

I Will Go! Send Me!

Forum panelists seek solutions to youth violence

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“Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37-KJV)

Some of Metro Louisville’s most prominent Black leaders gathered at the invitation of Simmons College of Kentucky’s President, Dr. Kevin W. Cosby, and University of Louisville’s Pan-African Studies Chair, Dr. Ricky L. Jones, to try to find an answer to this question.

In the wake of continued and increasing Black male youth homicides in Metro Louisville and beyond, the first Brothers Reaching Brothers forum was held on Saturday, September 17th, at the St. Stephen Worship Center in Louisville, Kentucky, to discuss and develop solutions to the devastating problems plaguing our black community.

In the book of Exodus, the Lord told Moses that He had seen how cruelly His people were being treated, how much they were suffering, and how He wanted Moses to lead them out of Egypt. Moses responded by trying to wiggle out of the assignment, giving God a laundry list of excuses. Finally he said to God, *“No, Lord, please send someone else.” (Exodus 4:13 – GNV)*

The Brothers Reaching Brothers forum panelists were clearly not saying this. They may have initially resisted when God tugged on their hearts to do something about the suffering and destruction of His people, but on this day their actions shouted indisputably, as the prophet Isaiah, *“I will go! Send me! (Isaiah 6:8 – GNV)*

The 17 member panel consisted of Louisville Metro Police Chief Robert White, state Senator Gerald Neal, car dealership owner and philanthropist Winston Pittman, Louisville Urban League President Benjamin Richmond, Louisville Metro Health Department Director, Dr. Adewale Troutman, professors, ministers, community activists, and corrections professionals.

Chuck Olmstead of WHAS TV 11 and Stephan Johnson of Fox 41 News, served as moderators of this historic and unparalleled event. They began three hours of dialogue by posing thought-provoking questions to the panelists. Subtle differences of opinion surfaced concerning the many issues facing the black community, but the one thing every

panelist agreed on was the existence of a lack of hope in our young black males. This hopelessness, they believe, attributes to the increase in Black on Black homicides, both locally and nationwide. The F.B.I. Uniform Crime Reports and the National Centers for Health Statistics, state, “For black males aged 15-19, firearm homicides have increased 158 percent from 1985 to 1993.” DeVone Holt, author of the book “Hip Hop Slop”, which highlights the negative impact of hip-hop music and culture on our youth, contends that there is an “amazing disconnect” between our youth and the Christians that can help them. He believes that we have almost lost the opportunity to reach our youth. Mr. Holt and Dr. Cosby both emphasized the need to deliberately go after our youth, using language and images with which they can identify. “Jesus spoke Aramaic, which was nothing more than ‘street Greek’.” Cosby explained. “We can embrace the hip-hop culture without compromising the Gospel.” Apostle Paul said, “*So I become all things to all people, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible.*” (1 Corinthians 9:22 – GNV) Christopher 2 X, a community activist and panelist thinks, as did all the panelists, that one of those means is to go to the youth, instead of waiting for them to come to you. “We need to dialogue with the street person at the kitchen table.” he said.

Most of the panel discussion focused on how to reach our youth and when the floor was finally opened to the roughly 800 member audience, the same focus continued. Lines quickly formed in the aisles, with people anxious to share their perspectives and ask questions of the panelists. Reasons for the violence were attributed to situational, personal, systemic, and societal factors. Suggested solutions to the violence were parental responsibility, personal responsibility, racial sensitivity in the classroom (white female teacher to Black male student), one-on-one mentoring, personal transformation, increased and revamped outreach from churches, more Black teachers, inclusion of youth, restoration of hope, and increased opportunities for technical job skill training in lieu of college education.

Organizers, Kevin Cosby and Ricky Jones feel the event was a successful beginning. “We become myopic sometimes and need to hear other perspectives.” Jones said. “The substantive work comes later.” The panelists will reconvene, take the ideas from the forum discussion, identify five top action items, and divide into task forces. The next community forum is tentatively scheduled for November 19th.

“This was an unprecedented event.” Cosby said referring to the gathering and general consensus of such a large and otherwise dissimilar minded panel. “We recognize that we must be mobilized to fight the unique problems that we’re facing on multiple fronts.” Cosby stated.

Rev. Alvin Herring, Executive Director of the Muhammad Ali Institute for Peace and Justice, and audience member, best summarized the event, “This is the beginning of a renewal. This is more than just more rhetoric. There is a spirit here.....I feel it.”

I felt the positive spirit of renewal and restoration too. I also felt a strong sense of pride in these intelligent and accomplished Black men. Men who could have been doing other things on Saturday morning, but instead chose to put other’s needs above their own. I hope that by their example, more men (and women) will make the commitment to also say, “*I will go! Send me!*”