

MPR news

MPR news

MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO

- NEWS

- THE CURRENT

- CLASSICAL



Redeemer Lutheran Church intern pastor Michael Vinson prays with Harrison community members before eating at a cookout at the Minneapolis church July 14, 2010. (MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson)

[View full slideshow](#) (9 total images)

- **Church aims to bring peace to crime-ridden neighborhood**

by [Brandt Williams](#), Minnesota Public Radio

August 6, 2010

Minneapolis — A majority of the 32 homicides in Minneapolis this year have occurred on the city's north side. With each shooting comes more concern that no one can bring peace to the neighborhoods that need it most. But one north side church has a plan to do just that.

Redeemer Lutheran Church sits in the Harrison neighborhood, which borders the northwest edge of downtown Minneapolis. Most of its residents are African or Asian American, and nearly 40 percent of them live below the poverty line.

On a recent summer evening, parishioners and neighbors gathered in a large grassy lot behind the church for a cookout -- which has become a weekly summertime ritual.

"If we're going to claim to be a church of the community, we need to be in the community," said Mike Vinson, an intern pastor at Redeemer.

Vinson says the surrounding community is racially diverse and vibrant, kind of like the neighborhood he grew up in, in Queens, N.Y.

Vinson says the community cookout is just one way to reach people who don't come to Sunday service.



Picking vegetables in the garden

"We probably have four times as many people who come through the church doors Monday through Friday than do Sunday morning. And that's all opportunity for ministry," he said.

Redeemer has a wide footprint in this part of north Minneapolis. The church owns the entire block as well as some adjacent apartment buildings. Redeemer uses those buildings to provide affordable housing for 60 people.

The church property also includes a large vegetable garden, which is overseen by Harriet Oyera.

Oyera came to Minneapolis from Uganda in 2007 as a political refugee. She says she was lonely and in poor health until she started planting vegetables in a vacant lot behind the church. She befriended people who came to ask about the garden -- even people who came to steal the vegetables.

"Each time I caught someone stealing, I said, 'You know what? You need the food. Take more. But you know what? Next year we're going to have more garden. Come and join us,'" she said.



Weekly cookout in Harrison neighborhood

The garden not only provides free food for community meals, it's become a classroom of sorts for young people. Oyera teaches kids how to grow, care for and cook the vegetables.

In addition to gardening, the church offers children other opportunities to learn more life skills -- bike repair, for example.

The church has a bike shop it calls People on Bikes, located in a garage/basement in an apartment building next to the church. There are dozens of bikes there -- all of them donated and all of them awaiting triage by the shop's mechanics.

One of those mechanics is Kline Tate, who's 13.



Checking out bikes

Earlier this year the church got a small grant to buy some tools. A few nonprofit groups pitched in with more money, to pay Tate and the other teenage mechanics \$7.25 an hour, for 20 hours a week.

Some of the bikes they fix are resold. Others are donated to neighborhood kids. Tate says he can fix just about any bike, although some are more difficult than others.

"Probably the older ones [are harder,] because of the different kind of parts they have on them," said Tate. "I would say the mountain bikes are harder than the BMX bikes, because the BMX bikes are more simple."

The church's youth director Kent Goodroad says the kids who get bikes from the shop can earn them by helping out around the church -- nobody gets a "free bike." Once they have bikes, the kids are taught about bike safety and even get practice riding through an obstacle course.



Dancing at a weekly cookout

The church also provides field trips and other supervised activities all year. Goodroad says it's especially important to give kids something safe and productive to do during the summer. The alternative for too many kids is to just hang out in the neighborhood. And that's not safe.

"Yesterday there was a shooting about a block from here," said Goodroad. "There was another shooting about maybe half a mile or three-quarters of a mile away in Bryn Mawr. There's constant stuff, especially in the summer."

The sun's rays are fading over the community cookout, but not the energy. Some folks have decided that the best way to digest their food is by getting up and doing a line dance.

The dance sort of sums up the philosophy Redeemer staff have talked about. At least for tonight, church members and neighbors, young and old, darker and lighter-skinned, stand side by side and move in unison -- to the left, and then to the right.