Are Catholic Churches Getting in the Front Lines against Gun Violence?

Part One: Chicago's Year of Living Violently

By Judith Valente


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As the world rightly focuses its attention on the recent carnage in Paris, and concerns grow over whether terrorists will soon strike again elsewhere, a different kind of terror continues to afflict us in here in America's heartland. In the great city of Chicago, someone will likely get shot in the time it's taken me to write this column. This is the city I've been proud to call my adopted home since 1987, and it is suffering.

Someone is shot in Chicago on the average of every three hours. There have been more than 400 shooting deaths in the city so far this year, up 18 percent already from last year. Our city's suffering became vividly clear for the whole nation this past week, following the release of a year-old dashcam video showing a police officer shooting a teenager 16 times.

The city had already been reeling from the death of nine-year-old Tyshawn Lee, whose murder shocked even those grown increasingly inured to tragic street violence.
Tyshawn’s death was particularly heart-wrenching not only because of his age. Tyshawn was executed. A fourth-grader who dreamed of playing in the NBA, he had walked few blocks from his home to his grandmother’s house to play basketball on a nearby court. Police say he was lured into an alley and shot several times, at close range, in the head and back. His presumed offense: being the son of a reputed gang member.

Tyshawn was the second nine-year-old killed in gun violence within the past 15 months. Back in September, an 11-month-old was shot as his mother held him in her arms. The infant’s mother and grandmother were also gunned down. Only the baby survived.

“We’re a city of walking wounded families,” says community activist and crisis responder Dawn Valenti.

The unspeakable sadness of it all has led me to search for people who are trying to bring hope and healing to this fractured city against heavy odds. Fortunately, there are many such people, like Valenti, who is part of a crisis team called Chicago Survivors. The year-old organization is an off-shoot of Chicago Citizens 4 Change, a group that includes many families touched by street violence who now try to combat it through community action.

With a staff of just four and a core of volunteers, Chicago Survivors provides intervention services that include counseling for victims’ families, organizing funerals and candlelight vigils, and helping families navigate the often overwhelming police investigative process. They have an offshoot called “Peacemakers” that regularly sends speakers who have lost family members to gun violence into the public schools.

In one recent case, Valenti even arranged for a cleaning company to remove the blood stains, free of charge, from the family car where a young man and his two companions were fatally ambushed.

Susan Johnson, an American Baptist minister, is Chicago Survivors’ executive director. After retiring two years ago as pastor of the Hyde Park Union Church on the city’s south side, not far from where the Obamas have a home, Johnson said she felt she still had something to give. She saw no greater need than helping stop the violence.

Johnson says Tyshawn’s murder, while particularly shocking, only underscores something she calls equally appalling: “the normalcy we’ve ascribed to seeing a murder a day.”

Lingering spiritual questions are often the hardest to address in gun violence cases. Families find their faith shaken to the core, Johnson says. Because it receives funding through a U.S. Justice Department grant as well as private donations, Chicago Survivors must walk a fine line in helping families navigate these questions.
“Several of our staff are comfortable leading prayer and being in prayer with others, but this has got to be requested by the families,” she says.

It’s also the reason why support from local churches and clergy members is essential. Sadly that support, according to Johnson, is often missing. “Very few [pastors] walk the anti-violence walk,” she says. “In the midst of the tragedy and its aftermath, they’ll come out. Three days after the funeral, they won’t be around.”

Johnson acknowledges that it’s often hard to help families who’ve endured losses through gun violence. They are angry, frequently at God. They need on-going care. About 75 percent of the Chicago families who’ve lost a relative to gun violence have small children in the home. Those children often experience subsequent panic attacks. Early and repeated exposure to violence can affect their ability to learn, to interact with others.

“It’s very difficult to stay by the side of a survivor. Their path to recovery is a long one.” Johnson says.

She notes that about a dozen pastors attended Tyshawn’s funeral. But they were far outnumbered by mothers whose lives have also been scarred by street violence, members of Tyshawn’s public school community and people from the south side Chicago neighborhoods who are all too familiar with the sound of gunshots.

I was heartened to learn that two Catholic priests are among the clergy members Johnson singles out for working tirelessly to end the violence: Father David Kelly of the Precious Blood fathers, and Father Michael Pfleger, longtime pastor of St. Sabina Church in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood where Tyshawn lived.

For years, Kelly has provided worship services and spiritual counseling for teens incarcerated in the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center. Pfleger is a well-known activist who leads one of Chicago’s most vibrant African American parishes.

Kelly’s work in the juvenile detention center led him to conclude that putting kids in jail fuels crime, rather than prevents it. He is now a leader in a movement called “Restorative Justice.” It is an approach to crime that focuses less on punishment than on seeing how those perpetrating a wrong can make it right.

“Restorative justice looks at the issue of who was harmed, who did the harm and how we can repair the harm,” Kelly says. “It deals with relationships because ultimately, crime is a violation of relationship.”

It is also a way of holding kids accountable, he says, “without labeling them demons or criminals.” And, he adds, it is gaining support among a growing number of state judges who hear juvenile cases.

Kelly holds regular gatherings called “Peace Circles” between offenders, victims and their families, where each side can freely express their emotions and come to some sort of resolution.

Like Johnson, Kelly says churches have been largely missing in action in the struggle against youth violence. “The churches need to open their doors. They need to make kids feel welcome. Instead, churches are afraid of these kids. They need to go out, find these kids and build relationships where they can feel they belong.”

In the city’s troubled Auburn Gresham neighborhood, Pfleger has dedicated his priesthood to that mission. Over the years, he led public battles to ban the sale of drug paraphernalia, close liquor stores and gun shops and eliminate cigarette and alcohol billboard advertising that could appeal to children.

“We have gone to a new low that’s removed what used to be some codes, some barriers, some lines that used to be drawn in the community, some things in our city that were not acceptable,” he said of the murder of Tyshawn. His words have particular resonance. Pfleger himself has two adopted African American sons, and was the foster parent of a third who died in a gang crossfire in the 1990s.

When Tyshawn’s family sought a place to hold his funeral service, they turned to Pfleger and St.
Sabina, even though the family isn’t Catholic. Pfleger’s parishioners have helped raise a $35,000 reward for information leading to Tyshawn’s killers, and Pfleger said he would personally pay for the relocation of any witnesses who fear for their own lives if they come forward.

In an emotional eulogy, Pfleger called Tyshawn the martyr "of a society that’s lost its conscience.” He suggested there has been a consistent lack of will on the part of government, business -- and churches -- to address the root causes of urban violence in neighborhoods like Tyshawn’s where there is double digit unemployment and mistrust of the police.

“We’ve got to confront our failed education systems and the lack of options and opportunities,” Pfleger said. “We’ve got to look at the broken bridge between law enforcement and the community ...to confront the gun lobby and the NRA who is running to the bank while blood runs in our streets.”

Just a few days ago, police arrested 27-year-old Corey Morgan, a gang member with a long criminal record and charged him with Tyshawn’s murder. Morgan’s alleged motive for the killing, recorded in court papers, is enough to make you hang your head and weep with despair. The filing quotes Morgan as reportedly saying, “that since his brother was killed and his mama was shot, he was going to kill grandmas, mamas, kids and all.” Something is very wrong here.

What if Morgan had been offered the chance to be part of one of Father Kelly’s Peace Circles long before his life began to spiral out of control? What if there were enough safe havens for him to turn to outside of the gangs?

Chicago Archbishop Blase Cupich recently urged the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to make gun control and curbing gun violence one of the church’s top priorities in the 2016 presidential election. The archbishop recent told the Chicago Federation of Labor, "I want the church to become an even more committed partner ... joining with business, government and labor in promoting the lives and dignity of those who are too often left behind in our city, nation and the world."

For decades, our church has led the way in protecting the rights of the unborn. It’s now time to turn our attention to joining with those trying to stem violence among the living. It is time to work with equal devotion at protecting all children, especially those in our cities like Tyshawn, who are most at risk.

Part II: Chicago’s Year of Living Violently: Seeking Solutions

The U.S. continues to incarcerate more youths than any other country in the industrialized world. There are an estimated 70,800 juveniles in correctional facilities, according to the most recent statistics available. That’s more than the populations of several state capitals, including Annapolis, Dover, Bismark and Harrisburg, to name a few.

Still, violence involving youth remains an intractable problem. In a previous post, I wrote about my own city, Chicago, which is on track for experiencing one of the bloodiest years in recent decades, due in large part to youth gang violence. In just the past two months, an 11-month old was wounded and a nine year old shot to death in apparent gang-related incidents.

A 2011 report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration,” lays out the reasons why incarceration largely fails to reform young offenders. Youths who spend time in prison have higher rates of recidivism than those placed in alternative programs, are less likely to return to school after their prison time, and less likely to find jobs.

Those findings were supported by a recent analysis of the Cook County juvenile justice system by the Mansfield Institute at Chicago’s Roosevelt University and the Institute on Public Safety and Social Justice at the city’s Adler University. According to that study, pushing teenagers into the penal system disrupts their connection to school, particularly their ability to receive special-education services; adds to mental health issues they might have, increasing their risk of suicide; and increases their acceptance of criminal thinking.
“Furthermore,” the study notes, “participants identified the paradox of not being able to receive any preventative services for themselves and/or their children without first becoming involved with the [criminal] justice system.”

Then there is price tag attached to incarceration. It costs an estimated $66,000 to $88,000 to house a young person in a correctional facility over nine to 12 months—far more than costs to attend many a public university for a year.

But there is also reason for hope. The rate of youth confinement has been declining. The number of juveniles in jail is down more than 30,000 from a 1995 high of 107,600. That is due in part to efforts to seek new, innovative responses to delinquency that are more humane and cost-effective, especially for non-violent and first-time offenders.

Father David Kelly and friends at Precious Blood Center in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood.

One of the consistent voices for change has been Father David Kelly, a Precious Blood priest who’s served as the chaplain at the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center for more than a decade. Kelly is a leading proponent of a concept called “restorative justice.” It’s an approach that includes bringing perpetrators and victims together, and involving their families and community in a joint effort to repair the harm done by a crime.

Kelly runs the Precious Blood Center in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood, a place swarming with gang members. It is also the neighborhood where that 11-month old, his mother and grandmother were killed in a crossfire last October. The center represents the kind of restorative justice “hub” that Kelly would like to see established in Chicago’s most crime-ridden neighborhoods.

“We’re not just people doing nice things,” Kelly says. “This is about building relationships with kids and families who feel disconnected. It’s about radical hospitality and accompaniment.”

Restorative justice hinges on certain pillars. It requires community members to take the lead in creating safe and welcoming spaces within neighborhoods. It calls for building, restoring and strengthening relationships; promoting a youth’s sense of connection and belonging to a community; and engaging in peacemaking efforts.

As a detention center chaplain, Kelly isn’t naïve. He’s ministered to enough youths awaiting trial on murder, armed robbery, and felony assault charges to know that incarceration might be necessary in some cases. Still, Kelly's efforts to seek alternatives is gaining support even among some county judges. Veteran juvenile court Judge Colleen Sheehan says she supports a proposal to form restorative justice community courts for offenders who are 18 to 24-years-old. Offenders in that age group currently have fewer alternative options than juveniles.

“There is no one size fits all solution,” Sheehan told me recently. The courts, she adds, need to look for innovative ways to address crime “or we’re going to become irrelevant.”
Sheehan says restorative justice courts might begin with those accused of non-felony offenses as well as first offenders, see how that works, and then advance from there to dealing with those accused of more serious crimes.

One of the foundations of Kelly's restorative justice center is the “Peace Circle.” Such “circles” for conflict resolution have their roots in both Quaker and Native American spirituality.

In one case referred by a juvenile court judge to Kelly's Precious Blood Center, a youth we'll call Dontae was charged with home burglary. As the circle leader, Kelly says he visited Dontae and his mother at home, explaining that at the center, they would be required to literally sit in a circle and face the person whose home had been burglarized. They agreed.

“Both Deontae and his mother said that what they really wanted to do was to apologize for what he did,” Kelly recalls.

On the day of the circle, refreshments were served. The man whose home was burglarized seemed more anxious and angry than he had been in agreeing to participate. The circle also included a retired school principal, a local coach, two other youths and a woman active in the neighborhood.

“Once all were in the circle, we began with a poem, and check-in, asking how they were in coming to the circle.” Kelly says. A ceremony followed in which each person took a strand of ribbon and was asked to think of someone who had been a mentor to them and share that with the rest of the circle. Each tied their strand of ribbon to another's until all the ribbons were connected.

“We got up and placed the ribbon circle in the centerpiece as sign that we are who we are because of those we had in our lives,” Kelly says. Over the course of the sharing, Dontae and the man he had burglarized learned that their mothers had both been their main mentors. Both had grown up in the same vicinity and had absent fathers.

“Little by little, people spoke, not to the issue of the burglary, but of themselves,” Kelly recalls. “People began to lean in and engage one another in a more intimate way. In the beginning [the victim] sat back with arms crossed as if saying, "So tell me something I don’t already know." But after hearing from others—especially Dontae—he began to lean in and engage others.”

When it was time to speak about the crime that had brought them together, the burglary victim said what really angered and hurt him wasn’t that a window was broken and some of his possessions were taken, but that his five-year-old son said to him afterward, “Daddy, I don’t want to live here no more.”

“What he had vowed as a father, to protect his son and give him a home that was safe, was taken from him with the burglary,” Kelly says.

Dontae explained that in participating with the burglary, he wanted to look tough in front of some other teens, so went along. He tearfully apologized to the victim. Dontae’s mother spoke about being embarrassed by her son. She said she worried every time he left the house what might happen to him.

Finally, when asked what was needed to repair the harm done, the man whose home was burglarized said there was one thing Dontae could do for him. “I need you to go to school,” he said.

Dontae had been expelled from school and his mother’s efforts to get him into another school had failed. The retired school principal who was part of the Peace Circle said she could help get Dontae back in the classroom.

The man who had been burglarized gave Dontae his card with his phone number on it. He offered to accompany Dontae, a basketball lover, to a local gym sometime to play ball.

“The circle ended with Deontae being mentored by the victim,” Kelly says. Dontae did return to school and seems to be doing well. Members of the circle are required to continue to check in with him for at least six months.

Kelly has accumulated a set of comments youth offenders have made about their Peace Circle
experiences. Here are a few:

“It is a place where you can be yourself. I hear people in here in the circle talk about things they would never talk about in the streets. They let their guard down and are kinda more soft—in a good way.”

“Circles let me get things off my chest. I can come to circle and talk about my problems and then I don’t have to think about them so much.”

“Once I was really upset and was about to get into it with someone, but I remembered that I had a circle that night. I knew I could talk about it there, so I walked away.”

Restorative justice Peace Circles aren’t the solution. But they are a part of the solution. They are a lot less expensive and complicated than incarceration. Sometimes the best solutions are the simplest ones.

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