

Welcome

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(Children of the Gift of God Orphanage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti)

Omaha leaders band together to rebuild the village in North Omaha
By Lee Warren/Gatekeeper Contributing Writer

The mood in the room is subdued yet doggedly determined. It's early June, and with the rash of shootings in North Omaha on the uptick in recent days and weeks, the Empowerment Network is holding its regularly scheduled monthly faith leaders meeting. They meet at 24th and Lake Streets and its leader has something to say.

"We talk about 'it takes a village to raise a child,'" said Willie Barney, president of the Empowerment Network — a network of some 500 organizations and individuals focused on improving the quality of life and economic position of African-Americans in North Omaha and the citizens of the greater Omaha area. "And God put it in my spirit three years ago [when the organization began], 'Well, we've got to rebuild the village then because our village is not healthy.'"

"What I'm starting to see with these areas is the churches are stepping up. Now we have partnerships with the schools. We have partnerships with the police department. We have partnerships with the neighborhood associations. That's literally what's beginning to happen — is that these neighborhoods are becoming healthier.

"And one of the challenges I would throw to the church, and all of us, is that the church has the opportunity right now to lead this transformation."

Barney went on to caution the group about making sure they don't miss this opportunity.

"The church has been asking and looking for this moment when the community looks to the church for a leadership point," Barney said. "We do not want to drop the baton. This is an opportunity — so really as pastors and ministers and faith leaders, this is the moment we've been praying for.

"All the other solutions have been tried from the government to everything else — and we work with everybody — but at the end of the day, the church has the opportunity to lead this transformation. And most people are not resisting that because everything else has been tried."

As the leaders looked over and discussed a map of North Omaha depicting the various organizations that have joined their adopt-a-block initiative, Barney says there are 25 churches on board so far. His goal, though, is "to be able to look at this map one day and have it so covered that every area is covered."

"No place for violence to hide," added Dave Gehrls with Christ for the City International, who leads prayer walks in North Omaha at the site of homicides.

So, what do the spiritual battle plans look like?

The Battle Plans

Barney pointed out during the meeting that rebuilding the village is more than simply encouraging the community to end

the violence. Instead, there must be comprehensive plans in place to rebuild North Omaha. The organizations represented at the meeting have such plans.

The Empowerment Network has the following 13 covenants in place that deal with all areas of life:

- Live Our Faith
- Strengthen Our Families
- Prepare Our Children
- Embrace Our Culture
- Build Our Wealth
- Protect Our Health
- Raise Our Vote
- Own Our Homes
- Clean Our Neighborhoods
- Love Our Neighbor!
- Stand for Justice
- Improve Our Communications
- Cross the Divide

“One of the key goals we had when we developed the Empower covenant was that we would build strong relationships between the community and the police department and other elected officials,” Barney said after the meeting. “So, from day one we sat down with the police department and neighborhoods and we identified what some of the issues were, as well as opportunities.

“When we host meetings, we give the community an opportunity to talk directly with the chief of police and the captains in the area to ask questions if there are issues, but also to figure out ways to work together.”

Omaha 360 is an initiative of the Empowerment Network and it encourages community members to pray, spend time at home with children, become a mentor, host positive events, join neighborhood associations, partner with churches, participate in stop the violence events, help provide job opportunities, participate in neighborhood clean ups, support children of incarcerated parents, and contribute time and energy to violence prevention efforts.

Enough is Enough (EIE), an organization started by Rev. John Voner (and not affiliated with the Empowerment Network) — pastor of World Fellowship Christian Church in North Omaha — also seeks to address the issue of violence in a comprehensive fashion.

EIE makes a difference in several ways. They distribute yard signs to homes and businesses to unify the community. They train and mobilize people to act as street patrols who work with police. They develop programs and activities for nighttime that give people positive options. They mentor groups of males ranging from ages 16-24 to be positive role models.

Omaha Police Capt. Tim Carmody describes the approach of these partnering groups as being four-pronged: “It’s prevention, intervention and enforcement. And with the enforcement aspect, we’re also working on re-entry to make sure that when people come back they don’t become recidivists and end up right back in prison. It’s a holistic approach that creates a great wrap-around for everybody involved,” he said.

A Spirit of Cooperation

As churches, ministries, police and other organizations work together, some would say the spirit of cooperation has more to do with the Holy Spirit than the human spirit.

“God is really showing Himself in this community — not just through the churches, but through Christian leaders who are in different services and jobs,” Rev. Bruce Williams said at the meeting. He pastors Hope of Glory Church — a congregation of 50 or so members, 90 percent of whom come from a background of substance abuse.

“It’s not just through the churches,” Williams said. “And so God is really bringing us all together. I’ve never seen such a move of God in this city since I’ve been here.”

“I’ve been in this department for 22 years, and this is the best effort I’ve ever seen,” Carmody said about the cooperation between the Omaha Police Department and community leaders in North Omaha.

In late May, the Empowerment Network, Omaha 360 and other groups sponsored Harmony Week that included 10 anti-violence rallies. At a follow up prayer walk and rally a week later at 30th and Ames, KPTM reported that close to 100 people showed up.

Churches from other parts of the city are beginning to partner with North Omaha churches to build bridges, create relationships and work for the common good of Omaha.

The Empowerment Network is working on facilitating some of those relationships. Voner said he believes it should happen more as an organic process that happens as one pastor from North Omaha meets with another pastor from other areas in the city.

Whatever the process, the people of God are unifying to make a real difference in the health and wellbeing of North Omaha and the greater Omaha area.

Takin’ It to the Streets

As prayer teams walk the area, as civilian street patrols are on lookout, and as congregations leave their pews, neighbors are stepping outside and getting involved.

“Our community — we’re talking about the everyday person — is more mobilized and more involved in their community and more aware,” Voner said. “We see more people now stepping up as witnesses, whereas, at one point, they would back down, stay quiet, not saying anything to the police or to any authorities.

“Now we see people are more mobilized — coming together to make sure some of the injustices that happen within their neighborhoods don’t happen anymore.”

In April, Gehrls lead a prayer walk at 30th and Bedford after a homicide. Rochelle Holland was driving by at the time and she told KMTV that she saw the group praying and she had to stop her car and get out to join them in prayer. Holland knows firsthand how this latest homicide victim’s family felt. Her son, Maxwell Griffy, was shot and killed last year in South Omaha.

Carmody, who attends many of these events, said the community is receptive as believers take to the streets.

“The power of prayer is an incredible thing, both personally and professionally,” Carmody said.

“I’ve been out on the prayer walks. When we start to pray for the victim’s families, I’ve seen people coming out of their houses to come up to the meetings. People from the group will intentionally go up and offer prayer for them personally and for the neighborhood.”

“It’s that type of one-on-one concern that is making a real difference in the lives of individuals in North Omaha — individuals like Barbara Robinson.

Going the Extra Mile

Robinson’s life was a mess in 2003. She was a drug addict who had recently re-entered society after serving time in jail. She had five children in the foster care program and was pregnant with her sixth child.

She entered the Williams Prepared Place, a recovery center for those struggling with substance abuse problems, run by Williams and his wife, Pat. After graduating from the program, Robinson relapsed and lost her sixth child to the foster care system.

In addition to seeing destructive patterns in her life, she saw negative patterns in the lives of Christians who reached out to her on occasion as well.

“I’ve been through a lot of different treatments and I’ve been to a lot of different churches and every time I would mess up, either the treatment facility would give up on me or the church would turn its nose up at me,” Robinson said.

“But Pastor Pat and Pastor Bruce, they prayed for me. They set boundaries. They gave me structure and it was up to me to follow it. They interceded for me. They used to come to my house. They came to the crack houses where I was. They stayed in contact with my children. They did everything, really, that parents would do for their own child,” Robinson said.

Seeing the love of Christ in action, Robinson responded. She began working with Pat to get her life back on track. She relinquished her parental rights for all six children – knowing she wasn’t in the proper frame of mind to care for them. She got married and became pregnant for the seventh time – this time by her husband.

As God continued to make changes in her life, she said the State of Nebraska allowed her to begin the process of adopting her minor children back. So far, she has two of them back and is in the process of adopting two more, who currently live with her and her husband as foster children. The daughter they had together is also with them. Her other two children are no longer minors.

These days you can find her working at Impact One, an organization in North Omaha that works with at-risk youth, gang members and “forgotten members of society” – a position she knows something about.

If there is one consistent message being sounded from North Omaha community leaders who are working to reclaim their neighborhoods, it is that crime, poverty and hopelessness are not just North Omaha problems. They are universal problems that require all of us to work together in the trenches.

“We’re looking for everybody,” Voner said. “Our efforts at EIE are not just for North Omahans or utilized just by North Omahans. We are looking for churches and individuals who are concerned about the city as a whole to join us in our efforts to support what we’re doing.

“We would love to get the word out about EIE to other areas to let them know they can be involved. It’s not just black people. It’s not just white people. But we actually have a large group of people all over the city working with us and we’d love to see more people involved.”

To learn how you can get involved with the Empowerment Network and Omaha 360, you can visit www.empoweromaha.com. To learn more about Enough is Enough, you can visit www.eienebraska.org. †

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