

30 years after the Morning Star Baptist Church stabbing, religious leaders carry on the fight for peace

In the aftermath of a 1992 attack, Black clergy led a coalition of religious leaders in a nonviolence campaign whose effects have lasted decades

By **Ivy Scott** Globe Staff, Updated May 15, 2022, 6:08 p.m.



Bishop John Borders greeted church members at Morning Star Baptist Church. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

In the days before a group of gang members stormed into the Morning Star Baptist Church 30 years ago, where hundreds had gathered to mourn another young life lost to gun violence, Bishop John Borders had a feeling that tragedy was imminent.

The previous two years, Borders had presided over funerals for more than 100 murder victims, a litany of grief that seemed without end. But the death of 20-year-old Robert Odom, the unintended victim of a drive-by shooting that week, pushed tensions in the neighborhood to a boiling point. On the morning of the funeral, Borders prayed.

“Lord, something’s going on,” he said in an interview last week. “I don’t know what’s happening, but it’s something bad and I ask you to cover me.”

Hours later, Borders stood before the mourners who filled his Mattapan church in somber anticipation of Odom’s eulogy. Instead, Borders’s worst fears were realized as violence broke out in the sanctuary, a burst of mayhem whose aftershocks would fundamentally change the city’s approach to combating violence in ways still felt today.

A group of young men allegedly chased a rival gang member named Jerome Brunson inside the church and toward the pulpit, descending upon him with knives and metal chairs. In a panic, mourners stampeded to the exits, breaking doors and leaping through windows to escape.

Several were injured and Brunson, 21, was stabbed eight times. He survived, but the attack left a lingering sense across the city that a line had been crossed, a sacred promise broken.

Borders did not preach Sunday but sat quietly in the back of the church, in silent remembrance of the attack.

“That day is one that I can recall clearly, but is sometimes extremely painful to talk about,” he said. “Years later, those events still feel fresh in my mind.”

In the face of crisis, the church’s natural response is to pray, Borders said. But the incident at the Morning Star Baptist Church helped galvanize Boston’s Black neighborhoods, spurring communities of faith to match prayer with action.

The May 14, 1992, incident was a “kairos moment that catalyzed and built on the existing nonviolence work of a few individuals and churches,” said Rev. Mark Scott

EXISTING NONVIOLENCE WORK OF A FEW INDIVIDUALS AND CHURCHES, SAID REV. MARK SCOTT,

director of violence prevention at the Boston Public Health Commission, among many Black clergy who vividly remembers the sense of shared purpose forged by the attack.

A few days after the funeral, Borders held a clergy-only meeting to mount a faith-based response to gang violence and found himself surrounded by a coalition of religious leaders 300 strong.

“It was an unprecedented event, because it touched everyone,” said Rev. Jeffrey Brown, pastor at the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury, who added that to this day the meeting was the largest and most diverse community gathering of religious leaders he has ever seen. “Everybody felt that if it could happen to John [Borders], it could happen to us,” he said.

From that first meeting emerged an aggressive series of faith-based initiatives to combat gang violence in low-income, minority neighborhoods. The most famous became known as the Ten Point Plan.

The plan was co-authored by Rev. Eugene Rivers and a young drug dealer named Selvin Brown, with the help of members of Rivers’s Azusa Christian Community. A veteran outreach worker, Rivers was one of several Black Christian leaders who had moved his family into one of Boston’s most dangerous neighborhoods in hopes of reaching those most in need. The Ten Point Plan that Rivers helped draft was championed by Brown and other clergy, including pastors Ray Hammond and Bruce Wall, and would lead to the formation of the TenPoint Coalition, a driving force behind the city’s fight against drug and gang violence.

“We really saw ourselves as called by God to serve the Black poor by building these relationships with kids and young men,” said Dr. Jacqueline Rivers, wife to Eugene Rivers, who explained the pivotal role that Black mothers played in early-intervention efforts to curtail gang involvement.

“I remember having kids come to our home on Friday nights. We would rent movies and get popcorn and have some tough little kids all splayed out on the floor in our living room [as a way to] pull them off the streets and out of the violence,” Rivers said.

“We were important role models even to these young men because they saw us leading lives that were dedicated to helping people, and not to drinking and drugging and partying.”

Reba Danastorg, another leader in the city’s anti-violence movement, called women the “hidden force” behind the campaign, “reaching out both to victims who are hurting and to those in so much pain that they inflict pain on others.”

While the women organized summer programs and collected Christmas presents for the children of families touched by street violence, their husbands and fathers walked the streets after dark, often until 2 in the morning, risking their lives to meet gang leaders and drug dealers on their own terms.

“You began to see restoration in relationships that everyone believed would be forever broken or fractured: Christians and Jews, Blacks and the police, law-abiding citizens and drug-dealing gangsters,” said Scott, who walked weekly with Rivers. “A high price was paid to rebuild those relationships, but it worked.”

The efforts of religious leaders, city officials, police, and community organizations during the 1990s contributed to what became known as the “Boston Miracle,” a remarkable decline in homicides that culminated in a 29-month stretch, ending in 1998, where Boston recorded no juvenile homicides.

Thirty years later, vestiges of that first meeting at Morning Star are still visible across the city. Rivers still hosts a community meeting every Wednesday morning to brainstorm solutions to reduce violent crime in low-income neighborhoods. Brown and Borders continue to advocate for increased social services and business opportunities for minority populations. And community initiatives launched in the early 1990s, including outreach workers and summer programs aimed at violence prevention, have been institutionalized through city programs that are able to reach a broader group of children and offer more comprehensive support.

Moving forward, Scott said he believes the primary task before Black Christian leaders is investing in people who are incarcerated or returning from prison to break generational cycles of violence.

“One of the mistakes the faith community made [during the Boston Miracle] is failing to follow people through prison. We locked everybody up, and the problem with that strategy is that the vast majority of people who go to prison come back. And all of those people leave family members behind,” he said. “We should never be throwing away the key. We should visit them and we should work with their families so when they come back home, they can be successful.”

The anniversary of the attack has served as a call to action, and an opportunity for religious leaders to reflect on the collective response that defied divisions of religion and race.

“Engaging with our young people isn’t just something that social workers can do. It’s a spiritual endeavor,” Brown said. “That engagement from spirit to spirit has done so much to help me understand that the streets are not separate from my community, but the streets are my community. If we’re going to make progress toward peace, it has to be together and not apart.”

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