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DORCHESTER

At Dorchester church, faith leaders, political candidates call for peace, unity in wake of marathon bombings

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 22, 2013 11:00 AM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

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Area spiritual leaders from several religions and local political candidates gathered at Saint Mark Parish in Dorchester on Sunday evening to show support and unity after a sequence of brutal violence over the past week.

More than 500 people – a blend of Christians, Jews and Muslims – packed the basement of the century-old Catholic church to pray, reflect, sing and rally together.

Led by the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, the event also drew candidates running for the US Senate seat vacated by John Kerry and others eyeing the First Suffolk District State Senate seat vacated by John A. Hart Jr.

Planning for the event began several weeks ago. Organizers said they originally intended to ask the candidates to explain their positions on key issues, including gun violence, youth programming, immigration and health care.

But after two deadly bombings on Marathon Monday followed by a manhunt Thursday and Friday that left one police officer dead and another wounded, the forum's agenda changed.

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Violence, and how to respond to it, was put front and center.

"We need to pray, to really pray. We need to sing and I hope we can really sing and we need to really stand together," said Burns Stanfield, pastor at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in South Boston and president of the interfaith organization. "We need to show that Christians, Jews and Muslims stand together against violence."

Families and friends of Boston-area victims of gun violence shared stories of their loved ones, how their loved ones died and how they try to deal with the devastating loss.

One woman struggled to get through speaking, pausing repeatedly to try to collect herself. She told how her 19-year-old son [Jorge was shot to death in September](#) while walking his dog in Dorchester.

"I miss my son every minute of every day," said Mirna Luz Ramos, cheers streaming down her cheeks. "As parents, we shouldn't have to bury our children."

Jeanette Callahan, a member at the Bethel AME Church in Jamaica Plain, said there is a connection between the high-profile, extreme violence of the past week and the more common violence on local streets.

She described how on Monday, several hours after the marathon bombings, her son posted on Facebook about how he could hear gunshots outside their Roxbury home.

"There's terrorism and then there's living in Roxbury," Callahan said her son wrote on the social media site.

Numerous people, including local political candidates, spoke passionately about how they want to see more gun control and urged supporters of that cause to mobilize.

"We have to turn the NRA into 'not relevant anymore,'" said U.S. Representative Edward J. Markey, of Malden, who is running for the vacant US Senate seat against fellow Democrat and U.S. Representative Stephen F. Lynch, of South Boston.

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Lynch, whose cousin was shot to death in 1996, said he too would fight for tougher gun laws. He cited the numerous shootings in Boston this week and said such street violence has “become far too commonplace.”

The recent violence was also condemned by candidates for the First Suffolk District State Senate, including Democrats: state Representative Linda Dorcena Forry from Dorchester; state Representative Nick Collins from South Boston; and Maureen Dahill, a blogger from South Boston; along with Republican interpreter and translator Joe Ureneck from Dorchester.

The gathering mourned the victims of the marathon attacks and subsequent manhunt.

"I still ache," said Stanfield. "I ache because there's a kid in my church on Martin Richard's baseball team. He's hurting."

Martin was the youngest person to die in Monday's blasts. He was 8 and lived with his family in Dorchester, about one mile from Saint Mark Parish.

"I ache because there are Muslim colleagues who are preparing to get looks. And I ache because it is so easy for young men to get guns and grenades," said Stanfield, who seemed almost amazed when he said the last word of that sentence, and then repeated: "They had grenades."

Many said how the horror of the past week has put them more on edge. And they wondered whether the sense of feeling safe would ever return.

"There's a lot of uncertainty," said Callahan. "We were grief stricken as a community. And there is anger."

But she and spiritual leaders at the event said comfort can be found in faith.

"Our security is not in things we can necessarily touch and see," Callahan said. "It's in God."

She said she works as a pediatrician at the Cambridge Health Alliance, which serves many students who attend the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, where the two suspected marathon bombers graduated from.

Callahan said she expects current students at the school will seek help from the health center in the coming days, due to questions, confusion, fear and anxiety over the events of the past week and their school's close ties to the alleged bombers.

Imam William Suhaib Webb of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury said "there are some concerns of backlash" against his Muslim congregation.

"But overall we're seeing a lot of signs of support," he said, adding that: "As Bostonians, we share the grief of the city. We're equally appalled."

Jeremy Burton, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, said the acts of heroism and kindness following the bombings have been a demonstration of "the strength and resilience of our community."

"It showed what is possible when we come together," he said.

Stanfield said he told his congregation Sunday morning to focus on a particular Bible passage that says: "let us run the race with perseverance."

"We always think of that verse with the marathon but of course now it has a whole different meaning," said Stanfield.

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