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Mt. Vernon pastor takes hope of 'Passion Season' to streets

BY **GARY STERN**
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Four days from now, on Ash Wednesday, Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon will begin to observe the holiest period of the Christian year with a highly unusual, 14-week speaker-and-worship series.

Every Wednesday from noon to 1 p.m., a different minister from black churches in Mount Vernon and beyond will preach and lead prayers, lifted up by sacred music. During Holy Week, there also will be services on Monday, Tuesday and Holy Thursday.

ADVERTISEMENT The series, which Grace has been doing for several years, will carry from the Passion Season, or Lent, to the Wednesday before Pentecost.

It is an ambitious series. "It is our intention during these sacred Wednesdays to create an oasis where faith is fueled and hope renewed," writes the Rev. W. Franklyn Richardson, senior pastor of Grace Baptist, in a brochure.

At the same time, Richardson is looking to renew hope outside his church, in the streets of Mount Vernon. For many, there's little hope of creating an oasis there.

The city has experienced 15 slayings in 15 months.

Last year, 12 black men went down. This year, there have been three more killings in the city.

"I told our congregation we have to step up," Richardson told me. "We can't allow drug pushers to take over this town."

When I spoke with Richardson a few days ago, he sounded exasperated. He is a man who is used to getting things done - a power broker in the city, in politics, in the larger "black church," in various fights for social justice. But violence in Mount Vernon has long been a moving target, a snake in the field that comes and goes, always lethal but never trapped or chased away.

Richardson mentioned that his congregation is creating a \$40 million housing development in the city.

"It will be nothing but a ghetto if we don't change the culture of violence," he said.

So that's what he is going to try to do - with a lot of help, of course. The first step was a couple of nights ago, when Richardson called about 75 community leaders to Grace to talk about what needs to be done.

They went over the all-too-familiar urban dragons that lead to bloodshed: drugs and drug dealing, the lack of jobs and programs for youth, distrust between police and the youth, and on and on.

They'll carve out 10 distinct problems that need to be addressed and name task forces to tackle each one, Davids against a slew of Goliaths.

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On March 3, Richardson will convene a "summit on violence" at Grace Church. He's inviting faith leaders and anyone who cares about the city to come and talk about what happens next: a toll-free number to report drug activity, a marketing campaign, even teams of people to walk the streets of Mount Vernon.

"We won't watch young, black boys kill each other and destroy the potential of the city," Richardson said.

I asked him if the blended forces of poverty, broken families and violence ever make him want to give up. Why should this War on Violence work when others have failed?

"When you get to the point of frustration, you look around and say, 'I got to do something,'" he told me. "You discover there are resources you've overlooked and people who feel the same way but need someone to express their resistance. I just can't call myself a pastor and let drug pushers override this community. I refuse. You get to a boiling point. I refuse."

There are obvious parallels between Richardson's zeal to slow violence on the streets and his commitment to call people to church to reconsider the modern meaning of Jesus' passion and resurrection for Christians.

Saving souls and saving bodies. The two sides of an urban pastor's coin. Both programs require faith and good works.

Richardson doesn't see a divide.

"I've never seen a demarcation between faith and the responsibility to speak out for justice," he said. "Religion points us to a vision of heaven. But that vision is not simply a destination, but a goal of transformation. The role of church is to engage society to become its best self, to transform the local situation right now."

So on Ash Wednesday, when Christians repent and consider their mortality, the Rev. W. Darin Moore, pastor of Greater Centennial AME Zion Church in Mount Vernon and president of United Black Clergy of Westchester, will open the "Passion to Pentecost" worship series at Grace Baptist.

Those who come should leave with new spiritual energy for the Summit on Violence six days later.

"We don't want the cross and crucifixion to be merely nostalgic, but to apply to the lives of men and women every day," Richardson said. "The history of a still struggling people connects with the suffering Christ."

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