Gangs and God: How churches are reaching out

by Jason Byassee in the September 18, 2007 issue

At a recent gathering of ministers, I asked a colleague what was new at her parish. “I’ve been doing a lot with gang ministry,” said Maria Edmonds, a pastor in a small town in the mountains of North Carolina. “I’m trying to get gang members into the church. They’re not accepted anywhere else. So I figure Jesus would have me spend time with them.”

There are few images in our culture more frightening than that of the gang member: tattooed, armed, as likely to shoot you as look at you—as part of the member’s demand for “respect.” Millions of dollars are spent each year at the federal level and in cities like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago to combat gang activity and reduce gang-related violence. And as the North Carolina pastor found out, gangs are also a feature of life in many small towns.

How does the church minister to youths in street gangs and to neighborhoods marked by their presence? An even more daring question: Is there something the church can learn from the gangs? (There was a time when the church was reviled as dangerously antisocial because it provided an alternative identity and community.) From urban to rural settings, I found that churches are meeting the challenge of the gangs in a variety of creative ways. While political leaders and police focus largely on suppressing gangs, church groups are stepping in to offer alternative forms of community.

Pastor Edmonds wasn’t seeking to start a ministry to gang members. She just listened, and found out that it was what kids in Franklin needed. Franklin is located in traditionally poor Appalachian country, though an influx of retirees and vacationers is changing the economic picture. The town’s location between Atlanta and Charlotte makes it a highway stop for drugs as well, especially crystal meth.

Early in her tenure as associate pastor at First United Methodist Church, a teenager in the church named Robin died unexpectedly while alone at a friend’s house. He

was the leader of a skateboarding gang named Toxic. The circumstances of his death raised questions. Church members pondered what went wrong, what they could have done differently and what they should do now.

Skateboarders are considered a public nuisance in Macon County. Skating on public property is against the law—a law that skaters break because they see their activity as no different from, say, playing basketball. But police in Franklin stop a kid simply for *carrying* a skateboard; he might, after all, be about to break the law.

Edmonds had been trying to befriend the skater kids before Robin's death, bringing Kool-Aid to the places where they skated. After his death, she sensed their need for a special kind of service. She purchased a skateboard that Robin had put on layaway, placed it at the front of the sanctuary and encouraged the kids to write farewell messages to Robin on it. A hundred kids came for the unconventional memorial service. Many were in a church sanctuary for the first time. Edmonds let them tell their stories and "have their time with this space." She spoke briefly to them about heaven as a skate park.

Edmonds suggested that the church offer the kids a space to gather and skate. Ramps were built, a church member with an insurance agency supplied the needed coverage, and The Walk was born. Once a week kids gather to skate, hang out, eat together and take part in a devotional. Since this is Appalachia, many kids need further help: clothes, dental care and adult guidance—and parishioners provide it. Some kids count on The Walk for their most regular meal of the week (one brought his elderly grandfather for the food the night I was there). Some almost always wear sweatshirts and T-shirts from The Walk—they don't have many other clothes. This year, for the first time, kids from The Walk will graduate from high school on time. Others have found permanent jobs with the church's help.

Edmonds also hosts an annual "blessing of the skateboards" service in the church. She wears a black robe (black was the former gang's color), thanks God for the gifts of skating and community and anoints the boards with oil. Church members have knitted backpacks for kids to carry their skateboards in so they won't be harassed by police. While we were outside the church's youth house, Edmonds pointed out the lineup of skateboards marked with Bible verses and The Walk's symbol. "These used to say 'F-you.' Now look at them."

Edmonds explains The Walk's success as a matter of offering "what each gang yearns for: community." Kids yearn for identity, and if they are told they are not welcome, they will create societies of welcome for themselves. Edmonds tries to offer love "without strings attached."

Toxic has essentially been replaced by The Walk—or to put it more accurately, it has been baptized and reborn. The basically wholesome activity of skateboarding was taken into the church, and its practitioners came with it. "We're not just entertaining kids," she says. "We're transforming them." Though Edmonds was slated to move to another church this summer, the gang ministry is expected to continue.

A different kind of gang ministry was developed at Spencer Memorial United Methodist Church in Charlotte. The neighborhood around the church was made up largely of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia. The second-generation immigrant kids lived between two cultures, and the neighborhood became a "fertile recruiting grounds for gangs," said Chris Henson, who headed Spencer Outreach in the early 1990s. Another factor contributing to the growth of gangs: sheer boredom. The area had begun to gentrify, and even the YMCA didn't want street kids in its gym. So there was nothing to do. "Involvement with the gangs seemed exciting," Henson said. "Adolescent impulsiveness meets opportunity."

The church reached out by offering activities almost daily: sports, outings, worship, meals, life skills classes, counseling. Rules were strict: no gang colors, no "representing" (hand signs), nothing illegal. "Patting down a Laotian Crip so he could play ball on Tuesday morning was no fun," Henson said. But the ministry was successful. Many of the teenagers went on to four-year colleges, and many others left the gangs when they came to see that gang life "led to an early death." Hanson admits that as Asians the kids in the neighborhood may have been able to avoid some of the barriers that racism sets up for blacks and Hispanics.

Henson found something else in the neighborhood: wannabe gang members. "Many kids claimed to be Crips —but when pressed they turned out to be no more Crip than I am." Real gang members don't want to draw attention to themselves: it hurts business. But the Internet, movies and television publicize gang colors and signs and make gang life look glamorous.

Spencer Outreach was closely tied to Henson, and when he moved on to seminary and his own parish ministry, the gang ministry at Spencer folded up. This sort of

high-impact work is difficult to maintain over time, and many former gang members who've made good have no intention of looking back, even to help others in similarly dire straits.

Darren Ferguson found a way to baptize the good in gangs through music. Ferguson first started working with gang members while he was incarcerated at Sing Sing prison in New York in the early 1990s. New York Theological Seminary provides an innovative education program in the prison, and as part of that program Ferguson was asked to tell his story to young fellow prisoners. He found that he was an effective speaker. Futhermore, he had been imprisoned with a key leader of the Bloods, a man named Wayne-O, and that connection gave him instant credibility with his listeners.

Ferguson sought to appeal to kids in their own language: "You recognize their culture, see clues for why they may be involved" in gangs. His time behind bars enabled Ferguson to understand the deep connection between prison and gang cultures, which is magnified by hip-hop culture. "Glasses without lenses, sneakers without laces, pants hanging down kids' butts—that's all from prison, where you can't have anything that can become a weapon," like glass, string or belts.

Upon his release from prison, with a master's degree in hand, Ferguson began working for NYTS's Project Uth Turn and was sent to historic Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem to be youth pastor, where he continued to try to reach at-risk youths. He initiated a hip-hop worship service—something called Friday Night FLAYVA (an acronym for Freedom, Love, and Abundant Youth Victory Alliance).

In Ferguson's view, a turning point in the ministry was the funeral of an Abyssinian Church youth, a member of the Bloods who was shot execution-style only three blocks from the church. It was "the first opportunity as a community to bring people together," and the building was "packed like Easter." At first, things didn't look promising. The Bloods bathed the church in red, the gang's color; they brought red roses and wore red bandanas. They made gang signs over the body. One gang member made the sign of the cross, and that led Ferguson to begin his sermon by saying: "Do you know what that sign you made is? Do you understand what it symbolizes? It's about sacrifice, not murder. You say to 'keep it real'? I'm keeping it real with you." Gang activity has markedly declined since the early 1990s in Harlem. Ferguson remembers that funeral as a turning point for the neighborhood as well.

This effort to “keep it real” is a mark of his ministry. “You can rap ‘Amazing Grace’ and have it mean so much more than a hymn,” said Ferguson. “To reach people you have to speak their language, and ours is hip-hop.”

Ferguson has continued this sort of preaching with Luke 4:18 Ministries and in an interim pastorate at Mott Haven Reformed Church in the Bronx. The Luke 4:18 group leads hip-hop worship services all over the city, usually with Ferguson preaching. The ministry also includes mentoring, tutoring, mediation, legal advocacy and, naturally, gang intervention. Ferguson’s ministry has been recognized: he serves as youth director for Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, and he received the first ever Amos Award from Sojourners/Call to Renewal. His work is part of a tide of hip-hop ministries, evidenced by books such as *The Hip-Hop Church* (InterVarsity) and *The Gospel Remix*: *Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (Judson). There is talk in some Roman Catholic circles of creating a hip-hop mass.

Similar to what happened with The Walk and Spencer Outreach, Luke 4:18 has become a gang surrogate, baptizing an aspect of culture so that it can be turned in a life-giving direction. (Luke 4:18 also tries to drown part of that culture—Ferguson detests the misogyny and profanity of most secular hip-hop music.) “Gangs offer family, protection, something bigger than me, and belonging,” Ferguson said. He presents the pursuit of excellence in music as an antidote to the “cult of mediocrity” that he sees in street youths today.

Chicago has long been an epicenter for gang activity. Violence has claimed the lives of some three dozen Chicago public school students so far in 2007, and in many cases the kids were caught in the gangs’ crossfire.

Gary Slutkin, founder of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention and an epidemiologist with decades of experience in public health, looks at gang violence as a type of social pathology: those who grow up surrounded by such violence often fail to question it. So he founded the center and its antiviolence campaign, CeaseFire. As a beneficiary of state funding (some $6 million last year), CeaseFire has a visible presence in the city, placing ads on public transit featuring cute children who plead, “Don’t shoot, I want to grow up.” (However, the state is planning to eliminate funding in 2008.)

Robin Hood, pastor of Redeemed Outreach Ministries, is a coordinator for CeaseFire in the Englewood neighborhood. He says gang ministry used to start and end with a

funeral after someone had been shot. “When the church would move in after a homicide, we couldn’t even get people to come out of their homes.”

Hood knows this mentality personally. When his own brother was murdered in 2003, the community’s response was mostly one of fear. But in 2005, after his cousin was killed at a gas station, 1,000 people came out for a vigil. “It was an unbelievable feeling in our family compared to just a few years before.”

Hood stresses the need to build relationships in the neighborhood. CeaseFire hosts resource fairs to promote peaceful activities and jobs for youths, and it helps churches and mosques become safe havens to which someone can retreat if threatened—or, more riskily, if they feel inclined to threaten someone else. Churches like Hood’s try to hold revival meetings in potential hot spots “at least once a week.”

The most innovative aspect of CeaseFire is its use of “violence interrupters”—former gang members who use their old street contacts to sense when and where violence is likely to take place and try to stop it beforehand. For example, they will immediately speak to the friends of a murder victim in an effort to head off retaliation. Hood praises the interrupters: “They go to places, by God’s grace, that I can’t even get into.”

When a tragedy does occur, the neighborhood knows that it can call on the members of CeaseFire. “I can get hundreds of people out on the streets within 24 hours,” Hood said.

Another ministry in Chicago seeks to prevent kids from ever getting involved in gangs. Gaylord Thomas traces the origins of the Simba Circle to the riots that followed the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. The World and National councils of churches hosted a number of “listening posts” afterward to reflect on the violence and its racial overtones. At one of them, Thomas remembers, a blue-clad member of the Crips asked church leaders to “help us find our spiritual selves.”

The Simba Circle has worked to do just that for the past 14 summers. It is a camp for African-American kids who are recruited through Lutheran churches in cities like Chicago and Detroit. This past summer some 100 youngsters attended camp at Tony Lake in New Era, Michigan. Campers are required to pay $300 themselves to make sure that they and their families are committed to the camp; grant money and donations provide the remaining $300-plus. “The best thing is just getting them out of that environment,” Thomas says, so that they can listen to birdsongs rather than

gunfire.

Simba, as the world learned from the movie *The Lion King*, means “young lion.” Thomas has written an Afrocentric curriculum based on scripture and the seven principles of Kwanzaa. His materials list “The Deadly Eleven Misconceptions of Manhood,” among them the street myths that boys become men when “you sell drugs,” or “you produce a baby,” or “you beat up another brother.” Simba Circle seeks to replace these false rituals of adulthood with true ones. For example, in the final days of camp, each camper meets with the “Council of Elders,” which examines the progress of each Simba toward manhood. “When else do three grown black men listen to them?” Thomas asks. “When do these kids hear from grown black men that they’re loved?”

Daily camp rituals include the pouring out of libations, “linking us with both our Creator and ancestors.” These and other rituals seek to encourage an Afrocentric and Christian sense of manhood and self-respect. And as with other camps, physical activities like sports, rafting, dancing and singing are crucial. “The only real alternative to violence is the arts,” Thomas insists.

A completely different perspective on gangs was voiced by Che Serna, a streetwise Chicagoan who is a member of a liberal mainline church. I had been told that Serna knows a lot about ministry to gangs, so I arranged to meet him. At his suggestion we met at an Ethiopian restaurant. I asked him how he had learned about gangs.

“Well, I’m a Latin King,” he said. I almost choked on my lamb shank.

Serna doesn’t see gangs as something to be saved from. When I described various gang ministries to him, he scoffed. “Sure, you can throw a basketball at us,” he said mockingly.

Serna is nothing like the stereotypical gang member: he is not tattooed, he is blazingly intelligent, he could probably do anything he wants with his future. But for Serna, the gang is his church. The Almighty Latin King Nation has its own prayers and liturgies and a distinct theology of sorts. Gang members respect the church as well: conversion is one of the few respected means of leaving a gang. Gang members have plenty of reasons to reach out to Christ: “Many accept Christ in the joint, or on the pavement after being shot,” he says. “There’s a yearning for the church to be there.” And for Serna, it *has* been there: after he was arrested at a peace demonstration in New York in 1998, members of his denomination visited him

and helped get him released. All the same, Serna has a few quibbles with the institutional church, pointing to the reaction of a Baptist church on Chicago's West Side to a neighborhood shooting: "They spent $10,000 for a wrought-iron fence." He notices the way church members look askance at folks like him when the offering plate comes around. "I don't need your money," he explains. "And maybe if someone takes it, they do need it."

Serna traces the rise of contemporary gangs to the civil rights era, when ethnic communities began to protect themselves against white violence. His account parallels that of Reymundo Sanchez in *My Bloody Life*: *The Making of a Latin King* (Chicago Review Press). That book's descriptions of police brutality and of the racism of white Chicagoans are enough to make gang membership understandable. Sanchez reports on the Gaylords, a white gang whose existence prompted Puerto Ricans on the West Side to form the Latin Kings. Serna also mentions a gang named the Papes—an acronym for "Protect our people, eliminate spics"—and tells me of the racism on the part of teachers and administrators that led him to drop out of school. "Being born brown in Chicago" is risky stuff, he says.

But to Serna the Kings are more than a vehicle of self-defense. He reads me a set of e-mails that he got from a fellow gang member serving in the army in Iraq, and his voice becomes tender, moved at the writer's expressions of love for fellow Kings. "Where else do you find love like that?" he asks.

Sanchez wrote his exposé in hopes of persuading people to leave the gangs. But Serna is proud of his membership. "It's no different from white Italian and Irish gangs that still exist today as social clubs," he maintains.

Serna said his denomination is considering ordaining him as a sort of minister-at-large to the gangs. A church official confirmed to me that such discussions are indeed under way, and he echoed Serna's prediction that one day the Latin Kings might be regarded the way the Irish Clowns are—as merely a civic organization, with little connection to its violent past.

Serna insists that not all the money controlled by street gangs is drug-related (he himself works full-time at OfficeMax). He regards gang violence more as an aspect of bravado and youthful machismo than anything intrinsic to gang life. Sure, he admits, kids get "beat into" gangs and "beat out" if they leave. But is that all that different, he asks, from college fraternities? Serna says he doesn't understand the opprobrium

heaped on street gangs, in view of the way the Italian mafia is glamorized in film and on TV, and the way Irish Americans filled the coffers of Sinn Fein until very recently. Some of his Kings brothers are involved with drugs and other illegal activities, he acknowledged, but that's not the gang's purpose. Anyway, adds Serna, violence in gangs is learned behavior—learned from the brutal tactics of the Chicago Police Department.

There will always be gangs, Serna contends, because there will always be racism. And as long as there are gangs, Serna wants to be in one, working for peace. The denominational official I spoke with vouched for him: "Violence has been averted because of his ministry," he said. Serna asked me: "Who do you think Jesus would be hanging out with if he were here now?"

Father Greg Boyle would agree with Serna that violence is learned and that Jesus would hang out with gang members. But he rejects the idea that gangs are in any way a force for good.

"I've buried 154 human beings," Boyle noted. To suggest that the Latin Kings are going to be transformed into something like the Kiwanis is like saying the Ku Klux Klan can change its ways, he said. "And if anyone thinks differently, I'll look them straight in the eye and tell them they don't know what they're talking about." If the most common response to gangs is vilification, the opposite end of the spectrum is romanticization. "This is not Northern Ireland," remarked the priest.

Boyle never intended to get into gang ministry. Upon returning from working with base communities in Bolivia in the 1980s, he told his Jesuit superiors that he wanted to learn Spanish and minister among the poor. They sent him to Dolores Mission in Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, one of the poorest parishes in the nation. And one of the bloodiest.

Boyle started by getting to know members of the neighborhood's eight gangs that were shooting at each other. He found that what gang members need most is love and jobs. He visited gang members in jail after their supposed brothers had long since lost interest in them, bringing them toiletries and words of encouragement. He remembered their birthdays. And when they got out, he had amassed enough clout with them to ask them to distance themselves from the gang—for example, to stop "tagging" (painting gang graffiti in public spaces).

For people who rarely received affection from or even knew their biological fathers, Boyle offered something powerful. “If gangs are places of conditional love,” he explains, “the antidote is unconditional love. Life in community.” Eventually Boyle’s ministry led to the founding of Homeboy Industries, which finds and helps create jobs for former gang members. (The Homeboy story has been told by Celeste Fremon in *G-Dog and the Homeboys*, published by University of New Mexico Press.)

Fremon describes funerals of slain gang members at which Boyle insisted that the dead young man would want his mourners to leave gangbanging behind—as the congregation squirmed uncomfortably. When I met with him, he repeatedly interrupted our conversation to ask a young man is our presence whether he had been smoking dope earlier in the week. The youth denied it, but without much conviction. Boyle agreed to trust him, but reminded him that no one could work at Homeboy while doing drugs. “Your two beautiful daughters deserve more,” he said. “No child ever says, ‘I’m so proud of my dad, he smokes bud every night!’”

Boyle can also take more dramatic action. Fremon describes how Boyle once waded into a gang argument that threatened to become bloody, shouting, “I love you guys so much, but I *hate* your neighborhoods.” The gang members dispersed. Fremon quotes one former gang member named Rebel who left gang life when Boyle stepped between his gun and those of his enemies and said, “You’re going to have to shoot me first.”

Gang violence in Los Angeles was especially bad in the early 1990s. There were 800 gang-related homicides in 1992. Boyle seems to have mellowed somewhat not only with age, but because the gang violence has lessened. However, he says that judging by the rhetoric of L.A. politicians, you would not know that there is less violence.

“Everyone wants to out-tough everyone else,” he says, voicing his suspicion that politicians exaggerate the gang problem in hopes of getting funding. “I really don’t have much hope on the national level,” he says, though U.S. senators are on the phone with him regularly to discuss details of gang-fighting legislation. “The response has to be local.”

Homeboy’s impact is definitely local. It serves 1,000 former gang members every month. Soon it will move from East L.A. to a $12 million facility in downtown (gang neutral) L.A., where non-Latino gang members won’t hesitate to seek it out. The

move will increase the agency's size seven times and allow it to serve all of Los Angeles County. It does all this without much in the way of government funding, which "always has strings attached," Boyle commented.

Homeboy Industries operates a silkscreen printery, a bakery and the Homegirl Cafe, where female former gang members work. It offers job placement, legal aid, counseling (two trained professionals work full-time) and classes on anger management and life skills. Many kids come to Homeboys straight from jail. As ex-cons they can't get an ID card or public aid and have trouble getting a job and a place to stay. That's when intervention is most likely to help.

Homeboy's most dramatic ministry might be Ya 'Stuvo (a slang version of "it's over" in Spanish), a tattoo removal service. Gang membership is frequently marked by tattoos, often in prominent places on the body. For active gangbangers, the tattoos symbolize that they're in the gang for life. I saw several young men with tattoos across their forehead or the bridge of their nose or on their ears. Who would ever hire them?

Homeboy tries to find employers who *will* hire them, even if only on a trial basis or with the agency paying the salary. In the meantime, the kids line up to have their tattoos removed by doctors (who donate their time). Though the treatment is time-consuming and painful, there are 2,000 names on the waiting list.

I saw a group of shackled kids from juvenile jail waiting their turn: they have started to get their tattoos removed while still in detention. Gabriel Hinojos, a former gang member nicknamed Spider, who has had 35 treatments over four years, still has tattoos covering his neck, forearms and legs—but the ones on his forehead and ears are gone. "You can tell what I look like now," he boasts.

Homeboy's secret lies partly in Boyle's audacity. He hires kids even when he isn't sure he can pay them and puts them to work. Homeboy has the cleanest windows and floors and the most well-staffed phone bank I've ever seen. "He hired eight more people the other day," his development consultant, Mona Hobson, told me. "And I'm supposed to figure out how to pay them." During my time with Boyle, he's interrupted by a call from one of the homeboys, who asks for help with rent. Boyle puts him off: "I'm $200 overdrawn; call me next week." He hangs up, sighs and then says to me, "Somehow the money always comes in."

Major foundations have stepped up to help Homeboy Industries. A representative from the Liz Claiborne Foundation, a supporter, was there when I visited. But Boyle still deals in the small stuff. When a kid calls collect from the train station, Boyle sends out an intern with ten $1 bills for him.

Boyle's work is rooted in his Jesuit vocation and training. "We're called to be in the world what God is: lovingkindness." When I ask how he never runs out of love for these love-hungry kids, his answer sounds simple: "It's the Christ in me worshiping the Christ in you."

Boyle understands that he is a father figure to many youths. He also knows that they not only need a father figure, but need to know that they are loved as sons. He tells me the story of a phone call that woke him the night before.

"This huge burly tattooed ex–gang member called me at 3 a.m.," he recalls, and goes on to recount the conversation: "'We all call you Pops,' he said through sobs. 'But I need to know: am I also your son?' I said, 'I'm not your biological father, but if I were, I'd be the luckiest man alive.'"

While we talked we were constantly interrupted both by media people (CNN Español phoned Boyle; Anderson Cooper of CNN and *Reader's Digest* have recently done profiles) and by the homeboys, who line up all day to speak to the priest. Some have a specific problem (they need a prescription filled, new glasses, help with a drunk-driving charge), and some just want to connect with him. He has time for each of them. Sometimes he is talking to several youths in his office while talking to another on the phone and making hand gestures to someone else beyond the glass walls.

Every young man I talked with declared that Boyle had changed his life. "I'd be dead or in jail without him," Spider says. He joined a gang at 14, got two strikes under California's three-strikes-and-you're-out rule, and then turned to Homeboy to get out of trouble. "I named my son 'Little G.'" (for Greg).

Angel Esparza, a former drug dealer, was shot eight times and left for dead. Boyle visited him every day, helped him learn to walk again and gave him work at Homeboy. Says Angel: "He's our dad. We call him Pops."

Homeboy even tries to pair former gang rivals together in its various industries. "It's like a 3-for-1," Boyle explains: "They get a job, they disconnect from gang life, and they learn to love enemies."

Homeboy, The Walk, Luke 4:18 and other such ministries are providing hope in extraordinary ways, but they spring from the actions of ordinary people. Greg Boyle seems like any jovial Catholic priest. Maria Edmonds started the ministry in North Carolina just by giving Kool-Aid to thirsty skaters. Che Serna is a surprisingly normal guy, trying to follow Jesus in ways that surprise the rest of us. Their accomplishments confirm Father Boyle’s wisdom: the best response to gangs is not to vilify them or romanticize them, but to be the church for and with them.