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In January 2006, Tracey Maxwell and a handful of enthusiastic volunteers launched an interfaith community ministry called Vigils for Healing. The original mission of this ministry was to hold public spiritual observances to mark loss of life in Forsyth County due to violence. The vigils are held outdoors at or near the murder site, usually several months or longer after the death. Loved ones of the victim, citizens living and working near the site, and the entire community are invited to attend. Music, candle lighting, prayer, and reflection by family members are hallmarks of the vigils.

Soon after our first few vigils, it became apparent that families who have experienced the murder of a loved one often need additional support, and VFH has grown to include an outreach mailing effort to give families printed information about local community support services, a prayer shawl ministry, a local support group, and a financial helping-hand (thanks to the Winston-Salem Foundation) for murder-related expenses.

We feel violent death deserves reflection and response, not complacency, especially when so many violent deaths involve young people and disproportionately claim people of color and lower socioeconomic means. We feel that to ignore violence is to implicitly accept it. So we gather and call on the power of God and a caring community to promote healing for everyone affected by violence; reclaim the death site and the surrounding neighborhood as a life-affirming space; allow those affected by violence the opportunity to have their grief acknowledged and their voices heard; and publicly proclaim that violence is not acceptable and requires all who wish to promote justice and mercy to take action.

By providing members of our community the opportunity to physically stand with those directly affected by violence, the vigils provide a forum for people from all walks of life to publicly express their commitment to non-violence and their empathy for the suffering of their neighbors. As a community we can either promote or obstruct healing by the way we respond to violent acts. The vigils are not platforms for proselytizing or ideological statements, but seek to tap into the diverse spiritual life of our community to promote peace and encourage the

process of healing.

To date, VFH has held nearly 50 vigils and has won several awards, including The Winston-Salem Foundation's ECHO Award, The WSSU Center for Community Safety Sylvia Oberle Advocate Award, and the Chronicle's Community Service Award. The organization is open to all.

