



ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES

People hold hands during a rally led by faith leaders calling for justice in response to the death of Freddie Gray.

# Is this time different?

We have long known what to do to stem city violence but lacked the will to do it

By WILLIAM A. AU

**T**he French have a saying: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." In the wake of the heartbreaking events that have troubled our city following the tragic death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, there has been a renewed public conversation about the need to address the systemic social issues and conditions which cause and find expression in such civil disturbances. To many in our community this conversation must call to mind another expression from French: "déjà vu."

Six years ago I participated in an effort of Baltimore clergy (the Baltimore Interfaith Coalition) to address these issues in response to a severe spike in killings in the city. This was not the first such effort of city clergy nor would it be the last. At that time we raised the issue that, despite all the programs of recent years, our city continued to be one of the most violent in the nation, with one of the highest per capita rates of children shot and killed. We also stated that it was not possible to address the violence in our city without addressing two central realities: the rise of gangs which offer our young people a sense of belonging and protection which they have not been able to find elsewhere; and the illegal drug trade which supports the growth of gang turf wars and seduces many of our young people who experience no hope of honest employment and economic opportunity. Nor could we pretend that the drug trade and gangs were only Baltimore's problem when it was obvious that people in the suburbs were getting their drugs from the city and that Baltimore was as central to the state's illegal economy as it was to the legal one.

Moreover, we recognized that the pervasive violence that affects our city is more than just the product of a few violent individuals and groups. It has in fact become a cultural problem, for it is

supported by the attitudes of a subset of society that has accepted this violence as inevitable and even acceptable. It is a culture in which the value of human life has been cheapened in the eyes of too many young people who, seeing no value to their own lives, think little of taking the lives of others.

We also identified specific areas of action that needed to be the focal point of effort by all areas of community leadership. These were certainly not unique insights of ours but a statement of what was painfully obvious to all. These included:

1) Calling for our city and state authorities to explain their strategies for addressing the illegal drug trade and for them to petition the federal government for an increased investigation of the Baltimore drug trade and the corrupt political and economic elements that enable it.

2) Demanding that our state legislators treat drug addiction as a public health problem rather than a criminal issue. (This did not mean legalizing drug sales or usage but placing addicts in treatment or maintenance programs rather than jail.)

3) Providing meaningful job opportunities for ex-offenders.

4) Most importantly, increasing support for mentoring, educational and recreational programs for intervention in the lives of young people most at risk of being drawn into gangs and the drug trade.

Six years later, events have only served to demonstrate how easily community concern and outrage dissipates into a lack of any significant action to address the underlying issues which have been long recognized as the heart of the problem. Instead of efforts to reduce the power of gangs, we read how one gang practically ran the city jail, and city leaders felt the necessity to recruit the help of gangs to restore order to the streets. Instead of effective strategies against the drug trade and meaningful intervention into the lives of our young people, we witness nationally

televised interviews in which our city youth eloquently testify to a lack of hope and opportunity and how the drug trade is the only option for some. Moreover, the anger and distrust expressed toward police shows how all other issues are exacerbated by the loss of human and community relationship-building between law enforcement agencies and the hardest-pressed neighborhoods they seek to serve and protect.

The challenge before us is not to identify the systemic issues feeding violence and injustice in our city. They are known. The challenge is whether we have the faith and courage for a renewed effort to recognize the truth of our situation, to be brutally honest in studying its causes and to forge a new community-wide commitment to a more creative and effective response. We need more than prayer walks and marches, as important as these may be in helping to create community solidarity and awareness. We need the religious, community and political leadership to speak truth to power and to continue to demand meaningful action when the cameras are gone and the inevitable cynicism which has crushed hope in the past seeks to push things back to business as usual. We have all been part of the history in which we have decried the violence and injustice in our city, while the violence continued to increase. We dare not now be mere victims of our history and allow fear to convince us that this history has exhausted the possibilities of our future.

Thus, the question before us is will things be different this time, or will the cameras leave, the prayer walks taper off and we return to what has tragically been accepted as normal? The cynical adage: "The more things change, the more they stay the same" must be among the saddest words ever spoken. But sadder still are those who allow those words to become their fate.

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