

Treat underlying causes

An open letter to Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson:

Let us first commend you on the rapid response to a community crisis that affects all of us. The latest wave of murders in our community begs the question, what kind of city do we live in, or even better, what kind of city do we want our children to inherit? Do we want to be the murder capital of the United States, or do we want to be a city of peace? What will be our legacy?

The measures you and other public officials have taken are needed but long overdue. However, they treat only the symptoms and not the cause of our current chaos. For many years we have seen tremendous progress in building up the Downtown and the superstructure of our city. The stadiums, convention center, office buildings and the like have sprung up everywhere. This all looks good, but beneath this there is the more important issue of the quality of life of our community in general and the African-American community specifically.

What good will it do for us to have a new stadium that we are afraid to go to for fear of being robbed or murdered? We understand the need to repair what is broken, but the safety issues are tied to the social issues. We do not just need to be locked up and locked down. We need to be lifted up. Most African Americans in this city are law-abiding people who want to feel secure too. We pay our taxes and vote our conscience. We deserve better than what we are getting.

Sir, we respectfully call upon you to help lead this city out of its social darkness. We are racially divided and social-delivery poor. Our kids need mentoring, tutoring and social skills. Our parents need training. Black fathers need help. Black children need to be empowered. We need recreation centers and after-school education centers. We need more anti-truancy, anti-drug, anti-teenage-pregnancy programs. We need more early-childhood programs.

Our kids are not bad, they just make bad choices. When they do get in trouble, we need to do something besides lock them up. We need to provide a safety net for those who have fallen, and provide jobs and training for those who are willing to work when they get out of prison. We need to strengthen the courts and the police, but more than anything, we need to treat the future like it is today, for it soon will be. We need resources to help you get the job done. It always costs less to educate than incarcerate or terminate.

We are asking you to lead the city in a change of priorities. We need proactive leadership. We need not only to take back our streets, but to take a good look at what is causing the problem, or next summer will be hotter than this one as black and white blood flows in the streets.

We are asking you to lead an initiative to raise a minimum of \$25 million per year from public and private sources within the next 12 months to expand and strengthen existing social and community organizations as well as create new opportunities through faith-based and other

OUR VIEW

This letter was signed by Bishop T. Garrett Benjamin Jr., Light of the World Christian Church; Pastor Jeffrey Johnson, Eastern Star Church; the Rev. Charles Harrison, Barnes United Methodist Church; and members of Westside Community Ministers, the 10 Point Ministers Coalition, Ministers On the Move and The Concerned Clergy.

organizations to help turn our city around.

It is now or never. We will not be able to support the building of buildings until we start building up lives. There are many who will help you. We must do our part. Our parents must take back their homes, but

we still need help. If we can find \$50-plus million for public safety, surely, we can find half that to mend the tattered social fabric of our community.

We cannot support just beefed up police and courts without the city addressing the social disintegration and racial division that threaten us all.

Government cannot do it alone. It will take parents, politicians, police, preachers and the entire community to save our children. Mr. Mayor, we need your leadership and we will work with you. We know what we have to do. As pastors, we must work on the hearts of our people so that respect for self, each other and human life flourishes once again in our community.

We close with the words of Terry Tempest Williams. "The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us, to see beyond our time." God help us all.