

March 4, 2009

Clergy group holds anti-violence summit in Mount Vernon

Christine Pizzuti
The Journal News

MOUNT VERNON - The young minds of Mount Vernon are capable of great things, but it's going to take a lot of work to tear down the false values youths attribute to activities that only harm them, the Rev. W. Darin Moore said last night.

Moore, pastor of Greater Centennial AME Zion Church, and other city leaders are on the verge of a giant campaign to end what Moore refers to as glorified thuggery - a culture responsible for the deaths of 15 young black men in the past 15 months.

The United Black Clergy of Westchester, of which Moore is president, has created a coalition dubbed SOS for "Save Our Seeds." Members held an anti-violence summit at Grace Baptist Church last night.

"We realize we're going against the tide of a culture that is very vast," Moore said. "One of the most rigorous components we're talking about is partnering with law enforcement to diminish this culture that is hostile and suspicious of law enforcement - this 'stop snitching' campaign that was launched out of Baltimore years ago."

It also is going to take a reversal of values, Moore said. Children aren't going to be interested in art or school if they don't plan on a future involving either of those things.

Part of that change will be aimed at parents, many of whom have shown great indifference, he said.

"Our community has parents that are ill-equipped to deal with social ills," said Moore, adding that it's either because they are overwhelmed with work and other responsibilities or because they, too, were young when they had children.

During the summit, a panel of community leaders exchanged ideas to develop ways to infiltrate such a culture, where being accepted on the streets is No. 1, and participation in after-school programs is like wearing a scarlet letter, as Moore phrased it.

Lawmakers, school and police officials stayed for hours and laid down the framework of what is to come by establishing a series of task forces focused on law enforcement, education, employment, youth outreach, drugs, media coverage and community renewal, among others.

City Police Commissioner David Chong and the rest of the panel agreed that police communications with the community must be improved. As with the other task forces, such improvements will be discussed in the coming days when the task forces meet before unveiling their plans in about a month.

The education task force will be headed by school district Superintendent W.L. "Tony" Sawyer, who said the task force must start at the crimes and work backward in the chain of the events to see where improvements need to be made.

The Rev. W. Franklyn Richardson of Grace Baptist Church, who moderated the discussion, said the school district has a graduation rate of less than 50 percent.

Sawyer put a large portion of the responsibility on parents.

They need to stop "using the television as a baby sitter on a daily basis," he said, adding that even though there are some TV stations that focus on the black community, they are often damaging to the values of Mount Vernon's children.

Sawyer also said there needs to be disciplinary changes for students who harm others.

"I don't think a youngster who has assaulted a child should be able to come and sit five days later next to the child," he said.