

Service called a start to combat violence

By Andrew J. Nelson
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Members and clergy of several Omaha congregations met Thursday evening at Lewis and Clark Middle School for a communitywide "Service of Healing and Hope."

The service included hymns and prayers, and perhaps most profound, the reading of the names of all Omaha homicide victims in 2007, who ranged in age from 1 to 67.

"You don't expect children to be shot or stabbed," said Debra Woosley, 54, of Omaha, who attended the service.

"We've had 41 deaths. Some of them were so young."

Mark Darby, co-chairman of Omaha Together One Community, described the service as a first step in getting the faithful to combat violence in Omaha.

"The Westroads shootings kind of served as a wake-up call to many members of the community who previously thought that violence was confined to one sec-

tion of the city," he said, referring to the mass shooting on Dec. 5, in which a gunman killed eight people and himself, and five people were wounded.

"Westroads showed that it was a communitywide problem and the religious community has been remiss in coming out in one voice."

Darby said the issues underlying the Westroads shootings are some of the same ones in the rest of the city's homicides, including mental health issues and access to guns.

The group is planning a roundtable discussion next month to discuss ways to curtail the violence.

About 160 people attended Thursday's service.

A church has the ability to increase awareness of the violence around it to its members, many of whom are caught up in their daily lives and not paying much attention, Woosley said.

"They hear about it a lot, but I don't think it's real to them."