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Pastor Meikle: Courage, discipline and love

By **LORRIE GOLDSTEIN**



Even before Toronto's infamous "summer of the gun" in 2005, Pastor Orim Meikle was one of a handful of black preachers who electrified the city with a powerful message about black on black crime.

Speaking at the funeral of one innocent young man who had been senselessly gunned down, Meikle blamed not white racism, but moral failure in the black community.

Blacks were being murdered not because of racism, Meikle thundered in a fiery oration which made the Sun's front page, but because of a lack of discipline by their parents.

Because too many fathers had abandoned their families and created a generation of sons who had grown into gun-toting, drug-dealing thugs, who were in turn fathering children and abandoning them and their young mothers.

While politicians fretted, Meikle and his colleagues marched into some of Toronto's most troubled neighbourhoods armed only with their Bibles, preaching that people had to "get right with God."

They were courageous and unforgettable -- a beacon of hope, amid despair.

Now it's three years later and Meikle is seated inside his spartan office in a low-rise Scarborough mall that unpretentiously houses, for the moment, his thriving, seven-year-old, multi-racial 2,500-member (and growing) evangelical church, Rhema Ministries.

While those sermons showed one pillar of the Jamaican-born Meikle's deep Christian faith -- discipline -- the happily married, devoted, 39-year-old father of two is today passionately talking about the other -- love.

He credits Chief Bill Blair and Toronto Police for slowing the gang violence. But, he warns, "if there's still someone out there being shot, there's work to do. And I know people are still being shot."

How? "Because I used to be one of them," Meikle says. "When I was young I got

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into trouble, I ran with the wrong crowd. I could easily have ended up smuggling drugs in and out of the country."

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What saved him, he says, was the strict upbringing provided by his parents, which eventually steered him towards a religious education, instead of into the deadly grip of the gangs and guns.

Today, Meikle is spreading that dual message of discipline and love through Rhema.

Despite its 2,800-sq.-metre size, his church is bursting at the seams. Meikle is negotiating with Ottawa to more than double that space at the former Downsview airport.

But his dream is to build an \$850 million, 145-acre Christian life centre in Toronto.

Remarkably, he already has the financing for it from a wealthy, private American foundation.

For now, three services -- one in Spanish -- are held in the 1,300-seat Rhema sanctuary every Sunday to accommodate the faithful. Rhema provides an extensive array of charitable and community services, including pre-marital, family, financial and debt counselling. Why debt? "Because we teach a strong message of prosperity here," Meikle replies. "I don't want families breaking up because of poverty."

Funding comes from a \$4 million annual budget contributed by supporters. Rhema has received government support for just one program, consistent with its philosophy of self-sufficiency.

'RESURRECTION SUNDAY'

On April 8, for the second year in a row, Meikle will lead a huge "Resurrection Sunday" service starting at 11:00 a.m. for 4,400 people at Mississauga's Hershey Centre, including a Passion Play with a chamber orchestra, 100-voice choir and, Meikle notes with a chuckle, live animals, including a donkey.

To learn more about Meikle's ministry, visit rhemaonline.ca or phone 416-496-1794.

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