long after that, a cousin came to take us to Columbus, Ohio. That was one of the happiest days of my life, because I knew I wouldn’t have to work in the fields, so I would be able to go to school. I loved school, I loved learning! Even got a little job and would donate some of my money to charity.

In 1966 I came up to New York to visit my sister who was living here with my aunt. I didn’t plan to stay, but my sister told me I should. You see, the two of us were on a spiritual journey. We both got saved in our teens, and my parents weren’t saved, so they didn’t understand what we were going through. But my aunt was saved and she could relate to us.

How did you become a pastor?

When I first came to New York I got a job in a factory, and then I trained as a typist. At the time I was working with a powerful man of God, Arturo Skinner at Deliverance Evangelistic Ministries. I was very active in the church: I did evangelical work, I went to Bible School, I traveled with an evangelist nurse, and I was even in the choir. We had a street ministry on 42nd Street, and we would testify and pass out tracts there.

One day a woman from the church said, “I have somebody I would like you to meet.” At the same time, my future husband was home listening to a record, and he heard God say, “I’m gonna put something new in your life.” Then he got a call from this same woman. After the service she introduced us, and he told me later that he knew right away that I was his wife. While my husband was pastor at Greater Mount Carmel, he considered me his assistant pastor, though I didn’t want that title at first. As he became sick, the church asked who would take over after he passed. He said that I would take over. Some people didn’t like that. Some said I wasn’t strong enough, or I wasn’t supposed to be a pastor because I was a woman. Others were glad because it kept the ministry in the family.

About a month before my husband passed, God began dealing with me, preparing me to step into that place. He gave me a vision one night. God told me, don’t fear, I’m going to take you to my school and teach you everything that you will need to know as a leader, as a pastor. He gave me Isaiah 41:10: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.” I began to wrestle with that spirit of the Lord and I just couldn’t contain myself. My husband woke up and said, “Carolyn, what’s the matter with you?” I explained to him that God was preparing me to take over. He said he knew it all along.

What was your husband’s ministry like?

He was a very loving man. He was always helping people find jobs and go to college. He was a carpenter by trade, and he’d help many of the young men in his church get into the carpenters’ union. He was also very compassionate in helping small ministries to get money and survive. He began a project called Unity and Strength, pulling in small churches to work together to do things like send children to school or buy homes for people.

Our ministry started in a living room with about a dozen congregants. When we outgrew that space we looked around and found this church, which was about half the size it is now. We didn’t even have the money to pay for it at the time, but the bishop who owned it was very generous and let us rent the space while we raised the funds.

Soon after, when we accepted the Lord in the sanctified church, a lady prophesied that things would begin to change for us, and they did. We were sitting outside our house when a woman just pulled over and started giving us all of this food and clothing she had in the trunk of her car. She had been driving down from Chicago to visit someone and bring them supplies, and she said the Lord had just moved her to stop the car and give to us. Not long after that, a cousin came to take us to Columbus, Ohio. That was one of the happiest days of my life, because I knew I wouldn’t have to work in the fields, so I would be able to go to school. I loved school, I loved learning! Even got a little job and would donate some of my money to charity.

How did you end up in New York?

In 1966 I came up to New York to visit my sister who was living here with my aunt. I didn’t plan to stay, but my sister told me I should. You see, the two of us were on a spiritual journey. We both got saved in our teens, and my parents weren’t saved, so they didn’t understand what we were going through. But my aunt was saved and she could relate to us.

How did you become a pastor?

When I first came to New York I got a job in a factory, and then I trained as a typist. At the time I was working with a powerful man of God, Arturo Skinner at Deliverance Evangelistic Ministries. I was very active in the church: I did evangelical work, I went to Bible School, I traveled with an evangelist nurse, and I was even in the choir. We had a street ministry on 42nd Street, and we would testify and pass out tracts there.

One day a woman from the church said, “I have somebody I would like you to meet.” At the same time, my future husband was home listening to a record, and he heard God say, “I’m gonna put something new in your life.” Then he got a call from this same woman. After the service she introduced us, and he told me later that he knew right away that I was his wife. While my husband was pastor at Greater Mount Carmel, he considered me his assistant pastor, though I didn’t want that title at first. As he became sick, the church asked who would take over after he passed. He said that I would take over. Some people didn’t like that. Some said I wasn’t strong enough, or I wasn’t supposed to be a pastor because I was a woman. Others were glad because it kept the ministry in the family.

About a month before my husband passed, God began dealing with me, preparing me to step into that place. He gave me a vision one night. God told me, don’t fear, I’m going to take you to my school and teach you everything that you will need to know as a leader, as a pastor. He gave me Isaiah 41:10: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.” I began to wrestle with that spirit of the Lord and I just couldn’t contain myself. My husband woke up and said, “Carolyn, what’s the matter with you?” I explained to him that God was preparing me to take over. He said he knew it all along.

What was your husband’s ministry like?

He was a very loving man. He was always helping people find jobs and go to college. He was a carpenter by trade, and he’d help many of the young men in his church get into the carpenters’ union. He was also very compassionate in helping small ministries to get money and survive. He began a project called Unity and Strength, pulling in small churches to work together to do things like send children to school or buy homes for people.

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The night he passed I saw, all of a sudden, around his hospital bed, lights. Circling, twinkling. I'm rubbing my eyes because I'm saying, I'm just too tired. But I realize now that the angels had come to take him away. The day of his funeral was the day he was scheduled to be ordained as a bishop. They honored him anyway.

What wisdom did you gain from that experience?
God will put people into your life who will pray for you and give you support and strength in times of need, and you have to help others in turn. I know that sometimes in this evil world, Satan messes people up so badly that they can't see who they really are, they can't see their potential. And it's my desire to help to bring out some of that potential in people's lives. That's what I want to do until I die. There are so many people in this community who need help, who need someone to reach out to them, to show compassion and love. I struggle with a lot of things myself, but my desire to help bring out the best in people remains.

What are you struggling with?
I've been saved since I was 16, and I'm now 64, but I never had as many trials in living saved as I've had since my husband passed. Like all hell's been loosed against me. Several of my children left the church because they couldn't understand why God would take their father. Six years later God came back and took my daughter, who was my assistant pastor.

I also struggle with myself because I wonder, is there more that I could be doing as a pastor? I would like to find people of like minds and like passions to help carry out the vision. And I don't just want members; I want leadership! But it's hard to get people out for prayer, for the Word, for Bible study. There have been times I felt like throwing in the towel, but then the spirit of the Lord would impress upon me so heavy: don't you do that. And I couldn't. I always go back to that experience when He said, I'm gonna take you to My school. God's school is not easy. Now that my children have begun to come back to the church, I'm taking heart.

What are some of the ways your church serves the community?
This place, ever since we opened our doors, it's been a healing place. We take in people who have been broken, who have no direction as to where they should go. We want to be a lighthouse, a source of help for our community. I believe that we're on this earth to be of service to others. Folks around here would tell you, this is a church that is always giving. People come to the church many times with a sad story; they have relatives who died, who got out of jail, just got out of the hospital. They come because we're known for giving.

My husband and I used to take people into our home until they were able to get up on their own feet. One young woman, my husband's relative, her mother kicked her out because she got pregnant. We brought her and her baby in for a while because they had nowhere else to live. Many young men who had lost their places, we would bring them in until they could get on their feet again. In the '90s, after a storm in the Smoky Mountain area in North Carolina, our church got together and brought a truckload of food and clothing down because one of the members was from there. So that's the type of thing we were known to do.

Have you ever seen someone's life transform through your care?
There was a woman who came into the church after a lifestyle of drugs. She said she heard one of the saints in here singing, and God led her to come in here, and she remained here until her death. She became a source of inspiration and a pillar of strength and prayer. The night before she passed I was visiting her and she pulled me down on my knees and said, I got to pray for you. I think she was trying to strengthen me; she was one of the people who were really there for me when my husband passed.

What are the strengths and challenges of being a clergy member doing community work?
You get these pastors together, they can do powerful work. If you just want to help people, without caring who gets the credit for whatever you're doing, you can do a lot. But that seems to be the problem for a lot of leaders and pastors in the church: they're not willing to take the low seat. The main thing is that we want people to come together because then I'm telling you, things happen! If you believe in God and in the work you do, you might be surprised who shows up to help.

If you had endless time and resources, what would you like to do to help the community?
I would love to help young men, especially those who have come out of jail, who are down and out, help them to get jobs. That was what my husband wanted, too; to help build people up, so that they could be productive in life. I love helping those who can't help themselves, to let them know that they are special in the eyes of God, to help them have hope.
Tell us about yourself. What path led you to become a reverend in Crown Heights?

The Lord sends many afflictions to the righteous, but he delivers us from them all. I came to this country when I was 18 years old, then I joined the military, did service in the time of Vietnam. After ten years I came out and did a little hustling. But even though things were going well according to the worldly standards of money and so forth, there was an emptiness in my heart.

We’re talking about the ’70s through the ’90s. That was a time when drugs, especially cocaine, were very popular in New York, in Brooklyn, in Crown Heights. I did my stomping on Franklin Avenue.

What kind of violence did you encounter in those days?

I’ve been shot at, I shot a lot of people. I don’t know that I’ve killed anyone but things can happen in the midst of all that mess. Because Franklin Avenue, that was the Wild West. I was living at 77 St. Marks at the time. That was the worst building in Crown Heights. There was shooting, killing, drug dealing in that lobby.

I used to do things that you wouldn’t even imagine, things I can’t even talk about. I used to be a bill collector and I would walk with a gun to collect that money. Once, I was going to shoot at somebody because he was avoiding. They pointed him out to me, and I pulled out the gun from my car. I was on Franklin Avenue by Lincoln. People saw the gun and started running and hiding, and the cops came up behind me. But God protected me. The cops did not see the gun, and I also could not shoot this guy—he got away from me. Imagine what I might have done.

That lifestyle is about claiming territory and standing your ground. Many of the dealers were trying to make fast money and get out, so they had no scruples. People would get into drugs without realizing that it was a whole system, and they got sucked in, became victims to it. I buried many of my friends back then, and as a pastor I bury many more.

Did you ever hear about people trying to escape from that world? Did you try to escape?

A lot of people wanted to get out because things were not working for them, they lost money, became addicted. But people were too caught up with it, emotionally and spiritually. You might not be physically engaged, but that world holds you in other ways. They were blessed by the devil. When God blesses you, he’ll bring you up. When the Devil blesses, he’ll bring you up but then he drops you.

At the time I was in search of a higher power, but I was against religion. My first wife divorced me because she couldn’t put up with my crazy lifestyle. After that, I met my current wife, who supported me and told me “Papi, let’s go to church.” I said, “Go to church? For what?” She said, “You need God.” I said, “God is with me,” and she said, “But you are not with God.”

That triggered something inside of me, so I decided to give it a try. I was reluctant to go to church at first, but my wife wanted me to and I was crazy about her. So I went, even though I was still out there dealing and doing drugs.
What was the most difficult about leaving that lifestyle behind?

I used to have homeless people sleeping in the church, sometimes up to 20 people. We had a church on Franklin Avenue for almost 13 years. As the neighborhood demographics started changing my landlord felt that he could do more with my place so he forced me out. I went back to Bed-Stuy, put a tent in the street and started preaching. But the homeless people we were helping went back the streets, becoming victims or victimizing others.

How does your ministry help people make positive choices?

The thing that I always try to do first is to help meet the people’s needs. I get food for them. You cannot talk to somebody who’s got an empty stomach. I also try to help them with their immigration status, going with them to their meetings and appointments. If we can have the resources to meet people’s needs, I believe they would not be out there shooting.

I’m also working with workers, to unionize those who are underpaid, working for below minimum wage, I’m championing those who are the car wash, those who are picking the vegetables. I go to the clergy council and ask for donations, and many people promise me help but don’t deliver. You know what makes a good pastor? It’s not a preacher, it’s a teacher. It’s the love for the souls. S.O.S. has a love for the people, and that’s what makes this organization so great.

I pray to God that the pastors who stand up on their podiums and preach can come out of their churches because it’s the ones who come and get their hands dirty that make a difference. The people see them and say, if he’s out here with me then maybe God is something good. The community needs to see us out here because they don’t trust government, they don’t trust agencies, who give them empty promises. We are the ones they trust.

Have you ever seen someone turn his or her life around?

When I came out of the military I lived in Fort Greene, which was very tough in the ’70s and ’80s. I sold drugs, and I had all these kids from the projects flocking to me. One of them, Brodas, was like a son. He was tall and went to college to play basketball, but dropped out because of his addiction. He was bitter and angry because things were not working out, and he became abusive to his women, children, and other guys. He became a victim of this system that never gave him a chance.

Brodas heard that I was preaching the word so he came to me. I could see in his face that he was dried up. I got him involved in going to church and meetings. At first he couldn’t understand what God was doing, it wasn’t total surrender. He was stubborn and still wanted worldly things. I told him, you can get all the best of the worldly goods, but you’ll still have that emptiness in your life. You’ll always go through trials and tribulations, but when you have God in your life, you’ll know what it’s for. So he’s on a better path now.

What do you see as some of the most pressing issues facing the neighborhood today?

The problem today centers on the youth. Back in our day, we’d fight each other but then shake hands afterward. Today they’re not coming together, there’s no love in the kids. Society has become so indifferent and so afraid of the youth today that they don’t want them messing around in the house, but they do worse things outside.

How can we address those issues?

We’ve got to make programs for youth; a pool, a club, we have to build those. We’ve got to find out what is the need among the youth. We have to keep a schedule and plan it so we’re meeting their needs.

S.O.S. does a great job speaking to the youth because the team can identify with the problem. But they are only few, and there’s so much bitterness out there. So the clergy have to help them, have to bring out the love of God. We can’t stop all violence. It’s too deep. But at least we can curb it. There’s so much to do.
Reverend Jerry West

Reverend Jerry West is the pastor at Mount Moriah Baptist Church and has served as president of the 77th Precinct Clergy Council for 13 years. Rev. West is a longstanding community organizer, involved with leaders like Rev. Al Sharpton and others. His activism and involvement in the community has earned him the nickname “The Mayor.”

Tell us about your involvement in the Crown Heights community.

I’ve been pastoring at Mount Moriah Baptist Church for 32 years. When I first came here, there was a lot of poverty. We used to have a community outreach day we called Mount Moriah day. We made hats and you’d see the little hoodlums wearing them all down Eastern Parkway. Once, one of the police captains called me and said, “Rev. West, we got one of your young people here down at the precinct.” They told me his name, and I didn’t know the guy. But somehow he got one of the Mount Moriah hats. So I went down to the station and said to the boy, “You know you haven’t been to Mt. Moriah church, and I don’t know you.” He said, “Yeah, but Rev, I knew you could help me.” He hadn’t done anything major, so I talked to the officers and they agreed to give him another chance. I haven’t seen that kid since. But that’s the kind of thing we do.

How does your church serve the community?

Mount Moriah is a place where the lost, the weary, the despondent, and the shackled, come for a second chance. It used to be a very close community here. We all used to leave our doors unlocked. Once, I was walking down Eastern Parkway, and I saw the lights on in the church, but we didn’t have services that night. I wondered why the lights were on, and then I realized. A lot of the little hoodlums lived in real tight corners and they wanted to get away from their homes, and our doors were unlocked so they hung out here. This was their escape, this was their place.

One of the kids was always getting into trouble, and I would help him out of it. Recently he came back and told me, “Rev, you’re like the only father I ever had. Thank you for all the time you spent trying to work with me.” He has a career in the Army now.

Once I got a phone call about 3:30 in the morning. It was a group of the little hoodlums that used to hang out at my church, calling to tell me they got arrested. So in the morning I called a few friends and got them some Legal Aid attorneys. The kids called me and said, “They told us to take a plea.” I said, “Did you do anything?” They said no. Turns out, the they went to a store and asked for a cup of coffee or something, and the storekeeper saw all these black kids coming into the store and thought, they’re going to rob me. So he pulled some kind of sword or knife on them and threw them out of the store. They called the cops, and then the cops came and arrested them, and now they gotta take a plea and pay a fine. I called some more people, who were able to help them out of it. Now, these same young guys would’ve ended up doing time for nothing. That happens a lot in this community. You get busted over nothing, you go to jail, and if you have nobody to speak for you, they’re going to offer you a deal, and you’re going to have to take it. So we try to be the voice that speaks up for people.

How did you get started doing community organizing?

My first big project happened when I was just starting out as a young pastor. I was having a board meeting with all the trustees, and this young woman comes in and asks to use the restroom. I let her in, and then the deacon told me that she was a 12-year-old prostitute working in Lincoln Terrace Park, right near the church.

Turns out, Lincoln Terrace Park was a hub of prostitution. I said, we got to do something about this. We can’t have these little kids selling their bodies down the street from the church. I called the major politicians and asked them to help me with a campaign to clean up Lincoln Terrace Park. But everybody said, “Rev, you don’t know what you’re doing, and challenging pimps is dangerous.” I was young, energetic and inspired so I went ahead without them. I got some of the deacons and some of the sisters to come with me and I told them, “We’ve going to go into the park and focus on the people. We’ll win those people to the Lord.”

The press came that day, with the cameras and all that. We went up there carrying pamphlets with the story of Jesus Christ and His love for us, and started telling them, “You don’t have to live like this.” We did that almost every day for about a month. I could feel the agony there. Some of them came out and we prayed together.

I brought these kids back to the church, to help them find somewhere to stay. Some of the parishioners said we shouldn’t bring such people into the church. I said, nobody was born saved, some of y’all were drug addicts or alcoholics, some of y’all were gamblers, so these are young teenage prostitutes. They need our help.

About two months later I was out walking on Linden Boulevard, and this young girl said, “Hey Mayor! Remember me? I was one of the teenage prostitutes at Lincoln Terrace Park that you referred to a program.” She had been renovated, rehabilitated. She was in school and she started getting her act together. These kids just need to hear the Word.

What other community organizing initiatives have you been involved with?

Reverend Al Sharpton and I, we used to work on planning the National Youth Movement together. Once we did a march called “From Crack to Christ.” We got a casket that symbolized what happens to people who do drugs, and we started here at Mount Moriah with maybe 40 people. By the time we got down about 10 blocks there must have been 100 people in the march. It was a good drive to let the folk know that we care. That’s what I see with S.O.S.—y’all really saying to the folks, “We care.”
How did you get involved with S.O.S.?
I got connected with the Mediation Center through the 77th Precinct Clergy Council. I started working with the 77th Precinct Clergy Council maybe 13 years ago, and I've been president ever since. We've done all kinds of things: a lot of networking, trying to get groups connected with resources. When people came in from Louisiana with nowhere to stay after the hurricane, I called upon the clergy from the 77th Precinct and we raised $1200. There were three families that came to us, we didn't know them from Adam, and we divided the money between them. One lady started crying because she said, you don't even know us! I said, we don't have to know you to love you.

I tell the clergy, you've got to put your mouth on the table! Meaning, don't just talk—act. I admire the S.O.S. team because they put their bodies on the line. They're practicing nonviolence. I used to work with Benny Garcia, a civil rights activist, and he said, you know you're really committed to non-violence when you're sitting on a barstool and somebody comes and stab the person right next to you, and you're still sitting there on the barstool waiting to be served. Never striking back. The S.O.S. team is walking in the street at 2 o'clock in the morning, no guns, getting shot at, but they're still there. That's true nonviolence.

Where does your nonviolent philosophy come from?
I think because of my various experiences I've realized that violence doesn't solve your problem. It motivates people, and somewhat insulates them from their real, emotional problems.

So how do you stop violence?
You can't help somebody else be happy if you're not happy yourself. Love has a multitude of forms. And the power of love is still greater than the power of hatred, the power of revenge. I'm thankful for having seen the power of love in my life. That thankfulness motivates me when I don't feel like working any more.

What are some of the root causes of violence in the neighborhood?
A lot of people in the community come from single parent homes. And that creates a void. It doesn't mean it's a "broken home." Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson came from single parent homes, and they did well, but they had mentors. There's a void of mentorship in our community because of the economic hardship. Everyone feels that, "I ain't got time to be sitting out with young ones, I got my own problems."

Did you witness violence growing up?
The only violent incident I ever had was once I was walking with my brothers and got left behind, and this guy put a zip gun up to my head. I started talking—you should have heard me! I was quite the talker. It seemed like hours, and I was thinking, if he hits that nail he's gonna blow my head off. When my brothers realized I was gone they came back and the guy ran off. That was the closest to violence I ever want to be.

I grew up in Long Island City, in the Queensbridge projects. When I grew up there were no drugs, no fighting, no shooting. It was like family—everybody helped raise the others' kids. There were gangs, but they weren't violent. I come from a very large family, 13 of us, and there were so many West kids that every gang in the projects had a West. We were on both sides of every conflict. I learned to appreciate the fact that, although something could go down, it's your own blood on either side.

You have to make that connection with the guys now, you have to bridge that gap. It's not Bloods and Crips, it's just everybody is looking to be a part of something. It used to be that your community was your family, but it's not like that anymore.

How did you end up in Crown Heights?
When I started the church here in Crown Heights, I didn't have a dime. No people, no nothing. The Lord told me to start my ministry here. I walked past this building and I thought, these people need that as a space for prayer. I went and told the owner that I wanted the building to do some mission work, but I ain't got no money. He said, I tell you what, you can have the building if you just find the man who has the key. All he gave me was his name. But because I was connected in the community I knew that man, so I ended up picking up the building for almost no money. When you make up your mind to do something for God, you don't need no cash.

If you had unlimited resources and time in the community what would you like to see done?
I'd rebuild economic and family values. I would go back to the old foundations. That's what I would do. I think just creating jobs is not going to answer the question. Because if I'm a junkie or a thug and you give me a job without changing me, it's just going to help me be a bigger junkie, or a better-dressed thug.

Now, the resources to build the programs we want is right in the street. Every time they bust a drug deal for millions of dollars, where does that money go? The money for our community is right in the street.
Growing up in Williamsburg, did you witness violence?
There were gangs in our community, but they didn’t have the same kind of weapons. There were fights, but those who fought wound up being friends next week. I don’t think the violence was as vicious as it is now. There was domestic violence, and rapes were prevalent. But gun violence was very rare. We didn’t have guns! That’s the problem now: There are so many guns.

What kept you on a positive path?
One reason we were deterred from violence is that we went to church regularly. Secondly, my mother made sure we were out of the projects. My father worked, but we had older brothers, and if they weren’t home your neighbors would knock on the door and check on you. There was protection in communities. If you were in your own community you were safe. Now there are turf wars among people living across the street from each other.

Tell us about your spiritual journey.
My family was very religious. I attended a small congregation that gave me a good foundation for spiritual life. My pastor was a great preacher and great man. He was a model I could look to for spiritual guidance, but also involved in the community.

In 1978 I had an automobile accident and started really believing that God, because he spared my life, was pushing me into the ministry. So I went to Bible school and became assistant pastor at the church I grew up in. Then in 1980 I started this ministry, and I’ve been here ever since.

We have 300 members on roll, and on Christmas we have 500. It’s predominantly African American, 90 percent, and 10 percent Hispanic. The majority don’t come from around here. We are known in the neighborhood though.

We have a lot of men in the congregation; that’s a rarity in the African American community. Men sometimes don’t want to listen to another man preach about what they’re doing wrong. Also, they feel there’s no camaraderie for them here. I make brethren introduce themselves to one another, to set an atmosphere where men want to come back.

How did you get involved with anti-violence activism?
Our church is involved with the gamut of problems in the community: AIDS, education, but specifically crime. We lost a 15-year-old member of this church. He came from an intact family, was a good student in school, wasn’t involved in any criminal activity, then got shot at 15 years old. He went to play basketball in Bushwick and a young lady said something derogatory to him, he spoke back to her, and then she called her boyfriend, who shot him in the back and killed him. A lot of young people in our church vowed that they would try to do something in honor of this kid, Larry Hill. We wanted to try to prevent this kind of thing from happening, so we started marching and speaking to young people in the community. From there we decided to galvanize community residents and leaders and clergy people to do something about the violence.

A group of clergy, Rev. Jones and others, went to Commissioner Kelley and told him that the crime level in our communities, though it has abated somewhat, was still too high. Seemed like every other week or month some person in the African American community was dying, and not just here, but throughout the U.S. and inner cities. We asked him, what could we do? So we joined the Brooklyn Clergy Task Force with the NYPD.

How do you work with the police as a clergy member?
For all my life, living in this city, there’s been friction between the police and the African American community. I had rested a lot of judgment on police behavior, but through the training I got a better appreciation for what they have to do. So we wanted to bridge the gap and build relations between the police and the community.

We work with the police, trying to promote respect on both ends. I once witnessed a Caucasian police officer apprehend an African-American female who was suspected of robbery and then punch her in the face. I called internal affairs and the Civilian Complaint Review Board. So whoever commits violence, we want it to stop.

What do you feel are the root causes of violence?
We tried to speak to some gang members and understand their perspective. Some of the concerns [of the gang members we spoke to] were very vital: no recreation in our community, no services, no jobs. So we started trying to address the human needs among them. Gangs serve as recreation and also families for some of these guys. A place for them to belong and feel protected. So you have to provide services to fill that gap.

Still, I feel that their number one problem is a spiritual problem. We’re born in sin and shaped in iniquity so anybody has the capacity to hurt somebody unless they’re turned around.

What are some ways to intervene in cycles of violence?
The first line of teaching, the way for a child to become a leader, starts in the home. Paul says that when parents teach children how to respect authority, from the home, it has an upward effect. If I respect my parents then I’m going to respect my teachers, and then that spills out to respecting the adults in the community, respecting police and those who govern, and respecting bosses and even employees. That’s the responsibility of every parent to make their child a productive citizen in society. So a lot of the violence that takes place is attributable to the breakdown in families, especially African-American families.

What are systemic changes that need to happen?
Education is big. In 1840 the only people who were being educated were the rich, but they found out that because people...
weren't being educated they were becoming addicted, going to jail, and committing crimes. So people rallied around providing education for all to prevent violence and have a better society. Today we don't have sufficient schools, so there is a school-to-prison pipeline. As young children, African-American kids are already getting picked up and getting records. Now with a record, how's that kid going to survive in this society? They're going to find a way to survive, but their skills won't be harnessed in a productive way.

Finland has the #1 education system. They start nurturing the kids before they're born and they meet the children's needs. They also have a system where kids don't compete as much, they help one another. And their crime rates are low!

But you see educated people committing crimes all the time too. So the most imperative piece is the church. The spiritual piece is big. No matter your status, you need Christ in your life.

How does your church try to intervene in the cycle of violence?
I try to incorporate it in sermons and to talk about the need for respect in our community. I talk about respect for authority and for each other. I try to implement the love of Christ, get people to love one another. I think that stops lawlessness.

The other way we intervene is by reaching out to people who are in need. Some people are committing crimes because their basic needs are not being met. They feel hopeless, as if no one cares about them. So we just walk the streets and talk to young people, ask why they're involved in gangs and violence. It gives them a way to vent, but it also gives them a way to see there's a better life out there.

What services does your church provide?
We do individual counseling and group counseling and religious talks. We do rap sessions with youth about problems in the community, which help us understand the problems going on in school and with parents. Then I'll tailor my sermons to address those problems.

We do street ministry and go to places where they're going in for parties and hand out tracts. We show people alternatives; trying to keep them out of teenage pregnancy, AIDS, drugs, all of those things. The young people now face more difficult problems than we ever faced.

There's also a men's support group, there's a substance abuse group for people who are addicted, there's a group where married couples having problems come to work out solutions. We have a prison ministry, where we go to prisons and have the choir singing, and give a word, and some people come out of prison and now come visit the church. There are men in our church who were once in prison, some were in gangs, some involved with domestic violence, drugs, but Christ got in their lives and changed their minds. That's the greatest part, to see people's lives turn around and bring hope to hopeless situations.

What are your biggest struggles in this work?
My biggest struggles are getting pastors to come together and understand this work in the community. Now some pastors don't believe in going to the streets, they'd rather preach the gospel in their churches and try to affect people that way. But if we look at the example of our savior, he was in the streets, in the villages and cities, reaching people and turning systems around. So I take that approach, trying to make change and speak truth to power.

I try to tell clergy that God has allowed churches to be a beacon in the community, and that we should be doing more to impede the violence. I say to them, I know you didn't initiate the violence, but let's try to liquidate it. It's hard to lead leaders; their time is busy. But if you're burying your people every other month, I don't know how busy you can get. You're going to conferences and preaching all over the country, but you come back and every other week there's a shooting or murder in your community!

If you had endless time and resources what would you like to do to improve the community?
First I would employ people. That way parents can serve as a model to their families and give their kids a sense of work ethic. Then I would put block watches together so the community could police itself. This problem presents an opportunity: We can put positive men in the schools, and that would help with employment. It makes a total difference. I'd put in recreation. I would have an education component for kids who are struggling. I would beautify the community, implement more churches. Churches are lowering the crime rate, getting guns off the street. The commissioner said so himself. Fight crime, I would fight crime if I had the resources.

Who are your role models?
Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, all of them. Also Bishop Lyons. He's a very meek and mild guy but he's sincere about what he's doing. He's 90 years old and still going. That encourages me.
Reverend James Neville

Reverend James Neville is the pastor at Holy Temple of Prayer Inc. His ministry is known for children’s adoptive and foster-care services, taking many local children under their wing as family.

Tell us about your background. What struggles did you have growing up?

I had a very rough upbringing in the South Bronx. My father was a drunk, my mother was a prostitute. I had five siblings. My older sister was married at that time, but we all lived together. We moved to Brooklyn in 1966, when I was in high school. My mother thought well of me in school because even when I was in 9th or 6th grade I was at a 9th or 10th grade reading level. She had prep me to take the test for the magnet high schools, Stuyvesant and Brooklyn Tech, but I failed the test.

I dropped out in the 10th grade because I wanted to become a street hustler. A lot of my friends were street hustlers. I had been shooting drugs since I was 12 years old. I started running numbers. This was in the early '70s before they had the state lottery, and the number runners in the street were making lots of money. At 17 years old I made $2,500 in no time.

From 17 to almost 30 years old I was a street hustler. My wife was part of that too. She was a thief. She would steal mink coats on 7th Avenue in Manhattan. She also used to cut up dope—heroin. We were all heroin users. We were selling drugs, stealing, hanging out in bars, and living on Parkside Avenue in Brooklyn with a doorman.

Did you experience violence in that lifestyle?

Violence wasn’t really a part of my life. We were money hustlers and when you’re getting money you don’t want there to be any trouble. We had gangs, but they weren’t violent. We were fancy guys—we had good clothes, girls, cars, gator-skin shoes, tailor-made suits.

I knew a lot of people making good money then, but if all went away. Most of the people I knew are either dead or in jail, or just running the street, alcoholics, or on drugs. A couple of them got saved, but the ones who did not get saved got nothing. If they see me, they know I’m in the church and they say, “Pray for me.”

How did you get involved in ministry?

At that time my father-in-law pastored this church. His daughter was my girlfriend and running mate, and they were fighting like crazy. He was angry about what she was doing, but he just prayed for his daughter, because what could he do? She was on drugs, and didn’t want any part of the church. Then she got arrested and served three years in jail. We had children together, but we lost them at a young age because we were drug addicts. They went to foster care until their grandmother took them in and raised them in this church.

When my girlfriend got arrested I lost my apartment on Parkside because she was a big piece of our income. I started selling drugs. I was sleeping on my brother’s couch, I was distraught. I was so addicted to cigarettes that I’d pick the butts up from the street and smoke them. I had no job, no skills, my wife was in jail, my kids were with my in laws. I got to the point where I was thinking, “I got a job I thought I was president of the United States."

A couple of my partners in the hustling business went to the church and got saved in the ’80s. They came to me and said, “You need to get yourself together man. Come to church with us.” They took me to the church of this well-known preacher called Norville Hayes. That night I got out of my seat and I went up in front of that audience and BOOM, I fell out. I said, “You need to get yourself together. I love you, but you’re done.”

How did your wife adjust to that change?

My wife had a similar journey. While she was in prison there was a couple doing prison ministry, and they took my wife to their home in Jersey. They were really working with my wife, trying to prep her to be released from the prison. When she came out she was ready to join me. We even found our own place. I had a full-time security job. Before that I had my first ever job as a messenger. I was making $335 an hour, but I was so happy. You’re talking about a hustler who never worked a day in his life, so when I got a job I thought I was president of the United States.

What challenges did you face in making that lifestyle shift?

It was hard at first. I worked hard and made so much less money, but my salvation and the desire to do right meant more than the money. I actually had a vision right after I got saved. I said, “God, I don’t mind going to Hell for a bit as long as you let me keep making that money.” But God showed me in a vision that you can’t go to Hell for “a little bit.” Hell is for eternity. So that vision showed me that I don’t want no more hustler life. Now I’m a doorman and have been for 24 years.

How did you become the pastor at Holy Temple of Prayer?

At first, after I got saved, I was going to a different church. I had to make a decision: my father-in-law had a small church, while this other one had a decent size congregation. What should I choose? Finally I realized, I loved Pastor Moore here. He’s not as eloquent or famous as my bishop, but my father-in-law was a man of God. He worked at a hospital, and he used to take...
me around to visit patients of every religion and show me how you can love people. He and my mother-in-law took in a lot of children through foster care, too. Later in life his wife moved away to South Carolina, but he felt he was called to stay. He was disabled and couldn’t do a lot on his own, so he started to depend on me a lot. At the same time he was training me to follow in his footsteps. I got ordained 15 years ago, and six years ago my father-in-law passed away and I became a pastor. He had his own sons, but he wanted me to take over because I was there for him all those years.

**So how does that experience you had in those days prepare you for pastoring now?**

I am where I am today because of where I came from. It was a life that I lived, and I’m glad that I left. If I hadn’t, I’d probably be in jail or dead.

**What led you to S.O.S.?**

Once I became a pastor, I felt I wanted to do more things in the community. I thought, “There has to be more to being a pastor than just preaching every Sunday.”

I went to the 77th Precinct Clergy Council meetings, and that’s where I ran into Dr. West, Rev. Jones, and life Charles. She and I clicked because we wanted similar things for the community. I was upset because one particular summer here was so horrible. Children were getting shot. But I believe in S.O.S. It’s great that someone is standing up in the community.

**What do you think that clergy can do to help stem the shootings?**

I’m from the old school. I believe in prayer. I’m in prayer heavily for what’s going on.

As clergy I think we all should get involved with S.O.S. C.A.N. and other programs. I used to do a lot of stuff with City Councilwoman Darlene Mealy’s office. A guy from there called me recently, he wants to open up a trade school for 17-24-year-olds to help these guys do something. He wanted me to get involved with that.

I’m willing to do the work. I deal with the boys on the corner. The guys there know me, most of them are from around here and were in Holy Temple of Prayer. Some of them were foster kids. They don’t do no foolishness near the church. Once, when there were a couple of shootings on that corner, I could find out who was involved because my boys are in the mix.

**Having experienced life in the streets yourself, how do you relate to and teach young people caught up in that lifestyle today?**

I look at my own life. I was young once, too, so I see how some of these “street” guys think. They don’t think for tomorrow, they just take life one day at a time. I see them on the corner, selling drugs. One week they have money, a car, then the next week they got nothing. That’s how the street life is. In your 20s, you want life, you want to have parties, girls, drinks, fun. You don’t want to hear nothing else. It’s difficult to reach them. But usually after your 20s you calm down and see life differently. Maybe you’ve had kids, and you realize you have to change. If you do reach them, you can steer them away from the violence. Otherwise, if you continue that lifestyle when you’re old, your life is just sad—you can’t end up anywhere good.

I try to set an example for them. I go to work every day. They don’t see me in the street getting drunk or carrying on. They respect the church. But you can’t force nobody to do nothing; they do what they want to do. Sometimes I don’t know how to help them. Bigger churches have a lot of initiatives and a big staff, so they can give guys jobs. I can’t do that because I have a small church.

**What is the main work you’re occupied with now?**

I became a licensed foster parent four years ago and I have five kids now. Foster kids are special kids. They need a lot of attention. Sometimes their parents can’t seem to get their lives together, so the kids come with issues. Some have ADHD, some are in special education programs; one had a lot of emotional issues because his mother passed away. He had to go back to the children’s hospital, and comes here only on the weekend. But they’re beautiful kids. I got two girls now who don’t want to leave foster care because they’d have to go back to the projects. Here they have a porch, they can go outdoors, run around.

So that’s what I’ve been focusing on right now. God is using me to work with these kinds of kids. I know I’m not the greatest pastor in the world, that’s not my calling, but the ministry that God has blessed me with recently is opening these doors as a foster parent.

**Is there one thing you want to highlight about your ministry or this church?**

One thing that’s special is that most of my members have some sort of disability. Many churches don’t cater to people with disabilities, so people come here because they can relate. They don’t get lost.

But the main thing we’re known for at Holy Temple of Prayer is children’s adoption and foster care services. For 25 years we’ve been geared toward children. Everyone running around here says, “that’s my brother, that’s my sister.” We’re all sisters and brothers. That’s how we associate under the banner of Jesus Christ.
How did you become a pastor?

I've been pastoring Grace Tabernacle Church of God in Christ since the passing of my dad about four years ago. I'm one of the young pastors here in Brooklyn—I was installed pastor at age 30. Initially, I ran from the calling. I saw all the gray hairs on my dad's head. Now that I got into it I've realized that the good aspects of being a pastor outweigh the bad. Sure, you get a few gray hairs, but you get to touch so many people's hearts through your messages and words.

Was there a turning point where you knew you would go into ministry?

In January 2008, when my parents were still alive, I was my father's minister of music. On the spur of the moment he made me get on my knees in front of the altar and said, "I'm passing my mantle down to you."

I have four other brothers, and I'm not the oldest, the biggest or the strongest. On that day he gave me the story of David, who wasn't the strongest, and people didn't think he would be able to defeat Goliath. That story turned things around for me.

Then that summer my parents got into an accident and my mom died and my nephew died, and my father was paralyzed from the neck down. When I think back to what he did that day, and I believe he saw something that nobody else saw.

Your father was a world-renowned gospel musician. What was that experience like?

I didn't always realize how famous he was. He ran with all of these famous people; Kurt Franklin was one of his musical mentors, Patty Labelle sang one of his songs. He knew Al Sharpton and Mayor Dinkins. He was nominated for a Grammy, Gospel artist of the year. He's also in the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. He created a standard in gospel music. Every choir anywhere in the country or even the world had at least two or three of my father's songs. My father would say, "Anyone can sing, you just gotta be shown how to sing." And people loved him for that.

Many people think that the church musician's job is just playing a song. But you've got to have the spirit of the pastor. When the pastor says something, you've got to know to play something. It's vitally important that there's a relationship between the pulpit and the organ. It makes the whole service flow. To play gospel music, it's not just about your talent, but also being in tune with God.

What motivates you to do anti-violence work?

Because I'm so young, I can relate to some of the issues that our young men have in the streets. I grew up in East New York, Brooklyn with my five brothers. It's only by the grace of God that we didn't all get caught up in crime and gangs, though some of my brothers have been incarcerated. But we mostly escaped, I think because we had a big, faith-based family. When you have God in your life it gives you hope. The streets can't give you a hope for eternal life. That's the message I want to push to the young people. You can get the quick, easy money and girls in the streets, but longevity and long life and hope come through God.

What was your experience growing up in East New York?

I've seen a lot of my friends cut down, a lot of my friends shot and killed. In the late '90s the crack epidemic was just starting to come about, and it really took Brooklyn by storm. We lived in the projects, and they would smoke crack in the basement of my building. You'd see it everywhere. When you're in the midst of that violence all the time, you can't avoid it. My brother sold guns and drugs and ultimately got incarcerated.

When my father saw that he said, I can't lose all my boys. So he moved us to Long Island, and that saved us from almost certainly getting overwhelmed by the violence. He got us out just in time because between the ages of 13 to 17 is when you can really change kids' minds. A lot of the gangs get them at that age.
So I thank God that we got out of East New York, but in a way we never totally left. When I went back to the community and did a concert, people said, "That's the same David!" It's the same David who used to act crazy, but I turned my life around and now I'm giving back.

How did you first get involved with S.O.S.?
Pastor Jones got me involved. When I heard about it, I said, I didn't just want to be a pastor who stays in between my four walls. That's the main problem with some of our churches today. We don't go out and see what's going on outside.

My father once told me a story that Bishop Washington had told him. Bishop Washington went out of town and visited a church whose pastor was there for five years. The Bishop said, "Let's walk around the neighborhood." So they walked for blocks around his church, and after about two hours the bishop said, "I feel that I have to remove you from this church. We just walked around your neighborhood for two hours and nobody knew your name or your church, and you've been here five years." That story resonated in my spirit. That's part of why I got involved with S.O.S.

What are the things that your church does to engage with the community?
One of our main outreach efforts is a year-round Grace Tabernacle basketball program that caters to teens ages 17 and under. I'm the assistant coach, and our gym time is Saturday from 11 am to 5 pm, all year round. We're doing a basketball tournament in June, where we let kids, teens, and then adults ball out and have a good time, with food and everything. Basketball is a tool that I'm using to get these kids. I can't go out with a Bible, but when I come at them with the basketball, I get in with them. Before we play the game we first say a little prayer and we check their grades and do a little tutoring. We always ask what's going on. Most of the kids aren't violent themselves, but somebody in their family or around them is, and it affects them. So then we can minister to that young man on how avoid going down that road to violence.

There are two twins we work with. They're 15 years old and their father is a drug dealer, and is trying to get them to sell drugs too. They live with their mom, and she came to us and said, "I don't want my kids to get stuck out there." So we go to their home in Far Rockaway and pick them up, and get to them before their father can get to them. Now they're in the basketball program and come to church every Sunday. They come with jeans and t-shirts on but I tell them it's fine, as long as they're in the right place. And I thank God for them. They're good ball players, but we're just using basketball to get them off the streets.

You often come to S.O.S. shooting responses. What do you say to the community after a shooting?
I love to stick with the S.O.S. slogan, "Don't shoot I want to grow up." Because the worst thing about gun violence, to me, is that some people who aren't even involved end up getting shot. There was a woman right down the block who was in her kitchen and got shot in her face last month while she was making dinner. The shooter had no idea what that bullet did; it could have hit anyone, even an innocent child. One little spray of a bullet and they could have ruined a whole family.

So those are my main things: "Stop shooting, I want to grow up" and "renew the mind." We need to renew the mindset of the people and change their culture, change their mind.

I would also go a step further and say we need to change our policies. There are no gun shops in Brooklyn. The guns are probably coming out of the back of somebody's car. You want a gun, you just go holler at the dude on the corner. I adopted a dog and they had to come to my house, check my house out, do the background check. And I was adopting a dog! If I wanted a gun, I could snap my fingers and get it.

If you had endless time and resources, what would you do to help the community?
I would love to build as many 24 hour youth community centers as possible. Open year round. No closing time. If you're able to save one person from shooting or getting shot, you've done something. A lot of the youth centers have disappeared. So if somebody has a horrible home to go back to, and they need an outlet, they just need to spend a few hours out of the house because mom is in the house shooting drugs, dad is getting drunk—where can they go? If they had a youth center they'd have a place to play videogames or gang pong or various activities. Sometimes people just need peace of mind. So if I had unlimited resources I'd open up youth organizations and centers for the young people.

What do you want your legacy to be?
I want to encourage people to love God at a young age—you don't have to wait till you're in your 70s. A lot of people make the mistake of giving our life to God only in their later years. They say, I got time for church when I turn 70. But give God your life in your 20s, your teens, so he can have all of you! I don't just want God's best, I want to give him my best. That's the legacy that I want to leave, right now in my best years.
Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

I am a third-generation pastor; my father and grandfather were pastors also. I was born and raised in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I’m still connected to the Virgin Islands. My father is still pastoring there and I’m going there soon to do a program on anti-violence. I came to New York to study Bible and theology at NYACK college, and after graduating I became the youth director of my church, Mt. Zion Church of God. About four years ago I took on pastorate at my church. I’ve been pastoring seven years but I’ve only been the main lead for four years.

What kinds of services does your church provide?

We now have this faith-based initiative called Brooklyn Center for Quality Life, which is a subset of the church for doing this kind of work. We serve low-income clients. About 200 people come in a year. We do all kinds of things: immigration reform, food pantry, computer classes, disaster preparedness, parent support, job training. I have an extended membership. The regulars, and those people who come for their need. I don’t choose my congregation, I pastor the church that God gives me. I’m at a community based church in Central Brooklyn. About seven years but I’ve only been the main lead for four years.

Crime, gun violence and gangs are a big part of life in the Central Brooklyn area. I don’t have any training in that per se but I have to deal with it because that’s the concern among my congregation. My response to gun violence focuses on three areas: the victim and their family, the perpetrator and their family, and also the gangs—how the church can help the police on that front.

Are you connected to other churches in this response process?

I became part of the 67th Precinct clergy council early on, but they weren’t very organized. I went to a meeting and said, I don’t think the police department should organize clergy—clergy should organize clergy. The more seasoned men said, “Ok, young man, then why don’t you lead it?” So now I’m the president of the 67th Precinct Clergy Council. The 67th precinct is broken up into 14 sectors, and we’ve devised a new strategy where local churches respond within their sector. When someone is shot and killed in Central Brooklyn we get notified. We try to send a team of three pastors who share the language and culture of the victim to the family’s home. The clergy offer condolences and our services to them. If they need to, they can use any church for free.

After a crime the clergy leader of the affected sector mobilizes the community response. It could be marching, giving out flyers, outreach in local schools, parks, or businesses. We have just under 50 people in the network now, but we’re going to recruit more. It’s like the biblical model of Moses and Joshua. We are putting these pastors in charge of their sectors, so it frees me up I don’t have to run to everywhere. I hold them accountable, and they hold their communities accountable.

How do you communicate with the broader community after a shooting?

If someone is shot and killed, they come to the church to have a funeral service. During the funeral we have the best captive audience we can find. I tell them, “You can either call me now and work with me to turn your life around, or call me later and I’ll bury you for free. Right now I’m burying your friend who is dead. But you can still make a choice.” Sometimes we’re able to help bereaved families become spokespeople against crime and gun violence. The parents and the friends of the victim often know what the real problem is, who’s involved, so we can try to intervene directly. If they’re in a gang we try to tell the victim’s friends that we can assist them to get out of that life.

In this way we form a network of families, and when there’s another incident we bring former victims’ families to advise them on how to cope with the pain, the detectives, etc. That’s our anti-crime strategy.

What do you think are the roots of violence and crime?

When you have reduced possibilities because of high dropout rate, and you have economics within that community that propel young people toward a certain future, you have some young men and women who can’t see a bright future. They see no other alternative than resorting to crime. Plus, you also have a lot of guns readily available in our community. I’m not talking about semi-automatic guns, like in Newtown. I’m talking about handguns that are easy to get. Guys from up here jump in a rental car, go down south, buy 15 guns, come back here and sell them on the street. So all those pieces stack up.

Still, I make no excuse for crime because of poverty. I tell people, I grew up poor and I was not a criminal. If you look historically in the Civil Rights era in the 60s, during slavery we were more model citizens. When you look at all the marches on Washington, we didn’t walk with a file, not even a nail clipper, because it was non-violence. It was against the establishment. We weren’t involved in the judicial system because it was an informal system—If you walk on the wrong side of the street, you’re dead. So being a student of history, I understood that struggle, but I don’t think that being poor is an excuse for crime.

Reverend Gilford Monrose

Reverend Gilford Monrose is the pastor at Mt. Zion Church of God Seventh Day Adventist, in Central Brooklyn. Mt. Zion is home to the Brooklyn Center for Quality Life, which provides various services to the community. He also serves as President of the 67th Precinct clergy council, an MTA chaplain, and a board member at Kings County Hospital.
How can the community work against some of those root causes of violence that you mentioned?

I don't know how you get guns off the street, but we have to find ways to reach young people, whether it's through their family members, churches, messages on TV, or interrupters like the S.O.S. team. We have to continue to make our voices loud and clear that this type of violence has no place in our community. Some don't listen too well, but they hear us.

We like to give choices but there's some choices that you should never give kids. It's harmful to let people feel a false sense of freedom if a choice is going to lead to destruction.

In the fight against violence, what are the strengths of being a clergy member?

The church is always going to be relevant. We're here when you're born, get married, when you die, so the church is in the thick of things with people's lives. That's how we're able to intervene with people, because they're coming in all the time. If we continue to keep all doors open, speak messages of hope, empowerment and love then we believe we all can make our community better. Whatever your religion is, we all have a stake, we all want our children to be able to walk home safe from school.

The other thing is that the church has a lot of resources. If you put all the churches together we have the most real estate in New York City. So how do we capitalize on that? If pastors know how to use all programs they already have as an anti-violence message, it could have a huge impact. Turn that GED program into an anti-violence program. Or get young girls off the street and teach them how to dance. You don't need any new programs, just do the same program and give it a community component. The church is poised to be able to help tremendously. It doesn't always look like it, but it is happening now.

What are your influences in thinking about this work?

My framework is from the Civil Rights Era, when the African-American church mobilized the community and changed the politics and laws of the country. We say that we're freer than before because we have more rights and schooling than our parents. But we are still confronting major issues: closing schools, foreclosure, high interest rate, predatory lending. It's the same type of issues wrapped differently. I'm troubled, because as I see it we are now oppressing ourselves: after all of the work and tears and blood of the Civil Rights Movement, we're here in the year 2013 and oppressed by the guns, violence, and street corner gangs of our own people. We are killing ourselves.

So my framework for working in Central Brooklyn is liberation theology, black theology. I need to figure out how could we have come from being a proud black people, working hard, to the point where we're oppressing and killing ourselves as free people.

What is your philosophy for community organizing?

I have these black shoes that I normally wear that are very worn, but I'll never throw those shoes away because I've walked Brooklyn with those shoes. Pastors want to know how I became so connected so quickly. And tell them, I was young and didn't know that there was any protocol that you had to go through, so I just started walking, and knocking on doors. I said to senators, "Hey, I need to speak to you!" I went to every meeting to get an idea of who's doing what. So now when people call me to ask who's in charge of x, y and z, I can tell them exactly.

I got connected with almost every government office in Central Brooklyn by just asking to put their name on a flyer for an event I was doing. I didn't ask for any money or help. They said ok, because I did all the work. That's how I got in with them. I befriended the low-level employees in the offices and now they've moved up and I have high-level connections.

What in your life led you to do anti-violence work?

In my past I was just a plain old church boy, playing music and basketball. I've met many who do this work because they're trying to clear their conscience of things they've done in the past. I have no past in crime. For me, it's out of love and care for my brothers. More people like us need to come out and take a stand and get involved with these things. They think that it's not their responsibility or they're powerless because they can't relate, but you don't always have to experience the problems people are dealing with to speak to them effectively. I have seen the effects of gun violence and lived through pain, counseling families who have lost loved ones. I think that has value.

When I started out there wasn't any pastor who was the go-to person on crime and gun violence. Now a lot of people know of the work that I'm doing, so they call me to ask what the response should be when something happens. You have to work to the point that you can be relevant in your community.

Mt. Zion Church of God Seventh Day Adventist
I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a household that wasn’t particularly observant of Judaism but we identified historically and culturally as part of the Jewish people. My grandparents on both sides were immigrants, from Russia and Germany, and wound up in Milwaukee.

We were raised as Americans, and liberal Democrats. My mother worked for an organization called the Community Development Corporation in the “inner city” in Milwaukee, a predominantly African-American, very poor neighborhood. In the mornings I went to my suburban school, which was essentially 95 percent white, 60 percent Jewish, and she went in the opposite direction to a very rough part of Milwaukee to work on community development projects. Her work was a living expression of her values: that is, that social problems are never going to get fixed unless basic economic equality and justice exists for all citizens of a country. I admired her a lot, and as I eventually worked out that I wanted to be a rabbi, I knew that my synagogue would also be engaged in these issues.

What led you to the rabbinate, and to New York?

I was interested in journalism and politics. I wanted to write and run for office. In college I worked for several state senators and I wanted to end up in Capitol Hill. Then my sophomore year I started to look more at Jewish history, and when my dad died of a heart attack I just plowed in. I was interested in religious and theological questions, and I said to myself, there’s no matter what is important for building connections, the fabric of community; it also translates into political capital. Since you’ve been there for them, you can call on congregants to be there for you.

Clergy tend not to call on people for personal issues, but we do call on them to say, “We’re joining a march next week and I need you to come with me.” Congregations expect us to be moral leaders and stand for things that they might not have the courage to, or might not be able to articulate as well.

Recently, as we’ve been organizing around Sandy relief and gun control people said, “The rabbi has been there for us and he really cares about this, so we should help.” They know this is something I’m very passionate about, because I’ve given sermons and written openly about it.

Why are you passionate about the issue of gun violence?

That also goes back to my mom. When she was six years old her father, who was a manager at the Wisconsin power company, let an employee go for mental illness. The guy demanded his job back, and when my grandfather refused the man pulled out a gun and shot my grandfather, and then shot himself.

So I was raised with this specter of guns. My mom didn’t allow us to have fake guns, and was very against the NRA. Right before she passed away in July she was telling me about this incident, and how it altered her relationship with the world and with God. That really showed me how the trauma of a violent experience can haunt an individual or a family.

Tell us a bit about yourself

I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in a household that wasn’t particularly observant of Judaism but we identified historically and culturally as part of the Jewish people. My grandparents on both sides were immigrants, from Russia and Germany, and wound up in Milwaukee.

I didn’t experience gun violence personally, but I had friends who did. In the 1970s the school district implemented desegregation policies, so a number of students came to my school from inner-city neighborhoods. I played basketball in high school and was friendly with a young man named Andre Johnson. Our sophomore year of high school Andre’s mother was shot and killed by her boyfriend. The shock of that was earth shattering for me: I remember another friend of mine, Kent, who was also bussed in, heard me say how shocked I was, and he said, “This happens all the time in our neighborhood.” I remember feeling very lucky for living in a safe part of town, and an enormous amount of guilt and shock. I realized that there are these two different worlds, and you’re either going to try to recognize that and make it more one world, or you’re just going to try to turn the other direction. I’ve tried to be a person who refuses to turn away.

Do you feel impacted by gun violence in New York City?

I have a 7th grader at the N.E.S.T. school on the Lower East Side, and there was a shooting outside her school on Columbia Road. Apparently it was a drug dealer from one of the housing projects who was chased into a bodega and shot. That bodega is right by the school, and the kids pop in there for a pack of gum or something all the time. It’s crazy!

I was invited to speak with Reverend Reggie Jackson on a PBS special after Sandy Hook, discussing the question, “Where is God when these shootings take place?” We had a nice dialogue, but after the lights went down and the cameras went off I said, it upsets me that 20 white kids get killed and now it’s time for meaningful gun action, when The New York Times had just written that 40 African-American kids are shot and killed each month in Chicago. Forty a month?! Let’s wake up! This has been going on for decades, so I’m glad that we’re finally mobilizing about it. It’s phenomenal that Governor Cuomo acted as quickly as he did, and that the president stood tall against the anti-gun-control voices, but it’s going to be a fight. We have to stay focused and organized.

What approach do you take in organizing your congregation around gun violence?

Getting guns off the street is one thing. Dealing with the conditions in which people live, which move them toward gangs and crime, is another. This is where the power lies, so let’s deal with conditions. For example, we held a service on gun violence in Brooklyn Heights, which is a predominantly white neighborhood, with a number of students from our congregation. The rabbi spoke on gun violence, and others spoke about the conditions in which people live. We had an impressive list of people who called on congregants to write letters to their senators. We released a statement calling for gun violence prevention, and we held a march. We also held a service discussing what we should do, and we held a vigil for Sandy Hook.

What do you think of the Westlake Legal Group /PRAYING WITH OUR FEET PRAYING WITH OUR FEET 59
One way to pray is to make peace in the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, and everyone repeats it, “I'm praying with my feet.” There are different types of prayer.

In your relationships, you shouldn't covet other people's property. I look at Torah as a social contract for humanity. God wants us to build a world where people are treated justly and equally. Social service work is holy work. If you just look at the Ten Commandments, they are very practical laws. Most of the laws are about the practical, social application of God's will. You should rest and your workers should rest. You should respect your parents, you should be faithful to your wife, and you shouldn't commit adultery. You shouldn't kill. You shouldn't steal. You should no longer have the response of “It's my life, I will do what I want.”

Do you feel that your Jewish faith informs your passion for organizing?

Moses is one example of a person whom history was thrust upon, and despite his misgivings and insecurities, he knew he had to act. I think that that is an expression of Jewish faith. I believe that you need to act when things are not right. Moses was able to act, and he knew that the people would listen. That experience also taught us that people are very passionate about feeding. We adopted a school in the Rockaways, P.S. 197, and we're making about 300 or 400 meals a week for them. We're trying to bring meals to homes, but we're encountering issues because some parents are undocumented immigrants and can't register for help. So we're trying to figure out how to deal with that, and again, it hits on the larger systemic issues that surround the process of aiding people.

What organizing is your congregation involved with?

After Hurricane Sandy we started mobilizing and bringing food. We were cranking out about 1,000 or 1,200 meals a day. Our allies in the Russian Jewish community in Coney Island asked us for help, because there weren't enough materials being handed out by agencies there. Also, two of our congregants work in Red Hook and told us that people there were fighting over space heaters. The police were getting involved, and it was becoming a big conflict. So we gathered a bunch of space heaters and gave them out at our synagogue, as a neutral location.

When we were doing hurricane relief we noticed that people often mobilize according to their own ethnic enclave. That meant that the poorest, blackest areas were neglected by agencies with white, upper-class staff. It showed us that there are such deep fissures in the economic structure of New York, that relief efforts can't just include building a new hurricane wall. This is a long-haul commitment to try to unify New York as a city. There's huge injustice here that was exposed as aid was being distributed.

That experience also taught us that people are very passionate about feeding. We adopted a school in the Rockaways, P.S. 197, and we're making about 300 or 400 meals a week for them. We're trying to bring meals to homes, but we're encountering issues because some parents are undocumented immigrants and can't register for help. So we're trying to figure out how to deal with that, and again, it hits on the larger systemic issues that surround the process of aiding people.

Do you partner with other faith organizations in your work?

We've done a few interfaith-services at Brown Memorial, and I'm also involved with the Living Wage Campaign, which is an interfaith effort. We have a partnership with Reverend Peters in a church two blocks from us; he's an old friend of the synagogue. We did a men's respite shelter together, and we're going to do a women's shelter with CAMBA here at Beth Elohim.

What other thoughts do you have about making change in your community?

There's the unwritten rule that from 2:30 to 3:30pm the merchants on 7th Avenue lock their doors, because the public-school kids are coming out of school. This is a predominantly African-American school in the middle of this bourgeois neighborhood. They come from tough areas, they're loud, as school kids are, and there are all kinds of stereotypes about them... So shopkeepers lock their doors. And the families at the school notice that.

I mean, how is this the community's response? Don't pretend this is Johannesburg! I feel like, when you go inside the schools and actually meet the kids, learn about their lives—I found out that a significant percentage live in homeless shelters—then you wouldn't want to give them that experience of coming to school and walking down an avenue of locked doors.

One of the things I want to do is get on the Park Slope Civic Council and develop an employment program. I want to get 20 businesses on 7th Avenue to hire two kids each. The kids could learn basic skills, build their resumes, get life and work experience. I know three or four businesspeople who I'm convinced I could sit down with—I don't think it would be such a hard sell.

Do you feel that your Jewish faith informs your passion for organizing?

My faith in the lessons of Jewish history speak to my passion for organizing. Moses is one example of a person whom history was thrust upon, and despite his misgivings and insecurities, he knew he had to act. I think that that is an expression of Jewish faith. I believe in God, and because I'm in a relationship with God I feel like I need to act well in the world. But I don't get up in the morning and ask, “What does God want me to do today?” My actions are as informed by history as by anything else.

If you just look at the Ten Commandments, they are very practical laws. Most of the laws are about the practical, social application of God's will. You should rest and your workers should rest. You should respect your parents, you should be faithful in your relationships, you shouldn't covet other people's property. I look at Torah as a social contract for humanity. God wants us to build a world where people are treated justly and equally. Social service work is holy work.

Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said, and everyone repeats it, “I'm praying with my feet.” There are different types of prayer. One way to pray is to make peace in the world.
Reverend Stephanie Bethea

Reverend Stephanie Bethea is a pastor at a ministry she founded called “WET TEARS,” Women Entrusted To Teach Each other After Rough Starts. She is also the assistant pastor at Glover Memorial Baptist Church, where she is active in the women’s ministry, youth ministry, and the hospital ministry. Rev. Bethea has also worked as a traffic enforcement officer and training academy teacher for over 20 years, and she sits on the Brooklyn Clergy/NYPD task force.

Tell us about your spiritual background.

I was raised in a home where religion and spirituality were always important. My grandparents were pastors, going all over doing missionary work. I always knew what God could do, but as most teenagers do, I decided to wander away from it. I ran into some trials doing things that I thought I was old enough to do, I got pregnant when I was 16 years old. His family wanted nothing to do with me and the baby, so I had no partner, no money, no idea how to take care of this baby. But because of my grandmother’s strong influence during my upbringing, I remembered that God is always there. God gave me the strength and taught me how to be a good mother.

When I learned that God would deliver, I wanted to share that with other people who were going through devastating, violent experiences and didn’t know how they were going to make it, I wanted them to know that God could help them.

What motivates you to do anti-violence work?

I lost three members of my family to gun violence. I had a nephew, Kareem, who was shot and killed at my aunt’s door. He was a beautiful young man, he played the flute and he had potential, but he got caught up with the wrong crew. His mom was a hard working woman, trying to make a better life for him, and his dad was not in the home, so he was often unsupervised and dealing drugs. One day my aunt heard a knock at the door and screaming, and when she opened the door she saw her only son with his brains blown out on her doorstep. She lived about two weeks after that and then had a massive heart attack, even though she was a young and healthy woman.

Another nephew of mine, called Bones, was killed on the corner of St. John’s and Albany. After that his girlfriend went into premature labor and delivered her baby early by one and a half months. So I watched the cycle continue. Now this child is going to grow up without a father.

The last person that I had to be killed by gun violence was my baby sister’s boyfriend. Out of all three that one got to me the most. This young man, A.J., was killed on the corner where I was living. A.J. was involved in the drug business; his mom had died of a drug overdose and he had no father at home, so he was taking care of himself.

One day A.J. came by, and I didn’t want to deal with him because I did not care for the kid. But I decided to talk to him and found out he had brilliant culinary skills! A lot of these young men that you see out here in these streets, they have a lot of potential, but they don’t have opportunities or money to develop their talents. When they get involved selling drugs they think they’re just going to get a few bucks and then do something else. But it doesn’t always work out like that because drugs don’t produce anything positive.

Anyway, he made me the most delicious lasagna that night, and we all ate and enjoyed ourselves late into the night. Afterward I said to him, I don’t want you to go on the corner with these boys no more. I’m gonna help you get your life together. Promise me, you’re gonna get your diploma. He said he was gonna try.

The next day after work my kids called and said Mom, little Dennis, which is my son, he’s been shot! And A.J. got shot! My son had a hole through his leg, and they shot A.J. in the head. I just dropped the phone and started running. By the time I got to the hospital they had him out of there, they had A.J. covered up and I realized he was dead. I started screaming, “God, please no!” He was just getting ready to get his life together.

So I have been directly affected by gun violence. It’s an issue that’s close and dear to me. I can’t tell you how much I just wish God would snatch up every gun out of this world.

How did you counsel your family as they were mourning those deaths?

As a minister of the gospel, I know that in spite of it all, we have to forgive. It’s not the easiest thing to do when somebody has taken a life from you. And a lot of times family members do not want to hear you say, “We have to forgive, we have to pray for that family, we have to love.” It’s really hard being the only person in the family trying to get people not to retaliate. There were moments when I went into the bathroom and broke down in tears. I said, “Lord, I need strength, and I need you to guide me through this.”

What did you counsel your family as they were mourning those deaths?

I would say, “You can’t do this. I’m going to turn you in.” And I did turn them in. I’ve been alienated because of that, I was called a snitch, and to this day they don’t speak to me. But I know in my heart I did the right thing, we don’t want people retaliating, because that’s how the cycle continues. My son was very angry and didn’t want to hear what I had to say, but I did get him to eventually let it go. Otherwise my son might not be alive today.
How do you promote anti-violence through your ministry?

I've been involved with anti-violence through Glover Memorial Baptist Church and at my own ministry, called WET TEARS, which stands for "Women Entrusting To Teach Each other After Rough Starts." I do a lot of youth ministry. If you catch a youth early, teach him a skill, get him involved with positive male role models like Rev. Jones, they'll think differently. Then you ain't got to run behind them and tell them, "Don't pick up a gun." They going to do what's right because their mind is in a different direction.

I lead a youth group at Glover Memorial where we talk about guns, drugs, sex, everything. I talk about the things that they want to talk about, because if we don't, they're going to go out in the street and talk to somebody else. So I tell them real. You can't just be a one-dimensional preacher and tell youth what to do. You've got to get into their mindset.

I do a lot of speaking and preaching with my WET TEARS ministry too. My philosophy is, "If each one teach one, then we can reach one." The Bible says that the angels in heaven rejoice over just one soul. We're so busy wanting to reach a whole bunch of people—let's just get one off the street with a gun. Then maybe that one will go back and tell others what S.O.S. does. So it spreads.

How do you address issues of gun violence with youth?

This Christmas I told my youth group to come up with an essay: What do you think we should do to end gun violence? That not only develops and perfects their writing skills but it gets them to think about the issue. I'm giving out $50 for the best essay.

I talk to them about gun violence all the time. I'm always telling them about S.O.S. They all want buttons, because they're "cool." The buttons might be the thing that gets them to the march, but when they come and see what it's about, they want to get involved. My granddaughter said she wanted to get involved because her little friend's brother got shot in school. She was crying to me, and she said, "I hate guns, Grandma." I said "Me too, but we got to do something to change it."

How do you counsel young people who might be prone to violence?

I understand their anger, because I was angry as a young woman too. You said anything to me, I'd snap. That anger comes from hurting, because somebody mistreated you, and you don't understand why. I was molested repeatedly by members of my family. I was so angry I wanted a plane to drop on my molesters. A plane!

People get hardened because they've been hurt, ridiculed and degraded. But all they need is somebody to see it, and they can become a different person. I was counseling a young woman recently who was acting out because she was hurting. I told her to write down a list of everybody that hurt her and to forgive them. There was a spirit of bondage that you were entangled in, but now you'll be free of that. When she left she said, "I just feel so different," and she started behaving much better.

What helped you deal with your own anger?

The turning point was when I had my first little girl. I didn't want the cycle to continue, and I knew that if I did not take an active stand, the violence in my life could continue in my daughter's life. As a mother, I felt it was my job to make her life better than mine. And that's why I made a conscious decision to go back to school, get a diploma, get a degree. I wanted to make a difference and leave a legacy that my grandchildren can carry on.

If you had endless resources and time, what would you do to help the community?

There are a few things I'd like to do. I'd like for us to provide spiritual education for those who desire it. I would also love to provide adequate training and skills for employment, or just provide the jobs ourselves.

And I'd also like to provide for the mentally challenged. My son is a bipolar patient now, and so I've become very concerned about those with mental issues. I want to open up a mental facility that would facilitate a lot of young men and women to work. They don't have enough rehabilitation facilities now. Their idea of caring is just to medicate patients, No! We need to seriously counsel and talk to them and teach them to be contributing members of society.

So those are the things that I'd like to do. Ministry is my first love, but ministering without doing something else is not going to get the improvement that you need. You need both.

I thank you for letting me be a part of this project. I often ask the children, do they know what S.O.S. is really about? They go, yeah, those are the people that go around marching and they don't want you to shoot. That little bit, that goes a long way. I pray that God will bless you, and that S.O.S. will be able to spread to other communities. Because it is making a difference.
Things we can do to Strengthen our Neighborhood

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

All of us have an important role in ending gun violence in the neighborhood. Please contact us through our social media, volunteer meetings, or at our events to tell us your ideas!

Things your house of worship can do

KNOW your neighbors! Find out when and where the local community meetings occur. Every neighborhood is supported by a community board of people who want to provide advice to the city on the budget, land use and zoning, sanitation issues and other services that contribute to the welfare and safety of the neighborhood. Community boards have monthly meetings that are great places to meet people and learn important information about the neighborhood. You can find your community board’s information by calling 311.

Every local police precinct has a monthly meeting that will provide you with information about safety and an understanding of police concerns. Some precincts even have special clergy councils that focus on the specific needs of clergy. Crown Heights is made up of two precincts, the 77th in the north and the 71st in the south, and two community boards, Community Board 8 in the north and Community Board 9 in the south. There are also many active block associations. Talk to your neighbors to find out more.

SURVEY the assets and needs of neighborhood. Crown Heights is rich with wonderfully resourceful, creative people who are deeply talented. Have your church develop a simple survey to find out what residents like most about the neighborhood, what residents are most concerned about in the neighborhood and what skills and talents they possess.

This survey can help you figure out the best way your church can become more involved in the neighborhood’s needs.

PLAN to organize some events that benefit the neighborhood in partnership with other houses of worship. SGD CAN has organized marches, sports tournaments and street festivals. Partnering with others takes advantage of your collective wisdom and experience. Building relationships with other clergy leaders by developing positive programs together multiplies the effect of your efforts.

SCHEDULE a meeting with your elected officials. To find out who they are, search “find my elected official” on the Internet. After all, they work for us!

TAKE TIME to cultivate leadership. Community organizers and community leaders are both important in building a safer and healthier community. Developing strong leadership with have a long-term positive effect on the health of our neighborhood. There are courses that lay leaders with leadership potential can take. Check out the “We Are All Brooklyn” Fellowship (waaborg) as a starting place.

LEAD a service dedicated to ending violence. Some houses of worship do this annually around Martin Luther King Day, and others do it at the start of the summer as a way to pray for a safe summer. You can deliver a sermon about ending violence, lead some youth activities, sing songs of peace or ask for congregants to share testimonials. Honoring the ways that others have turned away from violence is an important way to cultivate peace. For more ideas and suggestions, see our “Service Materials” or “Lesson Plans” sections.

Things individuals can do

1. Try to practice peaceful conflict resolution in your own life. For many of us, when we are stressed and overwhelmed, we can find it hard to respond to conflict calmly. Conflict is a normal part of being alive, and we can learn and grow from every conflict. While most of us have been told at some point in our lives that we should try to take deep breaths and listen calmly during stressful moments of conflict, it still can be hard.

2. Put an anti-gun-violence poster in your home. Make a public demonstration that you believe the violence must stop. The more physical signs of peace in the neighborhood, the more energy the movement to end violence has.

3. Continue to educate yourself about the issue of violence and gun violence. There are many organizations working the end gun violence in Brooklyn. You can find a list at crownheightsorg.

4. Be safe, but if you think you can, help others stay calm and reasonable during conflicts. Help them think about the consequences of their actions and help them recognize that they are strong people when they turn away from violence.

5. Keep your friends and family busy. Being involved and busy helps keep young people out of trouble. Help your friends and family find programs or activities that they find exciting. Help the neighborhood get more activities for the young people in the neighborhood.

6. Get involved in the neighborhood. Know your neighbors! Join the school’s PTA! Attend the community board meetings, block association meetings, and Precinct council meetings! The more neighbors we have attending and contributing, the more powerful we are.

Covenant for Peace & Action

As a member of the Covenant for Peace and Action I will:

◊ Proclaim that we will work to END ALL SHOOTINGS AND KILLINGS.
◊ Declare peace to be the norm and make it so.
◊ Assert a strong presence on the streets in response to every shooting in Crown Heights.
◊ Counsel and support those who seek to change their lives through the provision of positive alternatives.
◊ Adopt, mentor, and open safe havens for members of our community.
◊ Actively rally and work against illegal gun possession, gun use, and gun trafficking.

House of Worship’s Name:

| Clergy Signature: | Date: |

Please feel free to copy the Covenant for Peace & Action and share with your house of worship.

SAVE OUR STREETS
C.L.E.R.Y. ACTION NETWORK

C.O.S.
Clergy Action Network

S.O.S.

Counsel and support those who seek to change their lives through the provision of positive alternatives.

Counsel and support those who seek to change their lives through the provision of positive alternatives.

Counsel and support those who seek to change their lives through the provision of positive alternatives.
We have collected materials from various sources that can be used when leading an anti-gun-violence themed service at your house of worship. These materials include prayers, scripture readings, songs, and quotes, as well as a section for MLK Jr. Day.

Service Materials

We are a nation at war with ourselves, a people who have forgotten who we are.

We gather today in remembrance of all those killed by gun violence.

A Native African Prayer for Peace
If you are a good man,
Then detest violence.
Then reject violence.
If you are the best man,
Violence are the cornerstone of peace.

A Hindu Prayer for Peace
May all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illnesses. May those frightened cease to be afraid, and may those bound be free. May the powerless find power and may people think of befriending one another. May those who find themselves in trackless, fearful wildernesses—the children, the aged, the unprotected—be guarded by beneficent celestial beings, and may they swiftly attain Buddhahood.

A Buddhist Prayer for Peace
May all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illnesses. May those frightened cease to be afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.

A Christian Prayer for Peace
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”
“But I say to you that hear, love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you. To those who strike you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from those who take away your cloak, do not withhold your coat as well. Give to everyone who begs from you, and of those who take away your goods, do not ask them again. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

An Islamic Prayer for Peace
In the Name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful. Praise be to the Lord of the Universe who has created us and made us into tribes and nations that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. If the enemy incline towards peace, do thou also incline towards peace, and trust in God, for the Lord is one that hears and knows all things. And the servants of God Most Gracious are those who walk on the Earth in humility, and in their address they say, “Peace.”

A Jewish Prayer for Peace
Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, that we may walk the path of the Most High. And we shall beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. And none shall be afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.

A Bahá’í Prayer for Peace
Be generous in prosperity and thankful in adversity. Be fair in the judgment and guarded in thy speech. Be a lamp unto those who walk in darkness and a home to the stranger. Be eyes to the blind and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be a breath of life to the body of humankind, a dew to the soil of the human heart, and a fruit upon the tree of humility.

Prayers

Sample Call to Worship/Call and response
Leader: Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, that we may walk the path of the Most High.
People: That we may beat our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks.
Leader: Nation shall not lift sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.
People: And none shall be afraid for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.
Leader: We gather today in remembrance of all those killed by gun violence.
People: We mourn the loss of 30,000 of our brothers and sisters, killed by guns in our own country.
Leader: We are a nation at war with ourselves, a people who have forgotten who we are.
People: We gather today to remember that we are each a child of God.
We gather to claim our belonging to each other and our commitment to living the way of God’s peace.
Leader: We gather today to remember that we are each a child of God.
We gather to claim our belonging to each other and our commitment to living the way of God’s peace.
Leader: Come let us go to the mountain of the Lord, that we may walk the path of the Most High.
People: That we may beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks.
Leader: Neighbor shall not lift up gun against neighbor. Neither shall they learn violence any more.
All: And none shall be afraid for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.

Poem

Violence
If you are a good man,
Then detest violence.
If you are a better man,
Then detest violence.
If you are the best man,
Then transform violence into the heart of oneness-love.

By Sri Chinmoy

Litany of Remembrance
Leader: Let us remember all who have been harmed by violence. We acknowledge the strength of those who survived and of those still struggling to heal. For their sake and for ours, we commit ourselves to building each other up and to healing—together.
People: Let us remember the families and loved ones of those who have died from gun violence. We acknowledge their pain and their deep grief. They too, are part of our community, and need our love and help towards healing.
Leader: Let us remember the perpetrators, and the families of those who commit violence. We acknowledge that their lives, too, are devastated and their hopes dashed. For their sake and for ours, we remember that pain goes in many directions from each act of violence.
All: We will stand up to violence. We stand together expressing our unity, our connection to each other and to the divine, our hope for healing and for transformation. Let the Spirit of our Creator move through us. Help us to transform and heal our communities. And let us begin by transforming ourselves.

Written for Vigils Against Violence by Pat Long and Vandy Bradow

Prayers for Peace and Justice from the World’s Religious Traditions

A Christian Prayer for Peace
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”
“But I say to you that hear, love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who abuse you. To those who strike you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from those who take away your cloak, do not withhold your coat as well. Give to everyone who begs from you, and of those who take away your goods, do not ask them again. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

An Islamic Prayer for Peace
In the Name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful. Praise be to the Lord of the Universe who has created us and made us into tribes and nations that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. If the enemy incline towards peace, do thou also incline towards peace, and trust in God, for the Lord is one that hears and knows all things. And the servants of God Most Gracious are those who walk on the Earth in humility, and in their address they say, “Peace.”

A Jewish Prayer for Peace
Come, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, that we may walk the path of the Most High. And we shall beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. And none shall be afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.

A Bahá’í Prayer for Peace
Be generous in prosperity and thankful in adversity. Be fair in the judgment and guarded in thy speech. Be a lamp unto those who walk in darkness and a home to the stranger. Be eyes to the blind and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be a breath of life to the body of humankind, a dew to the soil of the human heart, and a fruit upon the tree of humility.

A Buddhist Prayer for Peace
May all beings everywhere plagued with sufferings of body and mind quickly be freed from their illnesses. May those frightened cease to be afraid, and may those bound be free. May the powerless find power and may people think of befriending one another. May those who find themselves in trackless, fearful wildernesses—the children, the aged, the unprotected—be guarded by beneficent celestial beings, and may they swiftly attain Buddhahood.

A Hindu Prayer for Peace
Oh God, lead us from the unreal to the Real. Oh God, lead us from darkness to light. Oh God, lead us from death to immortality. Shanti, Shanti, Shanti unto all. Oh Lord God almighty, may there be peace in celestial regions. May there be peace on earth. May the waters be appeasing. May herbs be wholesome, and may trees and plants bring peace to all. May all beneficent beings bring peace to us. May the Vedic Law propagate peace all through the world. May all things be a source of peace to us. And may thy peace itself bestow peace on all and may that peace come to me also.

A Native African Prayer for Peace
Almighty God, the Great Thunder we cannot evade to tie any knot, the Roaring Thunder that splits mighty trees, the all-seeing Lord on high who sees even the footprints of an antelope on a rock mass here on Earth, you are the one who does not hesitate to respond to our call. You are the cornerstone of peace.

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A Native African Prayer for Peace
Oh Great Spirit of our Ancestors, we raise the pipe to you, to your messengers the four winds, and to Mother Earth who provides for your children. Give us the wisdom to teach our children to love, to respect, to be kind to each other so that they may grow with peace in mind. And none shall be afraid for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken.

A Baha'i Prayer for Peace
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From the article, "Prayers for Peace and Justice from the World’s Religious Traditions" on the Harvard Divinity School website.
Sample Scripture Readings

Micah 6:8
He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Psalm 121
I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, not the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time and forevermore.

Habakkuk 1:1-4
The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘violence’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Matthew 5:9-10
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Romans 12:14-21
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited.

Revelation 19:6
God’s certain victory over evil

A Litany on the Tragedy of Gun Violence, for MLK Day

One: We celebrate and give thanks for the life and witness of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
Many: Who proclaimed a vision of all people living together, and bore witness to the power of nonviolence.
One: We gather, to remember his words, his commitment, his life and to rededicate ourselves to addressing the evil of gun violence.

Quotations

There is no peace in the world today because there is no peace in the minds of men. – Secretary General U. Thant

At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. – Martin Luther King Jr.

Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him. – Martin Luther King Jr.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiples hate, violence multiples violence, and toughness multiples toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. … The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation. – Martin Luther King Jr.

God of Mercy You HaveShown Us: A Hymn Lamenting Gun Violence

"God of Mercy You Have Shown Us: A Hymn Lamenting Gun Violence" by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.

"The Great Peace March" by Holly Near

"Shelter Of Peace (Hashkiveinu)" by Debbie Friedman

"Where have all the flowers gone?" by Pete Seeger

"Last Night I had the strangest dream" by Ed Mcurdy

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African American children are eleven times more likely to die by a gun than are children of the countries of all 25 industrialized nations combined.

Many: And we grieve.

We grieve for those are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; We pledge ourselves to translate your words, your commitment, your life into action.

One: And we pray.

We pray for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we see.

We see for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We see for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we grieve.

We grieve for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We see for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we seek.

We seek to translate your words, your commitment, your life into action.

One: And we pray.

We pray that your words, your commitment, your life will be translated into action.

One: And we grieve.

We grieve for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we join hands.

We join hands with those who have been affected by gun violence and with those who seek to end it.

One: And we act.

We act to transform violence into instruments of healing.

Many: And we pray.

We pray for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we grieve.

We grieve for those who are killed and those whose lives are forever changed; We seek to comfort for those who have lost loved ones; We pray for a change of heart for those who resort to violence.

One: And we act.

We act to transform violence into instruments of healing.

Many: And we pray.
Lesson Plans on Gun Violence & Making Peace

Here are a few sample lesson plans that the Youth Organizing to Save Our Streets program (YO S.O.S.) has used and you can use in your after-school programs to help young people think more about gun violence and violence more broadly.

What is Violence?
Materials needed: Large paper and markers
Goal: The goal of this workshop is to encourage young people to think creatively about what violence is. Sharing opinions and perceptions of what violence is and how it acts in our society can help people understand violence better.
Prep: Write on board or large paper, “Violence” and “Nonviolence” side by side with space underneath. On another large sheet draw the body of a tree with space by the roots.
During the workshop: Explain that there are no wrong answers in a brainstorm. This is not a time to disagree, just to toss ideas on the board. Ask the young people to think of words that come to mind when they see each word. Write up everything that people say while validating each appropriate response. The brainstorm is just to get people thinking.
Move on to the tree exercise: This is called “The Roots of Violence.” Ask people to think a bit more deeply about violence. Tell them that while we can usually see the effects of violence we can’t always see the causes. Use and example. Sometimes when people get into fights we see the after effects like them getting hurt or in trouble. What we can’t always see is what caused the fight or what caused someone to want to fight.
Ask: What are some of the causes of violence that might be harder to see? Encourage people to dig deeply by asking them, “What types of feelings do you have when you are about to act out?” Or, “When you feel like violence might be a helpful action to take, what do you feel?”
Take Home: If we can understand what violence is and where it comes from, then we can start to look at how to change the root causes and not just the outcomes. How will you try to look more deeply at violence?

Finding the “Cure” for Gun Violence.
Materials needed: Large paper and markers
Goal: To introduce the concepts of violence as a public health issue, and of “violence as a disease.” To encourage young people to acknowledge their power in coming up with solutions to gun violence.
Prep: Write VIOLENCE with a circle around it on the paper with spokes coming out of it like a wheel. Do the same with CAUSES and CURES under it.
During the workshop: Ask the youth to list different types of violence. Hopefully they will come up with things like, “physical violence, verbal violence, self-violence (drug and alcohol abuse) gun violence, emotional violence, gang violence, domestic violence.”
Write the examples on the spokes of the wheel. Explain that ALL of these are causes. Let’s match up a possible cure or solution with the causes.
Ask: youth to discuss other ways that gun violence acts like a disease. Explain that if you think about violence as a disease we can all work together, like doctors, to come up with the cure. One way to do this is to ask them to think about why people use gun violence.
Causes of violence
If they get stuck you can add some examples: No place to go after school, Pride, Jealousy, Disconnection from neighbors, disrespect of neighborhood, unemployment, peer pressure.
Cures
Encourage people to look at the Causes they have come up with and match up a possible cure or “solution” with the causes.
Take home: Gun violence is an issue that you can take on! You have the power to come up with cures and make them happen. What are some ways you, as a young person, can make some of these cures come true?

Let’s Talk About It: Gun Violence
Goal: To learn about what people are doing to stop gun violence from spreading like a disease and learn what our roles are in ending gun violence. This activity provides a unique opportunity for participants to speak about gun violence through their reactions and comments on The Interrupters.

Screening of documentary film by Steven James, The Interrupters
Time Duration: 3 hrs (1 hr 42 min Viewing, 1 hr Dialogue)
The entire film is available to stream online with minimal commercial interruption: Http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters/

During the workshop: Screen the Interrupters. After the movie allow 20 minutes for the group to discuss and offer their reactions to the film. Guide the conversation with the following questions:

Did you like the movie?
What did you see that stood out to you?
Which, if any, characters do you relate to?
What was the role of Violence Interruptors in Chicago?
What type of skills and strategies did they use to talk to people about violence?

For 30 minutes, allow participants an opportunity to think of easy ways they can safely interrupt violence in their school and community. Split participants into pairs of two and give the following role plays:

Role Player A: You are a high school student explaining why you think it’s important to fight against gun violence.
Role Player B: You are the guidance counselor at Role Player A’s school. You think talking about gun violence in class will just cause controversy and you don’t think it’s a good idea to promote conversations about violence.

Take Home: Let’s talk about how you can make a difference. What are easy ways you can safely interrupt violence in your school and community?

Role Player A: You are a high school student explaining why you think it’s important to fight against gun violence.
Role Player B: You are a friend of Role Player A. You don’t like that there is so much fighting and violence, but you don’t think anything’s going to change that. That’s just how it always has been.

Role Player A: You are a high school student explaining why you think it’s important to fight against gun violence.
Role Player B: You are a friend of Role Player A. You don’t like that there is so much fighting and violence, but you don’t think anything’s going to change that. That’s just how it always has been.

Role Player A: You are a high school student explaining why you think it’s important to fight against gun violence.
Role Player B: You are an older student in the same school. You’ve never been involved in gun violence but the friends you hang out with have been. You have been getting in fights lately and your friends have been pressuring you to get a gun.
Take Home: Like the Interrupters, you can do your part to stop violence in a safe way.

Identifying Peacemakers
Materials needed: Paper for note taking
Goal: This lesson is intended to help students think about what a peacemaker is and what qualifies a peacemaker to have. It gives them a chance to identify the peacemakers they know (either generally or personally) and to find models for productive conflict resolution.

During the workshop: Tell the students that today’s session focuses on peacemakers. As “conflict resolver” they are leaders at their school and have a certain power to help their fellow students work through their conflicts peacefully. One way of knowing how to do that is to think about peacemakers they already know and to figure out what makes those people peacemakers.
Ask the students to define a peacemaker. If they seem a little unsure, ask them what they think about when they hear the word “peacemaker.” Maybe create a brainstorm on the chalkboard if it helps them come up with ideas.

Give each student a piece of paper and ask them to write down the following:
1. Name two people who you consider to be peacemakers (at school, in the community, as world leaders).
2. Explain why that person is a peacemaker.
3. What are their peacemaking skills?
4. How do they use those skills?

Come back together and ask each student to share what they wrote about at least one of the people. If they need some help sharing their ideas, ask them to give an example of a time that person made some peace. Once everybody has shared, ask the group if they see any similarities among the peacemakers. Ask any and all of the following questions: Did any of the peacemakers use similar techniques? Do you see yourself being a peacemaker?
Take Home: Peacemakers are everywhere and being a Peacemaker is powerful. Do you want to be a Peacemaker?
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