

Gun Violence



CHARLA JONES/TORONTO STAR

Rev. Eugene Rivers speaks at the East Scarborough Boys and Girls Club yesterday, his final day in Toronto. Though hoarse from three days of talks, one of the architects of the Boston Miracle left loud messages for leaders to find solutions in the fight against violent crime.

'Make children the bottom line'

Leaders urged to seize momentum Pastor challenges politicians, churches

NAOMI CARNIOL
STAFF REPORTER

For three days his words were met by applause, cameras and shouts of "Amen."

Now, with his return to Boston, Rev. Eugene Rivers wants the same attention paid to Toronto's gangs.

"After all this media coverage ... there had better be an enormous amount of work that goes into helping these kids," Rivers said yesterday, hoarse after three days of speaking engagements and just hours before he headed home.

"The churches need to come together. Check egos in at the door. Make the children the bottom line," Rivers said.

The churches should hold a summit without the media, "where you sit down and say,

"What are we going to do after ... we put Rivers on a plane and send him back to America?"

The conversation needs to include plans for setting up a program that puts missionaries on the street, Rivers said.

Rivers is one of the architects of the so-called Boston Miracle, a program that greatly cut the murder rate in that city. The program combined increased police presence with funding for youth programs so pastors could work on prevention while police locked up criminals.

For Toronto, part of the answer will be making sure faith leaders live up to their promises. "I want you to hold the churches accountable," he told the audience at the Boys and Girls Club of East Scarborough yesterday.

Politicians also need to live up

to the enthusiasm they displayed, Rivers said outside Malvern Community Centre.

The black community also needs to stop being so divisive, Rivers said. "Part of the factions ... in this country are that people won't let go that they're from Jamaica, they're from Trinidad, they're from St. Vincent."

Black Americans "might be from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina and Colorado but when push comes to shove we close ranks and for that reason, we can pretty much produce whatever we need to produce," Rivers said. "The same lesson needs to be learned in Canada."

Rivers said he noticed some differences between Toronto and some large U.S. cities.

"I am profoundly impressed with the civility. There's a different kind of atmosphere. The edginess that I pick up in most of the American cities — that's

not here," he said.

But there are some similarities. "You do have in this city a vision of thug life," Rivers said.

And unless the root causes are addressed "you're going to have a problem in a few years. What will happen is the cancer will continue to spread."

Another similarity is some informal leaders in Canada's black community rely on "a certain kind of racial political discourse" that holds up racism as the key to violence. "That's an old paradigm that doesn't work," Rivers said.

It comes down to family and culture. If you're in touch with your culture and have a strong family "racism can't stop you."

Rev. Don Meredith, chair of the GTA Faith Alliance, called the three days well spent. "At the clergy level there is a serious resolve to work collectively together to impact ... those that are desperately in need," he said.