

Bringing hope, along with other concerned groups and individuals, are seriously challenged by what is seen as an epidemic of youth violence, crime and anti-social behaviour and its impact in our communities.

Much has been said and written about how to respond to the issues. Prayer, policies, strategies, discussions, research and documentaries are ongoing responses in bringing an intervention and indeed reformation of individuals and families caught up in this web. The crucial question is, how impacting have any of these interventions been?

Whilst acknowledging the challenges we face, Bringing Hope has also asked some very serious questions about engagement, impact, transformation, reformation and sustainability. In other words, are we fit for the purpose of 'bringing hope' in a climate where hopelessness, fear, despair and evil exist?

BRINGING HOPE CONTEXT

Bringing Hope is a Christian charity that seeks to work to transform and reform the lives of those suffering from negative, destructive and harmful lifestyles. This may include young people and their families who have been impacted by guns, gangs and knives, which may have resulted in a fatality.

We use a spiritually based paradigm to transform individuals following the teachings of Jesus Christ, to encourage and maintain hope in communities that have been broken and disengaged by forces beyond their control.

Bringing Hope sees as its basis the words of Jesus in Luke 4.18: 'God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"'¹

Here we note the potential for lives to be impacted by the Spirit and power of God therefore as part of our intervention we advocate God's divine and supernatural capacity to turn lives around.

This has been exemplified by one of the young men we are working with who was convicted of murder at the age of 18 and served 14 years of a life sentence. It was during this time in prison that through the chaplaincy and other Christian input that this young man acknowledged that he was living within a broken and hopeless state.

During one of our discussions with him, he stated the following: 'I remember, one evening whilst sitting on my bed I again "looked" at myself and what I had done, the words of the chaplain came back to me and I decided there and then to change, so that night in the

REV CARVER ANDERSON left his role as the Director of Youth and Education at one of the biggest Black Majority Churches in the UK to work with young people affected by and involved in gang lifestyles. A qualified social worker, Carver is the co-director for Shalom Consultancies Ltd and a Director of Bringing Hope.

NICOLA SMITH formerly worked for the Evangelical Alliance and the African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance until she was appointed as Project Coordinator for Bringing Hope in 2005. She manages the central office and provides creative support to promote the work of the charity.

cell I said to God, "If you are real and able to change me and people like me, then do it!" I recall feeling a deep sense of conviction, which brought me to tears. It was from this point I knew I had changed. It was due to my conscious change and practice as a Christian that I conducted myself well becoming a "model prisoner". This resulted in me being granted parole after fourteen years.'

BRINGING HOPE IN PARTNERSHIP

In a recent Home Office report, Tackling Gangs: A practical guide for local authorities, CDRPS and other Local Partners, Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, acknowledged that the challenge of disaffection resulting in antisocial behaviour 'has to be addressed by a range of partners and tactics including work with young people'. She goes on to say that it is important for communities to resist the intimidation and fear from those who choose to go down the road of using criminal activity or violence as a way of survival.

Bringing Hope acknowledges that no one individual, group or organisation is able to bring about total transformation because this issue relating to disaffection, brokenness and violence is very complex. Consequently, we seek to work with individuals and groups who share our desire to see lives permanently changed.

In our work with statutory services and community groups, Bringing Hope has noted both worst and best practice and developed a more

realistic and holistic response to the issues raised by guns, knives and gangs.

As part of our endeavours we have been a part of the Home Secretary's round table relating to gun and knife crime. It was during one of our meetings that we had a sense of deeper conviction regarding the need for a more profound intervention, which from Bringing Hope's perspective relates to a moral, ethical and spiritual component.

In March 2007, as a model for this process, Bringing Hope published the 'Damascus Road Principles'; drawing on Paul's Damascus Road experience recorded in Acts 7–9.

There are two aspects of Paul's conversion that we wish to highlight. The first is his personal journey from self-righteous violence, an advocate for fear who was involved in the death and disruption of individuals and communities, to a man who, through his acknowledgment of Christ (representing hope, righteousness, peace and love) accepted the serious need for a new path. Hence, his transformed and reformed life now 'bringing hope' to individuals and communities he once brutalised and persecuted.

The second aspect is how individuals and communities responded to Paul subsequent to his conversion. Evidently, Paul was feared and even hated, which meant that many did not believe his conversion until his new lifestyle became a sustained expression.

Bringing Hope recognises that, as with the people in our cities, conversion from a life of criminal activity or violence will bring consequences for those whose lives are changed and challenges to those around them.

As noted, Paul, the new convert, was not freed from suspicion and threats to his life, and the believers who supported and worked with him were in constant danger from the violence directed at both him and all Christians. It took time for relationships to develop and trust to grow. However, their experiences of living together through the persecution encouraged and enabled communities of believers to be established and nurtured across the Roman Empire.

BRINGING HOPE DEVELOPING A DAMASCUS ROAD PARADIGM

Whilst being mindful of the various approaches and strategies to address the above issues, Bringing Hope advocates three principles from the Damascus Road experience of Paul.

1. 'Each one reach one, each one teach one': Peer-led culturally competent mentoring

Paul's experience as a Pharisee, a Roman citizen and an intellectual from Tarsus, made him uniquely qualified to debate with and disciple urbane Jews and Gentiles across the Empire. Whilst Bringing Hope has seen excellent work among those working with people involved in gang behaviour, it is our view that the most effective educators are peer-educators. With appropriate training and encouragement, those who have come from the street are best placed to minister to and mentor those who want to leave it.

Christian-centred social and community enterprises that work towards developing peer-led culturally competent approaches and innovative support services, which provide a strong evidence base of the transformation process, could inform a best-practice model. This model offers a method of holistic intervention/prevention that is grounded in the realities of leaving the street with a greater measure of personal security and a greater probability of sustaining survival. In time, it might provide a stronger best-practice model serving the needs of all young people at risk and not just some of them.

2. 'We're all one people': Unity, morality and rites of passage

Successful peer-led mentoring takes place within and encourages the development of strong communities. Like other faiths, mainstream Christian teachings provide moral, spiritual and value frameworks for individuals distressed and disorientated by their conversions into a new personal paradigm and the temptations that can accompany it. This, of course, happens in all aspects of community life, but as the story of Paul shows, those involved in violence, whether lawful or lawless, can have much more to risk. For many gang members and ex-prisoners becoming involved in community/church life becomes the basis for accepting such risks and continuing on the journey of transformation.

The promotion of a truly integrated approach to building social and community enterprise and capacity would remove some of the burden currently placed on public services that are failing due to limited resources and commitment. The promotion and harnessing of peer-led mentoring and local communities would renew community infrastructures and generate a formidable workforce, whose collective energy would have a significant impact in empowering young people to consider new options and choices in their lives and challenging all that stands in the way of their transformation and liberation.

3. Community redemption and reframing the context

Policymakers and service providers need to acknowledge what

communities have been saying for years: gun crime, gangs, murder, corruption and social exclusion are human issues that cascade their effects throughout and between communities. The old paradigm tends to focus on the 'characteristics' of perpetrators and identifies solutions in terms of crime control, community safety/cohesion agendas.

The Bringing Hope paradigm, however, focuses on the impact of the realities and moral panic around guns, knives and gangs on public and social health. Here communities are understood as 'victims' of these things and the circumstances that encourage them. Ananias and other believers were afraid of Paul because of his murderous reputation, but allowed him space to change. This underlines a central focus within restorative justice, the willingness 'to repair the harm done to the victim' and for the victim to be willing to accept the acts of reparation. In these terms, where the community is a victim in itself, then repairing the harm done should focus on healing and redemption, not retribution and punishment.

We are all mindful of the need for a radical and dynamic model, which would lead to a process of positive change given the crisis we face in our communities. It is within this context that we again acknowledge that God is in the business of transforming lives through the work and actions of those who trust and obey his words.

The poem below is a challenge to all of us to seriously consider how valid our prayers and expressions are if they are not also validated by practical activities to bring life-transforming and attitude-reforming hope to this world.

ENDNOTES

¹ EH Peterson, *The Message: New Testament* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 1994).

LISTEN CHRISTIANS

I was hungry,
And you formed a humanities club,
And you discussed my hunger.
Thank you.

I was imprisoned,
And you crept off quietly
To your chapel in the cellar,
And prayed for my release.

I was naked,
And in your mind

You debated the morality of my appearance.

I was sick,
And you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was homeless,
And you preached to me
Of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was lonely,
And you left me alone
To pray for me.

You seem so holy;
So close to God.
But I'm still hungry,
and lonely,
and cold.

So where have your prayers gone?
What have they done?
What does it profit a man
To page through his book of prayers,
When the rest of the world is crying for his help?

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