



**Faith-based Response to the  
DC-Area Sniper Attacks:  
A Case Study**

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## ► Faith-based Response to the DC-Area Sniper Attacks: A Case Study

A string of methodical killings over a 100-mile area from Oct. 2 to Oct. 22, 2002 terrorized the greater Washington, D.C. area. For three weeks, a pair of snipers shot people of all ages, genders, and races. Thirteen people were shot over 21 days. Eleven people died.

Thousands of people temporarily changed their way of life as a siege mentality took over the public and transfixed the media.

Police arrested John Allen Muhammad, 41, and John Lee Malvo, 17, on Oct. 24 in connection with the spree, as well as other shootings in Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Both could face the death penalty if convicted.

Penniless drifters who eluded and taunted police, Muhammad and Malvo showed how just two men could paralyze the nation's capital. Their attacks left many residents wondering what well-trained teams could do.

## ► Timeline of Deaths, Funeral Services, Interfaith Services and Special Masses

- October 2 James (Jim) Martin killed
- October 3 James L. "Sonny" Buchanan killed  
Premkumar Walekar killed  
Maria Sara Ramos killed  
Lori Ann Lewis-Rivera killed
- October 6 Funeral service was held for Premkumar Walekar
- October 7 Funeral mass was held for Maria Sara Ramos  
Wake and memorial service were held for Lori Ann Lewis-Rivera
- October 8 Service held at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Rockville  
Montgomery County Executive Doug Duncan attended  
Evening prayer vigil at the Millian United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md.
- October 9 Funeral service was held for James (Jim) Martin  
Service focused on children held at the Christian Community Presbyterian Church in Bowie, Md
- October 11 Funeral service was held for James L. "Sonny" Buchanan
- October 12 Pascal Charlot killed
- October 13 Dean Meyers killed  
Kenneth Bridges killed  
Mass held at St. Paul's Catholic Church in Bethesda
- October 15 Memorial service was held for Kenneth Bridges
- October 17 Linda Gail Franklin killed
- October 19 Funeral service held for Pascal Charlot  
Memorial service was held Dean Meyers
- October 21 Funeral service was held for Linda Gail Franklin
- October 22 Conrad Johnson killed  
  
Service called by the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and the Mayor's Interfaith Council of Washington at the Faith United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md. Public officials that spoke included Montgomery County, Md. More than 20 faith groups were represented.
- October 26 Funeral service was held for Conrad Johnson

## ► An Altered Way of Life

The shootings occurred at public places (for a timeline of names of victims and funeral dates, see page 4). Five people were shot in the parking lots or lawns of retail stores or restaurants. Three were shot at gas stations. One was shot as she sat on a bench outside a Post Office. A 13-year-old boy was shot as he walked into a middle school. A man was gunned down as he was crossing the street in D.C. And a bus driver was killed as he stood in the doorway of his bus before starting his route. (For a list of sniper victims, please see Appendix 1.)

The sniper investigation started as an attempt to apprehend a criminal. It turned into a moral war. Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose, who has since resigned, was at the helm, and residents began turning to his televised press briefings for comfort and confidence.

But, other than staying up to date on investigations, and praying that the snipers were caught soon, the public had very few outlets for action except for a handful of interfaith prayer services. A few community and church relief funds were started, with proceeds going to victims' families. The name of one such campaign accurately reflected the moral crusade at the time: "Overcoming Evil with Goodness," a fundraiser by a church in Fredericksburg, Va., that raised money for two victims' families.

As police began sharing clues with the public – among them the sighting of a white box truck or white van at the murder sites – residents began to change aspects of their daily life, sometimes in dramatic ways.

A Washington Post poll showed half of all Washington area residents felt fear for their own lives during the shootings. More than 40 percent of respondents said they avoided outdoor activities.

Gas stations put up tarps to hide customers from sight, and people ducked between gas pumps and their cars. Starbucks coffee stores in the area removed outdoor furniture. People hurried across parking lots, walking in a zigzag pattern with the notion of making themselves a tougher target for a high-powered sight. Parents kept their children indoors.

High-school homecoming games were played on undisclosed secure military bases. Children ran for cover when they got off the school bus. And thousands of parents had conversations with their children about fear.

As teachers taught children at a church-operated preschool in St. Matthew's United Methodist Church – a half mile from where a 13-year-old boy was shot by the snipers at Benjamin Tasker Middle School in Bowie, Md. – even incidents that were once a passing concern were now traumatic, observed the Rev. Richard Stetler.

"Right in front of the church, a man in a pickup truck was pulled over by police and asked to put his hands on the hood," he said. "Our teachers were looking out the window with great concern."

## ► Sudden Vulnerability

The snipers made many people feel even more vulnerable than they did in the wake of the terrorist attacks. Some people said they felt somewhat safer after Sept. 11 if they lived or worked in areas that weren't likely to be targeted by terrorists. But almost every public place felt like a sniper target. "It's the randomness that makes everybody vulnerable," said Gil Furst of Lutheran Disaster Response.

After the first several killings, area churches began to offer worship services and prayer vigils that focused on comforting people who felt highly vulnerable. "Where are you when I need you, oh Lord?" asked Dr. Rajwant Singh during a reading from the Sikh tradition at an evening interfaith service held at the Faith United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md. "You are here, ever present in our hearts."

At the time, the Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine, executive director of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, said the snipers made it scary to go on with everyday life. "We fill our cars with gas. We shop and eat at restaurants. We are all affected by the events of the last few weeks," he said, offering a prayer: "God, help us to live as people of faith, refusing to allow fear to dictate our daily lives. Even as we experience the senseless horror of these attacks, fill our hearts and lives with the desire to be peacemakers."

Carole Miller of the Regional Baha'I Council of the Southern States, said that people had become suddenly aware their lives were finite and fragile. "Death could be upon any of us," she said as she comforted people during a worship service. "That's why we really have to live each day like we're going to make a difference in this life."

"If there was a pattern to the attacks, people could have at least made some sort of sick sense of it all," said Stan Hankins of Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. "If there was one mode of operation, people might have felt better able to protect themselves. But (the snipers) attacked in so many different areas and venues. I can't imagine how anybody felt safe."

## ► Spiritual Expression

The most spiritual expression early on in the sniper attacks was not organized church services but spontaneous community outpouring that included:

- ◆ yellow roses left in the Shoppers Food Warehouse parking lot where James Martin, the first victim, died
- ◆ commemorative letters and flowers tied to a utility pole near where James "Sonny" Buchanan was shot
- ◆ Maryland and Montgomery County flags flown at half-mast in front of Rockville police headquarters
- ◆ flowers and cards placed on the bench where Sara Ramos was shot (the bench was later removed)
- ◆ signs and flowers that transformed the vacuum cleaner at Connecticut Ave. Shell station used by Lori Ann Lewis-Rivera into a makeshift memorial
- ◆ flowers placed at pump 9 at Mobil station where Prem Kumar Walekar was shot
- ◆ candles and flowers left in parking deck outside of Home Depot where Linda Franklin was killed
- ◆ flowers placed at Georgia Ave. and Kalmia Rd. NW, in Washington, D.C. (site of Pascal Charlot's death)
- ◆ a makeshift shrine at scene of Conrad Johnson's death as he stood in the stairwell of his bus

## ► Mental Health

Before any formal spiritual care programs were publicly offered on any level larger than pastor-to-congregant, publicity began for government-funded mental health programs. The Montgomery County, Md. Crisis Center, the Mental Health Association of Montgomery County, and the American Group Psychotherapy Association provided counselors. Many area schools also brought in outside mental health counselors to assist guidance counselors already in place.

## ► Judicatory and National Response

As local churches began losing members to the snipers, judicatory executives began issuing statements of sympathy and comfort.

After the death of the first sniper victim, Bishop Felton May of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church issued a statement published in the judicatory newspaper distributed to pastors and lay leaders. "On behalf of the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference, I extend profound sympathy to the family of James Martin for the senseless murder and untimely death of this exemplary United Methodist layman," said Bishop May. "I feel a personal grief at this loss of a precious life. Indeed, we grieve and express our sympathies for all the precious lives



taken from us in these terrible shootings. They heighten our awareness and rub our sensitivities raw to the harsh reality of attacks and murders – both indiscriminate and intentional – that occur daily in communities throughout our region, our nation and our world.

"The commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' rings loud and clear as a call from God for us to refrain from and oppose violence – even the threat of preemptive violence – against human beings anywhere in the world," said the bishop. "It simply cannot and should not be tolerated by people of God. What we should all feel on this somber occasion is holy grief; that is, not merely sorrow but also the expression of love, compassion and active concern for the sacred lives of all human beings as an affirmation of our faith and obedience to God."

Some judicatory leaders began to realize local pastors might need support as they helped people cope with their fears. "We wrote a letter to congregations giving them scriptural passages, youth-related materials and Web sites that could help them find resources to deal with stress and strife," recalled Merrit Schatz, disaster response coordinator of the National Capital Presbytery.

In the aftermath of the fear and dread that gripped many in the D.C. area, Schatz wondered if that was enough. "We probably ought to have been more proactive," she said. "We posted the letter on our Web page, but that meant we had to rely on people to regularly look at the site. We would like to have run a bulletin insert."

"Things developed so quickly that the school and governmental resource people did not report back to faith-based groups what their findings were in the schools," said David Percy, spokesperson for Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) of the D.C. area. To further communication, LDR helped to sponsor a meeting of D.C. Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), Percy added.

Even those faith-based disaster response groups that did not respond to the public in some official capacity, acknowledged the effect of sniper-related fears on their own personnel. The human resources division at The Salvation Army National Capital and Virginia division office, located in D.C., decided to close the organization's offices for half a day one Friday because of concern for people's safety, said Molly Lew, disaster services coordinator. But, she added, "there was no divisional response, no cohesive effort."

Local churches that provided a place for people to pray and be together served their community well, said Gil Furst of Lutheran Disaster Response. "In this case, it was on the shoulders of the local congregation to take the initiative and do something. Local churches provided a safe haven atmosphere and provided strength for people in the context of their faith."



When the snipers penned a callous note after one shooting that said, in part, "I am God," many local pastors felt compelled to verbally respond.

"None of us is God," said the Rev. Chris Hobgood at a candle-lit vigil held at Faith United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md. There – and in many other churches across the area – dozens of Maryland, D.C., and Virginia residents gathered in solidarity.

Hobgood, a regional minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), acknowledged the pain of hearing such a message from the snipers. "All of us are precious to God," he said. "In this pain-filled time in our community, it is important to pray for all of God's children -- for the medical people who care for these victims, for the countless in our community who live in fear." And for whoever is killing people, he added. "We pray for those who – for whatever reason – turn deadly fury on the innocent."

Another message from the sniper that provoked heightened church response was one that said, "Your children are not safe anywhere at any time." After that message went out to the public, the number of ecumenical services increased, as did public prayers for healing, hope and peace.

More than 20 faith groups in the greater DC area – from Sikh to Islam to Jewish to Christian – were represented at one or more ecumenical services that took place during the sniper investigation.

Judiciary executives began trying to promote attendance at these services. "We are called to holy assemblies. Let us come singing a song of anguish," said the Bishop May, urging people to attend ecumenical services in the area.

## ► Workloads on Local Pastors and Burdens on Local Churches

Judiciary executives and national disaster response leaders seemed to agree that the larger part of the response to sniper-related fears fell to local churches. Many residents were at a loss for where to turn so they began to turn to their pastors for comfort. There was, as one resident put it, "so little we could do."

One pastor who lost a church member to the snipers urged people to draw together instead of hiding in their homes in fear. "My hope is that our response to this violence will be that instead of letting it destroy our community, we can have a renewal of feeling the pain of others," said the Rev. Jeff Jones, pastor of the Ashton United Methodist Church in Ashton, Md.

One of his church members, 55-year old James Martin, was killed in the parking lot of a grocery store in a Maryland suburb. "We need to help each other out, to move to being more engaged in our com-

munities from being less engaged," said Jones. "Crisis and danger can happen to anybody at any time. All life is precious."

Area residents were feeling "shaken" and "vulnerable," said the Rev. David Argo of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Kensington, another Maryland suburb.

One of the fatal shootings occurred one block from Argo's church at a Shell gas station. Argo visited the scene shortly after the shooting and said media people outnumbered the police.

"There is an uneasiness in people's lives here," Argo said. "Montgomery County is traditionally a safe place, and the random, senseless violence will have a long-lasting effect on the community," he added.

As the sniper attacks wore on, police presence and public reaction alike became increasingly visible. Police searched for a white box truck or white van and urged the public to keep on the lookout for these vehicles. They turned out to be very common sights in almost any DC area location.

Pastors admitted they felt as vulnerable as anyone else. "As this carnage goes on, we're just listening and praying along with everyone else," said the Rev. Charles Harrell of the Faith United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md., during the attacks. "Folks are expressing shock. No community is immune from violence."

The collective anxiety was difficult to address, acknowledged David Henry of the United Church of Christ national disaster ministries network. "How we deal with that fear as a society is extraordinarily difficult," he said.

Pastors and lay people alike urged people to use fearful time to develop the constructive habit of checking up on loved ones.

Bill Devlin, vice president of the faith-based Urban Family Council based in Philadelphia said living in the face of danger or fear came down to neighbor helping neighbor. "I call this the 'Good Samaritan strategy.'" In suburbia, people often don't know their neighbors, he pointed out. "You hit the clicker on your garage door and you're safely ensconced with your cable TV. Five, seven, ten years go by...

"Come outside your cave," he urged Washington area residents. "Know who your neighbor is. That's the illusion of living in the suburbs -- that everybody is fine. Well, not everybody's fine."

Clergy also urged their congregants to try to be courageous and go about their normal lives. "That is all we can do," said the Rev. Richard Stetler, pastor at St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in

Bowie, a Maryland suburb. The church is one-half mile away from Benjamin Tasker Middle School, where a 13-year-old boy was shot on his way into school. "That's what I preach, that's what I teach."

Sermons and prayer about fear became commonplace at most area churches. "We pray for those who are fearful," said the Rev. Connie Paulson at the Millian United Methodist Church. "We pray for those who are wondering -- who's watching over me? "Be courageous," Paulson urged her flock. Paulson said she was confronted with people asking the question: why? She – and her peers in the ministry – said they often, in turn, asked God why in prayer.

"Why such senseless death?" Paulson prayed publicly.

### ► **Moral Spokespeople: Public Officials or Clergy?**

As the weeks wore on, the public increasingly demanded results from public officials. And residents began to seek comfort from those same officials, often turning to them instead of or, in addition to, their local religious leaders. Public officials began attending church services – and with at least some of them up for reelection – they also publicized that attendance.

Hundreds of people gathered at the Catholic-affiliated Holy Cross Elementary School in Garrett Park, Md., for a special mass that honored Charles Moose, who was at that time Montgomery County Police Chief. The mass also honored several other police officers.

County Executive Doug Duncan also attended this mass, as well as other church services. Duncan also personally attended the funerals of all those who died, including funerals held in other states.

Duncan hosted a prayer vigil in downtown Rockville, Md., at the Montgomery County Executive Office Building. The service, sponsored by the Rockville-based Victims Rights Foundation, featured an invocation by Bishop Francisco Gonzalez, Auxiliary Bishop of Catholic Archdiocese of Washington D.C.

Together, Duncan and Moose gradually became what many people considered "moral spokespeople" for the community. Both at different times offered prayers or quoted Bible verses to a public hungry for comfort. (Duncan was reelected while the snipers were still at large.)

Even television news anchors exhorted listeners to pray for an end to the violence. On an Oct. 22, 2002, 7-minute, 11-second segment about the sniper attacks that ran on Eyewitness News at 11 p.m. on CBS Channel 9, news anchor Gurvir Ohinosa commented, "So many of us in this area feel out of control. The one thing that we can do is pray."



But no religious leaders were as visible to the public, except during televised religious services.

Bill Devlin, vice president of the faith-based Urban Family Council based in Philadelphia, said clergy would be more visible public spokespersons if they were better trained to do more to help people cope with incidents like the sniper attacks.

"We had a shooting over the weekend in Philadelphia, and the media – as they always do – immediately calls the psychologist community, not clergy, when they want to talk about the traumatic effect," Devlin pointed out.

If clergy became more visible moral spokespeople, their capacity to provide spiritual care would grow, he suggested.

During the sniper attacks, by far the most visible "counter-violence" initiatives came from secular public officials and organizations. Members of the Guardian Angel crime prevention league offered one of the most prominent forms of care. Guardian Angels pumped gas at local service stations as a community service while citizens stayed in their cars.

Duncan, Rep. Connie Morella (R-Md.) and D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams -- prayed together at a worship service called by the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and the Mayor's Interfaith Council of Washington. It was held at the Faith United Methodist Church in Rockville, Md. a few days before the suspects were arrested.

This service – which was featured on national TV news segments – was heavily guarded. Police were stationed in the parking lot and in the woods surrounding the church.

At that service – as in the Catholic mass – the congregation recognized area law enforcement teams who were trying to apprehend the sniper. "We thank God for the commitment and courage of these men and women," prayed the Rev. George Hackey, pastor at the Sharp Street United Methodist Church. "God, protect and defend them as they place themselves in jeopardy. Fill them with tenacity and wisdom to solve these crimes."

Only one uniformed officer came forward to personally receive a blessing at the interfaith service while dozens of others manned posts outside. Other prayers were lifted up for the medical teams caring for the wounded victims.

The police outside and the press corps that was crammed into the church balcony vastly outnumbered the actual 100 or so parishioners. At the end of the service, clergy led the congregation in a vow to carry candles of courage out into the world and share them.

At another ecumenical service at the Christian Community Presbyterian Church in Bowie, Md., parishioners also prayed for investigators. "We also ask a blessing upon all police, detectives, and forensic teams. Lord, protect them from all darkness. Open their eyes in the best way that they might swiftly find this person," prayed the Rev. Heather Howland Bobbitt, interim pastor at that church.

At another interfaith evening prayer vigil on the lawn of Millian United Methodist Church shortly after the first shootings, the Rev. Connie Paulson prayed: "God, be with our law enforcement teams. You can bring the snipers to justice. You know where they are. We pray that the evil one will be stopped," she added.

As churches began publicly praying for investigators and public officials, those same investigators and public officials began more publicly displaying their emotions, stress, and hopes. After a 13-year-old boy who was walking into a Bowie middle school was shot, then-Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose appeared on national television with tears streaming down his face.

"All of our victims have been innocent and defenseless, but now we're stepping over the line," he said. "Shooting a kid – it's getting to be really, really personal now."

## ► Impact on Children

When the 13-year-old boy on his way into school was shot one Monday morning, the crescendo of fear and grief sharply grew. The boy was shot near the Benjamin Tasker Middle School in Bowie, Md., as he and his aunt walked toward the school. He lived but was seriously wounded.

School officials in virtually all of D.C.'s major suburban counties preventively "locked down" school buildings and cancelled outside activities.

One day after the boy was shot, a Bowie church – the Christian Community Presbyterian Church – held an evening interfaith service focusing on children. It was the only service outside of a school that focused exclusively on children. Emotions ran high that night. When one child said aloud: "I pray that the bad guy gets caught," many congregants – children, parents, grandparents, teachers and law enforcement officials – openly cried.

"I hope the bad guy gets caught before he can commit any more murders," said a young boy. "I pray that our schools are safe," added a girl.



Worried parents and grandparents said the service provided a safe haven to gather and simply hug or lend a listening ear. "My granddaughter was afraid to walk the 300 yards from the bus stop to my house," said Doris Kobe, who escorted her 11-year-old granddaughter from the bus stop until the snipers were caught.

Another grandmother worried aloud how to talk about the sniper shootings with her grandson. "After 9/11, my grandson said, 'All those people that died, they were standing still, weren't they?' And I said, 'Yes, I think they were.' He said, 'Well, I'm a fast runner so they're not going to get me.' Now I don't know what to tell him this time around," said the grandmother.

The Rev. Heather Howland Bobbitt, interim pastor at Christian Community Presbyterian Church, said she felt the community needed to gather to pray for the children. "We come to God this night and pray for our children, and for our children's children, and our neighbor's children, that they be not afraid, that they be able to sleep well, trusting in the goodness that is surrounding them in this place," she said.

Part of coping with fear, Bobbitt said, is being courageous enough to still care for each other in the face of danger. "We might be more courageous people and take more risks in reaching out to one another and protecting each other's children."

"The community – teachers, students, parents, families, everyone – has been rocked so hard by this," said Bobbitt.

Pastoral counselors said while everyone was anxious about the sniper attacks, children – particularly adolescents – could be hit the hardest by anxiety and fear. Kathy Kohl, a pastoral counselor with the ecumenical Maryland-based Pastoral Counseling and Care Ministries, urged adults to provide places for young people to discuss their fears. "Children need to have places where they can talk about this, the adolescents especially," she said. Age-appropriate discussion groups could be held in local churches, she suggested – but no such events were reported.

Meanwhile the very counselors and other adults trying to comfort children acknowledged they were frightened themselves. Kohl said she frequented the grocery store in Wheaton, Md., where a 55-year-old man was the first person shot by the sniper. "I grocery shop there. I live in that area. I frequent the places where the murders happened so I don't know how to wrap my mind around it myself," she said.

Many faith-based schools held services and events that provided outlets for children to express their fears. The Catholic-affiliated Holy Cross School in Rockville, Md., held a special mass where students prayed about their fears. Students sang a song of peace and presented special thank you scrolls

to police officers, who were also honored with plaques. All 108 Catholic schools in the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., then followed that lead, holding prayer services focusing on safety and peace in the community.

As children prayed, police took very visible action to protect both private and public schoolchildren. Montgomery County schools and other school districts were placed on "blue alert," meaning children were locked inside the buildings for the school day. Afternoon and evening events were canceled.

Preschools at many area churches followed this pattern as well. One area pastor observed that parental fear for their children grew to the point it was often illogical and even irrational.

Parents concerned about their children's safety failed to remember that, if the children were secured inside a building, they were likely safe from the sniper, said the pastor of a Bowie church. "The sniper's profile doesn't fit that he comes into buildings and shoots," he said. When parents called that church to see if the preschool would be canceled, they were told to bring their children, he said. "Our response was that we're doing business as usual while being cautious."

School executives from both faith-based schools and public schools sent letters and made announcements to parents outlining the steps they were taking to keep children safe. Executives of faith-based schools were also able to offer public statements of prayer.

Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, Superintendent of Schools for the Catholic Archdiocese, wrote to parents: "As we trust that Our Lord is with us, we will continue to work together as a community of faith, taking steps to make sure our children are safe."

Both faith-based and public schools activated emergency procedures to ensure children's safety, following school crisis plans that were honed in the wake of 9/11.

## ► **Nonviolence and Gun Control**

The sniper attacks galvanized discussions about nonviolence and gun control in an area that often put such topics on a back burner, at least publicly.

The random deaths hit middle-to-upper-middle income suburban residents particularly hard, said Merrit Schatz, disaster response coordinator of the National Capital Presbytery. They -- and their pastors -- hadn't collectively had to deal with such violence before. "Many other neighborhoods have had to deal with this for some time, and their pastors have been dealing with this issue theologically as well," she said.

Unlike the sniper shootings, being randomly "caught in the crossfire" is usually related to a drug-related shooting, robbery, gang violence or other social problem, observed Schatz. "So people who don't live in neighborhoods with those problems consider themselves less vulnerable."

Religious leaders from inner city Baltimore and Washington, D.C. who had long advocated violence prevention began pointing out that, in a society where high-powered and assault rifles have become a staple of the gun market, everyone should feel vulnerable, not just those who felt like sniper targets.

Gun control advocates used the aftermath of the sniper attacks to point out that any person 18 or older who can pass a Brady background check can buy a 50-caliber sniper rifle. Nonviolence advocates pointed out the sniper culture is also increasingly promoted through books, videos, and the Internet.

However, in the aftermath of the sniper arrests, efforts for better gun control laws were mentioned in the press for less than a week.

The Rev. Doug Sands of the Simpson-Hamline United Methodist Church in Washington, said he has been urging area pastors to engage in a ministry encouraging nonviolence. "You see, on the streets of Washington, this kind of senseless death happens every day. I've held workshops and invited people from this area and none have shown up." Now they're interested, he added. "They're interested in nonviolence when they're hurting."

Sands said local residents needed to talk about how their culture glamorizes violence, whether through games, TV shows, or movies. Sands pointed to the movie "Red Dragon," which featured a serial killer and was released close to the sniper ordeal, as an example.

## ► Remembering Others Who Live in Fear

Many residents said the tough times during the sniper attacks made them remember others who live in fear. "There are communities across the land that are torn apart by violence every day," observed the Rev. Dr. Clark Lobenstine, executive director of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington.

Faith leaders urged suburban D.C. residents to take time to better understand what it's like to live in a culture of violence and to build peace in communities.

In the time span the sniper was attacking, there were 18 "traditional homicides" in the DC area. They included a congressional intern from Mississippi who was killed in a carjacking outside his home.



Pastors also pointed out that homicide wasn't the only way lives were being threatened. At the time the sniper attacks occurred, millions were in danger of dying from hunger in southern Africa.

Domestically, the largest disaster for the Federal Emergency Management Agency in 2002 wound up getting relatively little media attention because the D.C.-area sniper attacks grabbed the media spotlight. Disaster relief groups cleaning up the extensive damage caused by Hurricane Lili and Tropical Storm Isidore in early October 2002 reported their progress was slowed by lack of national awareness.

Kathy Kohl, a suburban Maryland pastoral counselor with the ecumenical Pastoral Counseling and Care Ministries, said she saw people affected by the sniper shootings "becoming more aware of injustices in society, whatever those may be."

On the other hand, telling someone who's newly traumatized by violence that others have long been experiencing such pain can seem patronizing or unsympathetic, pointed out Johanna Olson of Lutheran Disaster Response. "Nobody can fully appreciate what the other is going through. The comparison has a divisive quality," she said.

## ► Terrorism

Many in the greater D.C. area said fears in the wake of the sniper attacks outstripped even post-9/11 jitters.

Paul Unruh, a Mennonite Disaster Service community worker who began working with D.C. area churches after Sept. 11, said that sniper fears were piled on top of lingering anxiety about anthrax and terrorism. "Some persons in the churches were even more affected by the shootings than I expected them to be," said Unruh following a round of discussions with church leaders.

There was no shortage of "triggers" in addition to the D.C. area sniper attacks to set off new panic attacks in people – a looming war with Iraq and the indeterminate fear of future terrorist attacks, among others, according to Dr. Beryce MacLennan, a psychologist specializing in trauma recovery.

As suburbanites were coping with anxiety surrounding the sniper attacks, pastors began translating some 9/11 scriptural responses to address sniper-related fears. Several D.C. area pastors preached on Romans 8:31: "What, then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

At St. Mary's Catholic Church, nearly 1,000 people gathered to hear Cardinal Theodore McCarrick talk about what anxiety does to people. "We must say to ourselves at this time, as at every time when problems come, as on Sept. 11 – do not let anxiety, do not let fear turn us back," he said.

Some residents likened the shootings to the anthrax scare because the violence made people feel vulnerable going about their daily lives – getting the mail or filling the car up with gas. Others theorized the attacks were the work of terrorists. "Many thought it was another 9/11," said one resident.

Privacy concerns that surfaced in the wake of 9/11 were also compounded during the sniper investigation, especially since many people acknowledged the real hero for catching the criminals was the database that matched a crucial fingerprint. The same civil libertarians who opposed printing visa expiration dates on the driver's licenses of immigrants also opposed national databases modeled after the one that matched the telltale fingerprint. The gun lobby also went public about databases, opposing a ballistic fingerprinting database some theorize would possibly have matched the gun to its buyer sooner in the investigation.

Yet looking back on response to 9/11, Merrit Schatz, disaster response coordinator of the National Capital Presbytery, said it was hard to apply the lessons learned from the 9/11 responses to the sniper ordeal.

David Percy of Lutheran Disaster Response agreed the sniper trauma was altogether different from 9/11-related fears. "The area did seem to be traumatized by the snipers more thoroughly and more quickly than with either the 9/11 attack or the anthrax alarm," he said. "I didn't know whether the 9/11 response would work for the sniper attacks or not," said Schatz. "The events were so different. But we used some post-9/11 response because we didn't know how else to go about it."

Percy helped lead discussion about response to the sniper attacks during a meeting of the D.C. area Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD). Despite observation that the sniper fears were in some ways more acute than post-9/11 fears, the D.C. VOAD response simply wasn't as rapid or widespread as it was in the wake of 9/11.

## ► Potential Backlash Against the Muslim Community

One of the sniper suspects, John Williams, who had changed his name to John Allen Muhammad, is a Muslim convert. Once he was identified, faith-based leaders were concerned that discrimination against Muslims – already on the rise since 9/11 – would increase. Investigators soon discovered there was no link between Muhammad and Islamic extremists.

Public statements urging faith-based groups to help prevent potential violence against Muslims were released by the following faith-based leaders:

- ◆ Imad Dean Ahmed, president of the Islamic-American Zakat Foundation in Bethesda, Md.
- ◆ Hodan Hassan, spokeswoman for a Washington D.C. Islamic civil rights group
- ◆ Imam Shamshad Nasir of the Bait-ur Rahman Mosque in Silver Spring
- ◆ Rev. Clark Lobenstine, executive director of the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington.

All tried to make sure people's anger at John Muhammad did not turn into anger at the wider Islamic community. Discriminatory acts against Muslims rose in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But, no subsequent rise was traced after the snipers were arrested even though Muhammad's conversion to Islam was mentioned prominently in the news immediately after he was apprehended.

If he had been Catholic or Methodist or Baptist, the press may not have even mentioned religion, said Stan Noffsinger, who was then head of the Church of the Brethren emergency response ministries. "We make far too much over people's religion," he said. "There is good and absence of good in all people's faiths – the very best of humanity and the very worst of humanity."

Noffsinger said he hoped Muhammad's religion would not become part of negative propaganda against the Muslims as trials for the two snipers were planned. "If that's part of a propaganda war we need to stop it. I don't know what we do about it but continue to try to stop it."

The Rev. Doug Sands of the Simpson-Hamline United Methodist Church – also urged local pastors to distinguish the difference between justice and vengeance. Especially in the wake of 9/11, he said, "we are in danger of losing the faith of love and forgiveness of the enemy."

## ► Trials and the Death Penalty

Many people quickly replaced their fear with anger directed at the two men charged in the shootings. As trials were planned for the sniper suspects, a few faith leaders said there would be ongoing spiritual care needs, not only for victims' families but also for the general public.

"Where you have an incident that traumatic and visible I would suspect there are still spiritual care needs," said Rick Augsburg, head of the Church World Service Emergency Response Program.

Several ongoing issues continue to provoke an emotional response in many people, including:

- ◆ Highly publicized haggling among prosecutors and defense lawyers as trials are planned for the two suspects.

- ◆ Newly fueled debates over the death penalty and over prosecution of juveniles.
- ◆ Ongoing public debate over the resignation of Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose, which is related in part to disagreements over publication of a book about the sniper investigation.

## ► Recommendations

During and after the sniper attacks, faith leaders and community advocates offered these recommendations to improve response should something akin to the sniper attacks happen again.

**Increase visibility of the local nonviolent spiritual force.** Some religious leaders said if people drew together to advocate for nonviolence even during times of relative calm, response to acts of violence would be easier to organize – and the acts of violence themselves might decrease.

**Find the real meaning of "sanctuary."** During the sniper attacks, for some churches the word "sanctuary" took on a different meaning and came to be literal safe havens for people to gather. Churches should be better prepared to take this role at a moment's notice, said the Rev. David Carter-Rimbach, pastor at the Linden Linthicum United Methodist Church in Clarksville, Md. "For centuries, people sought sanctuary in churches," he said. "Churches need to be seen as safe havens from something that's out there that people are apprehensive about."

**Be intentional about being a "Good Samaritan."** The Good Samaritan strategy involves more than just an occasional nicety, said Bill Devlin, vice president of the faith-based Urban Family Council based in Philadelphia. "I've never liked that bumper sticker that says 'Practice random acts of kindness.' They shouldn't be random. They should be planned. When the snipers were attacking, they had a plan. How many people plot and plan to do good?"

**Equip local churches to respond to violence.** One Maryland congregation of a mainstream denomination requested permission to open its doors to people who wanted to come to a safe place. Judicatory leaders withheld that permission due to fears regarding lack of insurance coverage and safety risks. The pastor of this church said he would have opened the church as a sanctuary if he had better supported at the judicatory level.

**Plan ahead.** Even in the wake of 9/11, many churches do not have response plans for natural disaster, much less incidents of violence. Local religious leaders expressed a desire for disaster-related training to help them better plan ahead.

**Equip clergy to become moral spokespersons.** As the public turned to Chief Moose and other public figures for comfort, no religious leaders came forward. Many religious leaders said they felt ill-



equipped to take the spotlight and become moral spokespersons for their communities. By the time judicatory leaders got around to issuing public statements, the public had already turned to secular officials for spiritual comfort.

**Plan better post-incident response.** Some faith leaders said more prayer services should have been organized in the wake of the sniper attacks. "I can see prayer services being a lot more effective after the snipers were caught, when people say 'thank God it's over. We grieve for those lost. How do we deal with the residual effects?'" said Johanna Olson of Lutheran Disaster Response.

**Plan to pray for the perpetrator.** Clergy said they found too few opportunities to publicly pray for those causing the violence. They reported they wished they heard more prayers such as the following, which one parishioner uttered aloud at a prayer vigil: "God, step into the heart of that person that is so angry and despondent and unfeeling. Open his heart."

**Focus on young people.** Local churches should collectively work together to offer a safe haven for young people, even during relatively calm times, said Carter-Rimbach. "Churches could provide a place for kids to come after school. We have a lot of kids walk past on their way to school, too."

**Build an interfaith foundation before violence hits.** One teacher, Mary Jennings, who has lived in Bowie, Md., for a decade said she believed that, because the community churches worked closely together before the sniper attacks, people were better able to weather the crisis." The feeling here was that the shooting wasn't something from Bowie. It happened to Bowie," she said. "And this faith-based community was in place long before this event and long before 9/11.

"Because our churches work together, parents have worked together to provide wonderful support and values that were already instilled before this happened. If we didn't already have those values and a foundation in the church, this would have been even more terrifying for the children."

## ► Appendix I

### List of Sniper Victims

**James (Jim) Martin.** A private funeral was held Oct. 9 at the Ashton United Methodist Church, with Rev. Jeff Jones officiating. Martin, 55, was a member of the Ashton United Methodist Church. He died after being shot outside a Shoppers Food Warehouse grocery store in Wheaton, Md. Martin was the vice-chair of the board of trustees at the church. His wife, Billie, is a member of United Methodist Women, teaches Sunday School and plays in the hand bell choir. Their son, Ben, is member of the youth group.

**James L. "Sonny" Buchanan.** A funeral was held Oct. 11 at the First Baptist Church in Gaithersburg, Md. In place of flowers, mourners were asked to contribute to Sonny's Kids Foundation.

**Premkumar Walekar.** Walekar is survived by a son, Andrew, 23, a daughter, Andrea, 24, and his wife, Margaret. A funeral took place Oct. 6 at the Sligo Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Md. It was a traditional Indian funeral and was open to the public.

**Maria Sara Ramos.** Father Luis Marriquin led a funeral mass Oct. 7 at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Md. Ramos was buried at the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Silver Spring, Md., on a plot donated by the Archdiocese of Washington. She is survived by her husband, Carlos Cruz, and a 7-year-old son, Carlos, Jr.

**Lori Ann Lewis-Rivera.** A private wake and memorial service was held Oct. 7 in Silver Spring, Md. The body was flown back to Lewis-Rivera's hometown of Mountain Home, Idaho for the funeral, on Oct. 16. Her father, Marion Lewis, made a public statement outside of the funeral home. She is survived by her husband, Nelson Rivera, and a 3-year-old daughter, Jocylin.

**Pascal Charlot.** A funeral took place Oct. 19 at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart, in N.W. Washington D.C. The main celebrant was the Rev. Andre Pierre, director of Haitian Ministry for the Archdiocese of Washington. Rev. Stephen Carter also spoke. Candles were lit for all the sniper victims. There were prayers in French, English and Creole. Charlot is survived by his wife, Doriel Allen Charlot, a stepson, Lloyd Allen, and five adult children, including Herve Charlot, 42, and Myrtha Cinada, 38.

**Dean Meyers.** A memorial service was held at the Christ Evangelical Congregational Church in Zieglerville, Pa. on Oct. 19. A funeral took place at the Pottstown Coventry Church of the Brethren, where Sandy Christophel is the pastor. The Rev. Jeff Carter of Manassas, Va., also spoke at the

funeral. It was a military funeral, complete with color guard, flags and trumpeters playing "Taps." The family set up the Dean Meyers Child Sponsorship Memorial Fund.

**Kenneth Bridges.** A memorial service was held Oct. 15 at a ballroom at First District Plaza in West Philadelphia. The Rev. Ernest Custalow officiated. Gary Shepherd, a friend of the Bridges family and spokesman for them, spoke to the press. Bridges is survived by his wife, Jocelyn, and six children: Aja, 24; April, 22; Justin, 20; Alana, 16; Joshua, 15; and Alyssa, 12.

**Linda Gail Franklin.** Bill Murray served as the family spokesman. A funeral took place Oct. 21 at Mount Olivet United Methodist Church with the Rev. Larry Tingle officiating. Franklin is survived by two grown children, Thomas Belvin and Katrina Hannum, and her husband, Ted.

**Conrad Johnson.** A funeral took place Oct. 26 at the Glendale Baptist Church in Landover, Md., followed by the burial at the Resurrection Cemetery in Clinton, Md. Johnson is survived by two sons, Dante, 14, and DeVohn, 6, and his wife, Denise. Ride-On bus drivers who could not attend the funeral pulled busses over for moment of silence at noon on that day.

Three people survived being shot by the snipers: a 43-year-old Spotsylvania woman, a 13-year-old Bowie student, and a 37-year-old man from Melbourne, Fla.

## ► Sources

Sources include:

- ◆ interviews with leaders of responding faith organizations
- ◆ quotes from prayer services
- ◆ statements from judicatory executives
- ◆ suggestions from church leaders for the future
- ◆ quotes from others whose lives were directly impacted by the attacks
- ◆ Newspaper articles from The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun, The Pittsburgh Gazette, The Washington Times and The New York Times.
- ◆ Newsweek special report, "The Sick World of the Snipers: The Inside Story of an Epic Manhunt," Nov. 4, 2002
- ◆ stories posted on wtopnews.com
- ◆ stories posted on www.disasternews.net
- ◆ "Time of Prayer," a 7-minute, 11-second news segment aired on CBS Eyewitness News at 11 on WUSA TV-Channel 9