

# Ministers Fight Gang Activity in Toronto

**Area churches are partnering with police to combat a recent increase in youth violence**

A series of deadly gang shootings that culminated in November with the shooting of a 17-year-old boy on the steps of a church while he was attending the funeral of another slain boy has caused black pastors in Toronto to work with police and civic leaders to find effective solutions.

Increasing handgun violence in poor, predominantly black Toronto neighborhoods motivated Orim Meikle, pastor of Rhema Christian Ministries, to start prayer walk outreaches and home visits to the city's five most violent ghettos in 2004. Hundreds of the church's members walk and pray en masse through the gang-infested areas during the summer months.

Initially Meikle said his team knocked on residents' doors and asked how they could help. "Their unanimous answer was jobs: 'We need jobs,'" Meikle said. "So we got some government grants-for skills training and small-business startups-started training youth on computers, and showed them how to dress, walk and behave during a job interview. If you dress like a gangster, you'll be treated that way. But if you dress for success, that's what you'll get."

Rhema also opened a transitional home for young men at risk for criminal activity, and the church plans to buy more houses.

Meikle believes dysfunctional families, coupled with the

glorification of violence, gratuitous sex and drugs in gangsta rap music, has wrongly influenced some young black males to become gangsters themselves. His 2,000-member church includes four families who have had a child gunned down or stabbed. Many other families live in violent areas where fear of gang threats and shootings are a constant companion.

Omar Hortley, the 21-year-old only child of a single mother, was a member of Rhema until he was killed in a drive-by shooting in 2004. Meikle counseled and comforted Hortley's mother until she pulled through the shock.

"What do I say that will comfort the mother? It's very difficult," Meikle said. "In that tragedy, God brought some good out because she committed her life to Christ."

Meikle, a 38-year-old father of two who immigrated to Canada from Jamaica in 1975, has swiftly risen to a place of prominence with both police and politicians for his outspoken attitude on black empowerment. "Sometimes we have this attitude that people should just accept us as we are, but we also have a responsibility to lift ourselves up," he told Charisma. "So we're not going to take the handout approach, but we'll come to the table to collaborate with other community members."

He believes churches must once again become an integral part of the city's fabric in order for them to work effectively with schools, government agencies, grass-roots organizations and the police. "Functional churches should lead the charge," he said. "The spiritual component sets the tone for the whole city infrastructure."

Don Meredith, chairman of the Greater Toronto Area Faith Alliance and pastor of Grace Christian Life Centre, echoes that sentiment. Meredith, a 41-year-old father of two teenagers, detected the gang problem back in 2002 and, along with 24 other pastors, followed up by visiting the city's police chief for answers.

That effort resulted in the formation of the Faith Alliance, an interfaith coalition representing 40 churches. Today Meredith spends much of his time networking with politicians, police and social agencies to find holistic solutions to curb violent crime in poor neighborhoods.

The group has put forth several solutions that have proved effective, such as the mingling of police officers and youth to play after-school basketball in the church gymnasiums of high-crime neighborhoods. Rhema is a participating church.

Meredith's conviction that there often is a lack of parental involvement in Toronto's urban communities compelled him last year to visit Rev. Eugene Rivers, a Boston minister who created the National TenPoint Leadership Foundation-named for the 10 tenets the document says are necessary for neighborhood transformation.

"Meredith and I met, and we said there are lessons to be learned here, and it's got a spiritual dimension. The root component of the problem is fatherlessness," said Rivers, who grew up in poor, violent neighborhoods in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago and eventually attended Harvard.

In 1988, Rivers established the Azusa Christian Community in one of Boston's most dangerous neighborhoods. The house where

he lived with his wife and children was shot at twice and burglarized six times. The purpose, he said, was to live on the same level as the street youth so they'd feel safe enough to trust his group's motives.

"The way you raise a child is by going to where he lives," Rivers told Charisma. "The black churches need to put men on the street to live with the troubled youth."

Although Azusa Christian Community was launched in 1988, Rivers said area churches wouldn't pay any attention to their efforts until 1992 when a young man was shot during a funeral just as the 17-year-old was in Toronto.

"The first churches to pay attention and come on board were the high-steepled ones-the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians," Rivers said. "Now our coalition has 47 churches of almost every denomination who work in close conjunction with the police, social and community services."

Rivers' efforts helped reduce Boston's homicide count by more than 80 percent between 1990 and 2000. His plan has since been implemented in cities worldwide.

**Josie Newman in Toronto**