In a pilgrimage for a safer community, more than 200 residents of City Heights held a candlelight march last night, seeking to bring a diverse and torn area closer together.

Alice Padilla, 16, a junior at Hoover High School, expressed the feelings of many participants in the two-mile procession that started at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church:

"You can always go back to the right path, or to school. It is never too late. There is always hope."

To Ron Gearhart, 30, a volunteer who helped with the march, what is needed is better communication between members of the community.

"If we could get people to come together and talk," he said, "I think we could make things better. Everyone seems to be going their separate ways."

But last night, those who walked, sang and offered holiday spirit were together.

The march was a combination posada, a Latino re-enactment of Mary and Joseph’s trek for a safe place for the birth of Christ, and community event. Participants included many cultural groups reflecting the diverse community.

It was organized by volunteers with the San Diego Organizing Project, a grass-roots, interfaith organization that sponsors assistance projects. The group's members interview community members, learn what the problems are and try to help them solve those difficulties.

Members of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church were catalyst and host, with the procession starting and ending at the sanctuary.

In City Heights, an area east of I-805 and south of El Cajon Boulevard, residents say crime is all too frequent.

Gunfire can be heard nightly. Certain gangs extort money from businesses run by immigrants from Southeast Asia, residents say. Just the day before the march, a police officer said there was a killing, a gang rape and a couple of stabbings in the area.

And even as the marchers carried candles along University Avenue, a police car sped west, rushing to the scene of a robbery at knife point on the western border of City Heights.
Dorothy L. Kwiat, a 16-year resident of the area, told of another woman, also at the march, who huddles nightly with her children as gunshots ring out.

"That is totally unacceptable," said Kwiat, a secretary at UCSD in La Jolla. "That is why we are here tonight. We are looking to make our community a safer place."

A place where youths, like Manuel Nevarez, 16, a junior at Hoover High who helped with the march, can fulfill their aspirations. "I want to be a doctor, a specialist," he said.

A place were Pham Hoi, 58, who "escaped" from Vietnam in 1989 and last night walked with friends, can practice as an artist.

And a place where Manuel Villasenor, 67, a retired maintenance worker from Francis Parker School who served as a march marshal, can watch his grandchildren grow.