

Church leaders denounce gang violence in Portland

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LeRoy Haynes Jr. (second from left) of the Allen Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church speaks to community members Friday, calling for an end to gang violence in Portland. Twelve pastors with the Albina Ministerial Alliance held a press conference to address the Dec. 12 fatal shooting at a funeral at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. Joining Haynes are (from left) Robert C. Jointer of New Hope, A.A. Wells of Emmanuel Temple Church and Alcena Boozer of St. Philip the Deacon Episcopal Church.

Stunned by the fatal shooting inside a North Portland church last week and fearing increased violence, a dozen city ministers Friday demanded that gang members drop their guns and silence the back-and-forth gunfire that continues to claim lives.

"The issue is urgent. Our house is on fire. Our children are dying. We need to take immediate action," thundered the Rev. LeRoy Haynes Jr., standing before his pulpit at Northeast Portland's Allen Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

Multnomah County Sheriff Latwan Brown, suspect in church shooting

Haynes stood with 11 other members of the Albina Ministerial Alliance to denounce the violence that disrupted a funeral service at one of their churches and ended with the death of 30-year-old Darshawn L. Cross on Dec. 12.

The Rev. Robert C. Jointer, the pastor of the New Hope Missionary Baptist Church where the shooting occurred, described it as an "unthinkable travesty." Emmanuel Temple Church senior Pastor C. T. Wells called the shooting a "spiritual attack on the church." Together, they urged the suspect, Latwan Brown, 31, to turn himself in and pleaded with family, friends and witnesses to come forward to help police.

Their impassioned pleas hearkened back to the late 1980s and early 1990s when Portland gang violence was at its height. The ministers said they weren't under any illusion that their united voice would halt the shootings, and they called for increased funding for gang enforcement, outreach and intervention programs. Two street preachers said the pastors' public plea would not be enough and urged ministers to shed their crisp Sunday suits and reach out to gang members on their own turf.

Though last week's brazen killing marked the only gang-related homicide in the city this year, Portland Police Bureau's Gang Violence Response Team has been called out to 65 violent gang clashes, a marked increase from the 40 in 2007 and 30 in 2006, Lt. Mike Leloff said.

Cross, an Unthank Park Hustler who had been shot in the stomach this summer, was attending a noon funeral service at New Hope off North Gantenbein Avenue when he got into a fight with Brown, a Kerby Bloc Crip. Police and witnesses said Cross suspected Brown was the man who shot him in August. Authorities said Brown, who was handed a gun by another person at the service, pumped four shots into Cross, who collapsed on the church carpet. About 150 frantic mourners ran outside or ducked for cover. Cross died Monday.

"We call upon Latwan Brown to surrender himself to the Portland Police Bureau and take responsibility for the actions he has done," Haynes said, his voice reverberating through the church. "We plead to the family members to encourage him to surrender. Then we call upon the witnesses to do their moral and civic responsibility by contacting police."

Haynes said that just the night before he had been summoned to the hospital where 30-year-old Samuel Mason, the son of one of his congregants, was being treated for a gunshot to the leg. Mason, a close friend of Brown's, had apparently been shot in retaliation for Cross' killing.

"It is time that every pastor, every citizen, every parent, every community organizer, every official in government take a stand and say 'Enough is enough' to end this senseless violence in this community," Haynes bellowed. "Our hearts cry out to end this cycle of violence. This most recent violence has penetrated the most sacred of sacred places."

Pastor Melvin Bailey of Bethesda Christian Church in North Portland suggested his fellow church leaders start engaging the gang members.

"Many of them are members of our own churches," he said. "Bring them in, sit them down."

Street preacher Larry Collins of On the Block Ministries attended Friday's gathering. "No disrespect, but these church leaders need to come out of these four walls, and establish relationships with the gang members on the street, go where they're at."

Carl Goodman, assistant director of the Multnomah County Department of Community Justice, noted that Cross had been on parole supervision. Friday, Goodman pledged to work closer with local ministers. "We haven't been working as collaboratively with the community as we should have been or could be," he said.

Jimmy Brown, a city official who had started and supervised the county's Gang Resource Intervention Team, said the community must not only come together in crisis. "Part of the challenge is, how do you maintain this type of focus?"

Jointer said he was humbled by the support from ministers locally and church leaders across the country. While he said he's officiated at many gang-related funerals, he added, "Never had I dreamed that anyone -- even gang members -- would desecrate the church in such a horrendous manner." He called it a "miracle" that no one else inside the church was wounded.

Anyone with information in the Cross homicide is asked to call Detective Mark Slater at 503-823-9319. Crime Stoppers is also offering a cash reward of up to \$1,000 for information that leads to an arrest in the case. Call Crime Stoppers at 503-823-HELP (4357) or leave a tip online at www.crimestoppersoforegon.com

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