

## Gang intervention must address source

**P**ASADENA'S remarkable rise in shooting murders has closely touched the people at Harambee Christian Family Center.

One young man on our staff was the friend of a man shot on Washington Boulevard in broad daylight earlier this year. A child at our school saw the dead body of another young man killed in August. A few weeks before that, two men were shot dead in a driveway just south of our center. Exotic SWAT vehicles rumbled up our street that same morning, serving a warrant at a different location. Two weeks ago, an early evening shooting occurred on the street in front of our center.

Being so close to this much violence in a short span of time, I'm interested in fresh approaches to dealing with gang-related challenges. Make no mistake: The majority of the killings have involved gang members on at least one side of the gun. Any actions that seek to address youth violence in the community must have gang intervention at the core of the approach, or we are just fooling ourselves.



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And it must be intervention, not just suppression.

According to the Los Angeles-area Advancement Project's strategy on citywide gang activity reduction, "law enforcement officials now agree that they cannot arrest their way out of the gang violence crisis and that their crime suppression efforts must be linked to competent prevention, intervention and community-stabilizing investment strategies."

But doing gang intervention is not as easy as it sounds. In an area youth workers meeting following last December's shooting

across from King's Villages that started Pasadena's present wave of violence, one youth worker pointed out that past initiatives to stem youth violence have the curious quality of helping everyone except the very gang-involved young people who are most unreachable and most likely to commit crime.

I've noticed the same thing. Pasadena has many good groups serving a wide range of youth and family needs primarily focused on prevention when it comes to gangs. I count Harambee as one of those groups. But there are precious few outreach efforts to those already involved in gangs.

The reasons for the deficit include the difficulty in finding and funding people who are not only effective, but also credible to both gangs and the community at large. I've also heard, at community meetings, an underlying tone that suggests, "You can't win them all," and therefore we are somehow justified in writing off the gang-involved. There are also those who are victims of gang crimes, who have suffered at the hands of gang members, and don't have any special affection or

interest in the well being of people in gangs.

I have some understanding and sympathy for these different positions. This type of work is simply very hard to do. In many areas of life, you can't win them all and it is wise to cut your losses. And I'm not about to force any victim to simply dismiss the injustice committed against them.

But these cannot be the principles on which we approach the situation. As a Christian, I claim to follow a savior who left 99 sheep so that he could find one sheep that was lost. Common sense says that if you reached 99 out of a 100, you did a good job, and by the way "you can't win them all." But I profess beliefs that don't let me off the hook that easy. In my own life, I believe I have benefited at the hands of people who shared the mentality of leaving the 99 to go after the one.

Separate from an approach based on faith, we can remember that those in gangs are people, too. I remember the first time, many years ago, when I saw a gang member at the supermarket, buying diapers for his baby. I

think of gang-involved people I know who are tired of the killings and want a different life for their children than the life they have had.

And yet I do not view the gang-involved with rose-colored glasses. Concern and outreach for individuals in gangs must be balanced with the simple, hard fact that many gang members are presently engaged in criminal activities that hurt many innocent people. Many, myself included, will not be pleased if we make outreach efforts to gang members only to find we have inadvertently opened the door to a range of unintended consequences that make the problem worse.

Addressing gang violence, in a way that stems violence and offers alternatives for those among the gang-involved that wish for something different, is going to be very difficult. That's why we need to focus early and intentionally. Throughout California, city governments and community-based organizations are applying for funds made available by the governor to address the rise in gang violence. In my hometown of Pasadena, officials are crafting

long-range plans that address youth violence and also the broader quality of life for young people and families in violence-impacted communities.

We are in a moment where creative approaches can have a significant impact. In Pasadena, it may mean things like expanding the number of funded gang interventionists from one to many, making sure that outreach goes to Latino gangs and not just to black gangs, and funding those interventionist positions over a multi-year period, not just year to year. Across the state, it may mean requiring results score cards that measure direct impact on the gang-involved, and not settling for initiatives that only focus on preventing youth from joining gangs.

However plans take shape, let's keep our eyes on the ball. The present wave of violence in my community, and similar communities, relates largely to those involved in gangs. Solutions must have outreach and intervention to the gang-involved at their core.

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