

# **The Church vs. Street Gangs: How a Faith Community Can Help Break the Cycle**

*By C.W. Hall and Rev. Dr. Bruce Cook*

*Crime Victims Advocacy Council, askcvacwhy@aol.com*

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 750,000 young people nationwide, including 15,000 in Georgia, are involved in gang activity. Gang activity has been on the rise since the 1970s with little sign of stopping. Experts say our youth turn to gangs as a replacement for the family. The church, with its emphasis on abundant grace and unconditional love, can serve as a resource to help stem the incidence of gang involvement. Here are three steps a faith community can take.

## **Know the Signs**

Many parents and concerned adults fail to recognize the signs of a child's involvement in a local gang. Rebelliousness, tattoos, staying out late with "friends" you've never met, secretive or deceitful behavior, and skirmishes with the law are all signs of possible gang involvement. Other clues include: dilated or pin-sized pupils from drug use; hurried speech from crystal meth or speed use; yellowed fingers from holding marijuana joints; numbers like *13* or *14* worn on belts or garments; gang insignias on clothing; clothing worn in odd ways (like rolling up one pant leg); and the use of secret hand signs with one another.

While these are some of the signs of gang activity, they also may be signs of youthful rebellion or drug experimentation without gang involvement. So how do we, as concerned adults, know for sure? The best advice is to talk about it—with other kids, social workers, guidance counselors, and, most especially, our own children. Go ahead...simply ask the child if he (or she) is involved in gang activity. Then verify his answer by checking with others.

### **Instruct Early and Often**

The time to start teaching children to avoid gangs is in elementary school and Sunday school. Because roughly two-thirds of local gangs are Hispanic or Latino, local churches need to develop dialogue with the Hispanic/Latino community as well as with recreational, spiritual and social programs serving the entire community. Think creatively. For example, a local United Methodist Church might collaborate with another community church with a strong Latino membership. Church leaders also can connect with law enforcement anti-gang units to see how the church can help.

Churches are invaluable in raising a child. They are centers of knowledge, life experience, family values clarification, and moral and scriptural guidance on raising kids. Even with this help, parents must remain active in their child's life. For example, parents should know where their children are at all times and must communicate directly with them. When the support system of family, friends and faith community fails in its responsibility to care for and love a child, a surrogate group—often a street gang--can get a foothold on the child's impressionable ego. As a faith community, we must prevent this from happening.

### **Be a Role Model**

Parents and churches must stand as role models for our children. A positive and focused reinforcement, such as a Youth Group or Youth Ministry in the church, sends a strong message to kids, offering them the love and attention they need. Backing up this type of ministry with caring parents and adult church members can help youth stay away from gangs.

Church leaders also need to communicate with each other about what does and doesn't work. Many police departments provide officers specifically trained in gang activity to instruct parents and others about gang awareness, gang activity and preventative measures. Teens turn to

negative forces when they feel they have no hope. In cities large and small, including Atlanta, children, teenagers and their parents need training in personal safety, crime prevention and victim education. If churches would offer this type of training on a regular basis, gang activity undoubtedly would decline.

Children require attention and love. They need to be reminded daily by parents, relatives and church members that they are loved. If they do not experience this love, they will find attention elsewhere, quite possibly in a gang. As adults with love for and concern about children, we know our lives are no longer our own. Our actions—and our failure to act—influence our children and our future. As members of the faith community, we can influence a gang-free future.

*C.W. Hall is a nationally trained Crime Prevention/Victim Education Consultant for Crime Victims Advocacy Council (CVAC), an advanced mission special of the North Georgia Conference and a mission site of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. Mr. Hall is available to speak to children and parents on crime prevention, including issues of Internet safety, anti-bullying, child safety and anti-coercion. Rev. Dr. Bruce Cook is the Chaplain and Executive Director of CVAC, which provides free counseling to all crime victims. Reach them at CVAC, 3101 Paces Mill Road, Atlanta, GA 30339; 770-333-9254; askcvac@aol.com or askcvacwhy@aol.com.*

12-16-06

(Sidebar)

Involvement by the family, church, schools, and community as a whole are all crucial components in the battle against gang activity. What can we, as parents or members of the faith community, do to combat gangs?

- Be a positive role model.
- Work to improve communication and take seriously the responsibility of raising our children.
- Take a deeper interest in our children and their activities.
- Know the company our child keeps.
- Monitor our child's whereabouts and activities.
- Get our child involved with extracurricular activities in school and community groups.
- Be aware of the signs of gang recruitment and involvement. If such signs exist, intervene as quickly as possible; seek the help and advice of family, church; schools administrators and police.
- Do not allow your children to wear gang clothing or styles.
- Do not allow your child to "hang out" on the streets.
- Be suspicious of graffiti and tattoos.
- Do not allow your child to limit your access to their room.
- Learn about drugs and gangs, and talk to your children about these threats.
- Develop the attitude of anti-drugs and anti-gangs in your home, and emphasize the overwhelming negative aspects of both.
- Start early...*the gangs do!*