

**'The Answer Within - The Role of the Church in the Black Community: A  
Community Development Response to the Violence in Toronto'**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will assert that the church in the Black community has a role in addressing the contemporary issue of the violence in Toronto. The church's historical significance in the Canadian context as studied by Este (2004) will be examined along with the church's present day role. Following this will be a focus on the increased gang and street violence that is occurring in some Toronto communities. The harsh realities of these communities will also be considered along with assumptions of how best to resolve the increase in violence as reflected in the media, politicians, law enforcement and the Black community itself. It is then proposed that the church community needs to be involved in promoting social capital and spiritual capital (Sinha, 2004). Research by Sinha (2004) is reviewed as it found that, "...local religious congregations in collaboration with local agencies and stakeholders, fostered positive outcomes among youth [at risk] and promoted community linkages." The paper concludes with consideration for social workers working with faith based groups.

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One day a young man was killed. He was a victim of gun violence. There had been reports of violence for several months prior to this one. What was new about this shooting? What made us take a second look? The shooting occurred on the steps of a church, during a funeral. An atrocity! An outrage! Sacrilegious! On Sunday, November 18, 2005 18 year old Amon Beckles, a father of a young baby, was gunned down on the steps of the Toronto West Seventh Day Adventist Church located at Albion and Martin Groves Rd. during a funeral for his friend, Jamal Hemmings, who was also a shooting victim. It was an execution style hit. Beckles' daylight murder was the most brazen of the last year's 78 murders in Toronto. It seemed to have set a new benchmark in callousness; a shooting on the doorsteps of a house of God. It also seems to have served as a catalyst.

In March of this year I attended a wedding at that same church. While I listened to Pastor King perform the wedding ceremony, I could not help but reflect on the loss of life that occurred within feet of where I sat just 4 months prior. As I saw the young couple who were only several years older than the shooting victim it came to me that though the problem occurred here the solution could reside here as well.

I will begin by looking at the historical significance of the role of the church in the Black community and its current role in contemporary society. I will then

take a brief look at the harsh realities that some of these communities face. Also there will be mention of some of the assumptions of how to best resolve this problem, from different sectors in society. I will then go on to discuss what the church is doing now and how it can go further in addressing this crisis as an agent of change. I will then conclude with considerations for social workers working at the community level with faith-based groups.

### THE CHURCH'S HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

From the time I was a young girl, church has always been in my life as it was in the lives of my peers. Today we exchange humorous stories about our mandatory Sunday attendance at church and Sunday school. My peer group exemplifies the close tie between Black people and the church.

Research has shown the historical significance of spirituality in the lives of Blacks. "Spirituality has been identified as a fundamental attribute of the personalities of Blacks," (Fernander et al., 2004). Church and religious participation have played a particularly important role in addressing various supportive needs in African American communities in areas such as community organizing and individual and family support (Taylor, Lincoln & Chatters, 2005).

Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when some religious groups undertook to combat slavery by the Underground Railroad movement, Blacks began to come into Canada. Their churches, which had been an important part of their life before they fled from the U.S.A. were quickly transplanted to Canadian soil and carried

on their ministry there. The earliest and most important institutions in all Black Upper Canadian communities were the churches (Daniel Hill in D. Este, 2004).

Historically the church and community presented Blacks with a positive identity, a sense of self-worth, and ultimately, a base from which to attack racism and discrimination. Black preachers provided positive leadership and were instrumental in maintaining a cohesive community. The church was a place where Blacks could participate with dignity, pride and freedom. On Sunday in the church they became deacons, deaconess, the lead tenor or soprano in the choir or superintendent of Sunday school (Este & Bernard, 2005).

#### TODAY

The present day role of the church is similar. My father, an immigrant from the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada worked as a machinist during the day and brought home televisions to repair at night. But on Sundays he filled with pride as the treasurer of the church. As an immigrant, man, it gave him status, self-esteem, a position and role to fulfill that he did not have in mainstream society.

In the past the church, “became an empowering medium that helped the people in their fight for social justice and more equal opportunities,” (Este & Bernard, 2005). After slavery, during the civil rights movement, the church’s role was to protect Blacks and fight racism. As I look at the church today, it is now imperative for the church in this new climate to fight for the preservation of the

Black family, the Black youth and more specifically the Black male. It is a shift from an outward fight to an inward preservation.

Despite the power of spirituality to help people cope, a number of participants in a study of spirituality and African Americans, talked about the need to go beyond coping to healing, and called on the role of spirituality to help facilitate that process as well. "Coping is not enough. Change has to happen." (Lloyd, 2003). Increased communication, spirituality, community-based action were all mentioned as part of the process of moving forward (Este & Bernard, 2005).

#### THE HARSH REALITIES OF THESE COMMUNITIES

A study of youths in and around a housing development indicated that exposure to violence was related to a pervasive sense of hopelessness and depression (Durant et al. 1995 in Adamson, 2006). In the city, these youth come from single parent, fatherless families and confront issues of systemic racism, poverty, lack of education, family breakdown, the internalization of oppression and lack of employment on a daily basis. What does this mean? It means that living in environments with limited opportunities and little supports for success increases the risk for engaging in violent acts. Add to this the apparent limitless supply of guns and it becomes a volatile mixture. Experienced on a repetitive basis, community gun violence taxes a parent's resources, creates stress and impairs a parent's ability to be emotionally responsive and to fulfill parental tasks

and responsibilities effectively (Adamson, 2006). There is no question about the impact that crime has had and continues to have on the community.

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

So, why is there so much violence? There are a number of assumptions associated with this increase in gun violence. Some say the music industry, the hip hop culture. Take a look at the rap star 50 Cent and his overwhelmingly popularity and influence amongst Black youth. Last year 50 Cent starred in an autobiographical movie entitled '*Get Rich Or Die Tryin*'. The movie was the favourite amongst youths as it glorified the gangster lifestyle. The message it sent was clear – get rich or die trying. When it comes to the church, these days God has to compete with guns, increased access to guns, gang influence, poverty and hopelessness. Depending on the assumption that is made, that will often determine where you look for the solutions.

As Toronto grapples with its rising homicide rate and the mounting number of young men killed by gunfire each year there is an equal proliferation of solutions proposed from various quarters such as tougher judicial sentencing for offenders, tighter gun control laws and so on. The response or proposed solution usually involves more policing. It was noted; however, that the police are never going to arrest their way out of the problem we're having. There has to be a holistic type approach to it.

What about the government? The government is 'throwing money at the problem' as it were, with the provincial government providing \$15 million in a

challenge fund to provide young people with more opportunities to succeed and to give them an alternative to guns. Premier McGuinty said that this fund is about creating opportunity and community safety, from the ground up, by providing local support for youth where it matters (Government of Ontario, 2006). My response to that is, “What does that ground look like? Does it include the church?” As the chairperson, Mike Clemons, acknowledges that money is not the answer, the answer is the community. This, in my opinion should include the church.

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHURCH

Research by Sinha (2004) sums up where the church should fit in this equation. Local religious congregations in collaboration with local agencies and stakeholders need to foster positive outcomes among youth at risk and promote community linkages.

The January Globe and Mail reported on a community meeting where Monica Willie a community worker stated, “I listened to Paul Martin at Jane and Finch talking about handguns. I listened to Dalton McGuinty talk about the money he was giving away to the police, and Stephen Harper and his ideas. They don’t know a thing about Black people in this country,” (Appleby, 2006). My response to that is, who does? Willie insists that to fight gangs and crime, it must be done on a community level through prevention programs and skills training.

Community development involves citizen development and participatory action. It also includes indigenous leadership and engaging local people. One way in the Black community is through the Black church by building on

community achievements, existing strengths, local skills and better methods for engaging local people. It is the collective responsibility of the Black church.

The churches want to be part of the solution to end gang and gun violence in Toronto. One person noted, “Our community is hurting, our Black community is hurting. It has been hurting for a long time. I’m really tired. I’m tired of waking up every morning, opening the paper, listening to the radio or watching the news and asking the Lord, Oh God, please don’t make him be Black,” (Mandel, 2006). I know that is a sentiment I share when I see the news. Not another Black youth.

Why the church? We have already discussed the significant role the church plays in the lives of Black folks. Church leaders are sources of refuge for many of these families. It is the church that is often trusted in the Black community.

Richard Wright wrote in 1907 that the African Methodist Episcopal Church saw itself as the primary influence in the [Black] community. It kept a focus on creating change in the community and organizing the church for action. His work with the church provides a model for social workers and religious leaders today as increasingly religious organizations are looked upon to take on more responsibility for the provision of social welfare services in our communities. Wright felt the model church would provide linkages to employment, housing, education and economic development. He knew the church was a place that could foster hope and identity in people. He understood religious congregations were valuable social institutions uniting people for action. However, he was also well aware of the challenges of mobilizing the church for social activities –

particularly when people believed the church to be solely responsible for spiritual activities (Modesto, 2004).

## WHAT SOME ARE DOING

There are just a few examples of faith-based activities that are occurring in Toronto and models of what are happening elsewhere and it is acknowledged that there are many more activities that are going on.

**Men United:** The Toronto Star (2006) reported on 'The Men United' from Philadelphia. Their idea was simple: Go to the neighbourhoods where homicides were exploding and talk to the young men - young men who have no direction, who are angry and misguided and are out on the street corner with no one who can teach them how to be men. Become the father figures and role models they lacked. They link the boys up with employment counsellors, youth outreach workers and mentorship program. The Men United for peace set out on a patrol for peace into some of the roughest neighbourhoods in Philadelphia. After each foot patrol they gather in a circle for a final prayer. They have succeeded in helping to reduce the crime and violence. Their ranks have grown past 400 with chapters springing up in a number of States (Porter, 2006).

**The National Ten Point Leadership Foundation:** It is a national coalition that organizes clergy law enforcement community partnerships. The objective is to mobilize churches against Black-on-Black violence. Its primary mission is to help provide African-American Christian churches with the strategic vision and

financial resources necessary to save at-risk inner-city youth from child abuse and neglect, street violence, drug abuse, school failure, teen-age pregnancy, incarceration, chronic joblessness, spiritual depravity, and hopelessness about the future.

Rev. Eugene Rivers made a high profile visit to Toronto and he spoke to a capacity filled Seventh Day Adventist Church, the same place where Amon Beckles was gunned down on November 18<sup>th</sup> . He then met with Mayor David Miller, Premier Dalton McGuinty and the chief of police, showing that there is recognition of the potential role that religious institutions can play in addressing this issue. Rivers came to Toronto to help create a model for change, a strategy on how to achieve it. A local drug dealer once told him something he has not forgotten. I'm here when Johnny goes out for a loaf of bread for Mama. I'm there, you're not. I win, you lose. It's all about being there."

Reverend Rivers committed himself to living and working with the poor. A model that is in practice already in neighbourhoods such as Regent Park which has the presence of the Salvation Army and its foot soldiers. They say, "we shop here, we worship here, we become a part of the community and that's what brings transformation." (National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, 2006 and Alcoba, 2006).

**GTA Faith Alliance:** The GTA Faith Alliance is a coalition of about 40 multi-faith leaders and chaired by the Reverend Don Meredith, who is interested in addressing youth violence and gun activity. It was the GTA Faith Alliance who invited Reverend Rivers to Toronto. They believe that the Black community has

to take ownership of this situation. They cannot wait for the government. The Alliance recently announced an action plan to find 400 mentors for youth and open 70 after-school programs in churches across the city.

Their goal is to engage and motivate the youngest children. These churches need to be located in social housing communities where there are large concentrations of vulnerable children. Reverend Meredith noted that when programs were run, the children would arrive quite early for their lesson and stay around long after their lesson was over. The children had nowhere else to go – nothing at home and nothing in their immediate neighbourhoods. When little else is available or attractive, gangs fill the void and capture the kids' imagination and loyalty. As the gangster said to Reverend Rivers, "It's all about being there!"(Chong, 2006).

**Erin Mills United in Mississauga, Ont. – Kofi Hope.** Kofi has been described as a serious, fiercely intelligent black activist who has something to teach the entire United Church — about social justice and accountability, racism and privilege — and above all, about faith. Faith, for him is grounded in action. He has helped to empower a whole community of volunteers, organizing a Black youth summit and mentoring Black high school students. Fuelled by the broad social justice he had learned at Erin Mills United Church and the Bible he says that God presents you with something and asks, 'What are you going to do?'" and the response should be, "I'm going to act."

For Kofi, it is still all about faith. He is surrounded by other spiritually minded youths such as Muslim women wearing hijabs in the coalition he helped

start – the Black Youth Coalition Against Violence. They got involved in an ambitious project called B.L.I.N.G (Bring in Love Not Guns)..

**The United Reform church:** It has within its structure church related community work which involves a wide range of new initiatives in urban areas. It has relied on community development techniques to bring about change and improvements by applying a theological framework for the promotion of ‘community and the common good’ such as the need for commitment to one’s neighbour, at the individual and community level.

There has been a growing acknowledgement that faith groups of all religions may now be the strongest community organizations in deprived areas. As yet; however, their potential has not been fully exploited. Faith communities can command valuable resources and social capital in terms of networks, buildings, voluntary activity and leadership skills. These can be especially important in deprived areas if other forms of institutional support have been eroded. Faith communities are a distinctive part of the community and voluntary sector and we need to see them as such. (United Reform Church, 2006).

#### SO WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

**The Church Community Worker** - Going back to the United Reform Church – it has made community work a ministry within the church. They define church related community development work as overcoming the separation of church and community. Church related community workers, as they are called, are commissioned to care for and, to challenge the community. To respond to

human need by loving service. To seek to transform unjust structures of society which includes the theological concepts of: dignity, action, transformation, collaboration, service and equality.

Church related community work is not a means of increasing church membership but an engagement with those outside the church, particularly those who are disadvantaged or oppressed. A few of the core competencies for its church related community workers is theological reflection linked to community development and the ability to enable others to theologically reflect. They are community workers and theologians who work with the church to work for change within its local neighbourhood, rather than someone simply employed by the church to act on its behalf. They have an involvement with community initiatives (United Reform Church, 2006). As congregations have declined, many churches have re-oriented their activities outward into the communities where they are located. Church buildings are being used for a plethora of activities, some promoted by the church and others with no direct link at all – such as co-operative nurseries and youth activities.

**Partnerships** - There should be partnerships of law enforcement, faith communities and community groups. Pastors could work on prevention while police work on the criminals. In Etobicoke, a new program similar to the Boston strategy has been underway since last spring. Pastors and police are meeting once a month. Pastors are trying to find young people jobs, they are knocking on doors of local residents, and they are lobbying for a community centre for a neighbourhood that has few places for youth to meet.

There is a growing interest in faith communities' role in neighbourhood renewal and regeneration initiatives. Government needs to equip faith-based organizations to provide quality service to the community and to ensure that the government recognizes the contribution of these groups in community action.

**Advocacy** - The faith community must elevate itself to become an impartial, non-partisan advocate for the poor – an independent voice of truth and conscience that speaks truth to power. This includes lobbying and challenging the various powers. The Black faith community must step up to the plate first. The Black community has to prove that it can create credible and responsible programs, and then its members will have the right to ask the government for funding (Welsh, 2006).

**Preserver** - The church needs to be the preserver of the family. Speaking in a language familiar to church folk, Rivers challenged the Black clergy to be watchmen on the wall, to stand in the gap and for the Black church to become a surrogate for distressed fatherless families (Welsh, 2006).

Strengthening the capacity of faith-based organizations to mentor the most violent young people in the poorest neighbourhoods is one element of a possible proposal for Toronto. Pastor Rivers spoke about ministering, mentoring, monitoring which needs to be part of a broader strategy of prevention, intervention and enforcement (Gillespie, 2006). This is a family conversation. It requires that the Black community come together, stop making excuses, move beyond the rhetoric, race card and focus on how do we as a community become more accountable.

The church needs to adapt to its current youth population. If it wants to do that and is serious about it, then the churches have to broach delicate and touchy subjects. Anytime you talk with youth, you will need to talk about touchy subject. That is just the name of the game. This includes subjects such as Black men who have abandoned their sons, babies out of wedlock, teenage mothers and broken families. Rivers refers to it as, “a public conversation around accountability,” (Gillespie, 2006). Rev. Meredith of the GTA Faith Alliance also mentions that the focus needs to be on families; especially the lack of fathers. No subject should be taboo. There must be dialogue about sensitive yet critical issues openly, in the congregations. As a protective community, we may not want to discuss this outright openly but should be able to and encouraged to do so in the comfort of the sanctuary. Wherever it occurs, the dialogue must take place (Gillespie, 2006).

**Church based activities** - Some of the things the church could do include: parenting support groups and groups for single mothers because parents need to accept responsibility for their children’s behaviour and youth need to be held accountable for their actions; however, families need support. Part of the answer lies in ensuring that parents have access to supports as well as other material essentials such as adequate income and housing. The church needs to provide leadership and role models and address relevant and current issues facing these families and youths.

There could be cooperative day cares, vacation Bible school, women’s ministries, tutors, mentors, youth leadership training. Even Bible studies, home

visits - making that connection beyond the pulpit and into their homes. It sounds very simplistic but it also sounds very effective. It is recognized that not all Black churches will have the adequate resources and the administrative base to expand the types of programs that they currently provide.

From a strengths perspective, the community and the church have assets and resources that they can call upon. They have each other. The church needs to be actively involved in outreach. It needs to provide strategies and supports. The youth and their parents need this support. It needs to engage in community partnership and collaborative work. It requires collaboration, mobilization, engagement, citizen participation and by extension congregational participation. There is some debate as to the role of the church and what are its 'jurisdictional' duties or responsibilities as it were. For even those who feel that social action is not the role of the church, one cannot deny a fundamental component of the role being to promote values, ethics and moral standards.

It is a multi-layered ,complex situation that requires complex and integrated, solutions. To say that there is only one solution to the youth violence is both short-sighted and unrealistic. The reality I proposed is another key that involves prevention and intervention.

If one were looking for legitimacy through a relationship, there could be perhaps few better ways than through a partnership with a group of ministers. For the most part, throughout society ministers have unique moral standing. They are expected to be fair and to protect the interests of the less fortunate. Ministers are often asked to be problem solvers and to adjudicate between conflicting

parties. In the inner city, ministers and their churches are among the institutions committed to the welfare of their neighborhoods and within the black community, they have often been looked to for leadership (National Ten Point Leadership Foundation, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social work practitioners need to recognize the importance spirituality plays in the lives of Black Canadians, its historical role, its present-day role and its potential role.

What does it mean for the front-line social worker, working in the community?

The Black church, has a particularly strong tradition of focusing on families to enhance parishoners' internal resources and buffer them from adverse social and economic circumstances. Workers are in a unique position to capitalize on these strengths. Under the right circumstances, faith leaders and practitioners can form effective partnerships with one another.

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