

A Paradigm Shift

A Proposal to Engage Street Groups or “Gangs” As a Potential Resource for Safe Communities, Justice Making and Community Building

(From the Beloved Community Center and the Pulpit Forum of Clergy in Greensboro, NC)

Preamble:

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing any family, community or city is the challenge of modeling, guiding and nurturing the growth of children and teenagers into responsible adults. It appears that we as a community are not doing well with this undertaking, especially as it relates to low income youth and children of color. There comes a time when it becomes important for us to reexamine and perhaps reframe our basic approach to making progress in this area, an area of deep concern to the whole community. We are convinced that the time has come for our city to make such a change. With humility and hope, we offer this proposal as a step toward making that change.

Background and Recent Developments:

It is apparent that some of the major factors contributing to the current plight of youth are the breakdown of the family, the disintegration of extended family networks, and the related loss of a sense of community responsibility, nurturance and mutuality. While an explanation of why such breakdowns are occurring is beyond the scope of this proposal, we believe that some of the contributing factors include poverty and racism, combined with consumerism, materialism, individualism, and the absence of a positive community spirituality and ethos. At any rate, we are convinced that it will take the entire community engaged in a *“learning and doing process”* to turn this situation around.

It is in the spirit of finding a way that **works** and that involves the whole community that we advance this proposal. Although not explicitly spelled out, inherent in this proposal is a call for the strengthening of families, neighborhoods and the cultivation of a spirit of community that seeks to affirm, nurture and care for all of its members, especially those historically abused and most marginalized.

In late June of 2008 we were privileged to meet a group called the ***Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN)***. The Inca (leader) of the group – King J (Jorge Cornell) – shared with us his desire to cultivate peace among “gangs” or street groups, to promote greater unity between Black and Brown people and to engage the prejudices and injustices, especially as experienced by Black and Brown people.

Since June, we have worked closely with the ALKQN, often under very stressful conditions, and have found the group (and Jorge) to demonstrate a considerable degree of stability, consistency and integrity. We accept their view that they have renounced stealing, drug use and initiating violence. They have, however, maintained the right of self-defense, a position with which the overwhelming majority of citizens in our city and nation agree. With encouragement, support and guidance, we believe that the ALKQN can become a valuable asset in helping our community unite other street groups (gangs) and to participate with the larger community in reorienting and reeducating itself to do a better job of “modeling, guiding, nurturing and facilitating children, teenagers and young adults toward becoming responsible contributing citizens of our city and nation.”

Under the leadership of Jorge Cornell, together with the Beloved Community Center and the Pulpit Forum, representatives of five groups broadly classified as street “gangs” and two religious organizations – namely Christians and Muslims – held a most productive meeting in August. The meeting produced a one page agreement among the organizations that called for all the groups to join in peace, to renounce initiating violence against each other and the community, and to embrace several projects through which joint work would take place(see attached document *Towards A Peace Agreement Among Gangs*).

The police, probably reflecting the opinions and culture of most in the community, expressed that it did not trust the motives of the ALKQN. Therefore, our efforts at peace and justice making were met with what police describe as “suppression” tactics toward the ALKQN. This suppression policy as we have seen it in actual practice has resulted in provocation, stretching of legal limits, and putting into place a ***two tier*** law enforcement system, one for “first” class citizens and another for “second” class citizens, or “gang members.”

Our information shows that 98% of validated gang members are people of color. If this is true, the implications of this policy are historically amoral, practically counter-productive, and culturally insulting. There exist great amounts of information that can support this claim when and if that becomes necessary. Suffice it to say here, that the lessons of history should not be lost on us when it comes to promoting a system based on first and second class citizens (or people), no matter how tempting such a construct may appear at the moment.

The two tier system has, in our opinion, already resulted in a kind gang/poverty/people of color-related prejudice. Additionally, it has also objectively negated the well established principle of everyone being viewed equal before the law. The suppression approach with all its implications is likely to create more and more bitterness, confusion and resentment by a larger and larger sector of poor people (and especially people of color) towards law enforcement personnel, while actually generating more crime. Our neighborhoods, communities and, indeed, our city will be thrust along the path of becoming a divided, quasi-military zone.

We grant that the suppression policy may be well intended; we are persuaded, however, that it cannot solve the unacceptable levels of crime, drug use and violence; in fact, this policy is likely to intensify the problem. If this is true, then what should we do? How do we re-focus the thinking and actions of our entire community?

A Paradigm Shift Is Required:

Based on both our convictions about the essence of human nature and our experience over the years and especially our experience over the last six months, we believe it is important for the community to change its orientation towards the potential of street groups or gangs. Instead of viewing gangs as only a problem that must be erased or dismantled, *we believe that gangs should be viewed by our city as a potential resource for safe communities, justice making and community building.*

To actualize this shift in approach, we suggest that we organize our work into four parallel, concurrent, and overlapping tracks. The four tracks are:

1. Clergy/religious institutions, college students, “gang” and neighborhood track
2. City/government and Police/law enforcement track
3. Public education/schools, and retired teachers/community elders track
4. Collaboration/communication and community synthesis track.

Track 1- Clergy/religious institutions, college students, “gang” and neighborhoods:

The primary work of track one will be to:

- a.) Revive the work initiated in August of 2008 of creating a space and atmosphere for discussion among “gangs” that promotes peace and facilitates participation in wholesome activities that advances their own future and also the safety, beauty and general welfare of their neighborhoods.
- b.) Engage together when possible the injustices and prejudices that confront low income and people of color neighborhoods in which they live.
- c.) Work on creative ways to find and/or grow work. Particular attention will be placed on work that not only provides an income but also builds up and improves the community.
- d.) Recruit churches to work with youth groups, including Love Youth Faith Empowerment (LYFE) and RELAY.
- e.) We are convinced that as street groups and youth in general begin to meet and work with each other, along with neighborhood leaders and city officials, new ideas and proposals will emerge that will be much richer and more doable because they are tied into the base of the community.

Track 2 – city government and Police/law enforcement

The paradigm shift that underlies our approach has profound implications and will be challenging for everyone. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be for police officers and members of street “gangs” as they are currently in the most confrontational, adversarial posture. Therefore, before we go further, we want to state what we hope are some shared views and core assumptions.

First, there is an unacceptable level of crime and violence in our community. We are also aware of extensive drug use, unemployment and under-employment, health and housing issues, and a number of other complicating factors that contribute to crime and anti-social behavior. Further, we are clear that some gangs or some members of gangs may not be transformed into a resource for safe communities, justice making and community building. For all these reasons and more, good law enforcement is needed and will be needed for the foreseeable future. **Nothing that we say here should be misinterpreted to mean that the law should not be rigorously enforced. Our concern is with how the law is being enforced.**

We have acknowledged the real possibility that all gangs or members of gangs may not make the changes required to play a constructive role in the quest for safe, just and caring communities. In the spirit of fairness and recognition of how deeply entrenched is the current paradigm, some police, some clergy, some teachers, and some community members may not be able to make the necessary adjustment to the proposed paradigm shift, but similarly this reality would not invalidate the proposed approach.

With these views, assumptions and suppositions clearly before us, the following particulars are suggested:

- a.) That the Greensboro Police Department abandons its “suppression” policy, which as we have stated is cultivating prejudice and objectively establishing a two tier system of law enforcement.
- b.) That the GPD enforce the law equally and without prejudice.
- c.) That the GPD work collaboratively with the community in working through the practical implications of the paradigm shift and that training is developed for all GPD officers consistent with the aforementioned approach.
- d.) That the GDP Gang Unit be radically retrained and/or dismantled.

Track 3—Public Education/Schools, Retired Teachers and Community Elders:

We have been consulting with a retired teacher with 43 years of public school experience. The discussion is in its early stages. This former assistant principal has many years of experience with street groups in the Guilford County School System. He

has also been in recent contact with one of the street groups with which we have been working. He is currently consulting with other retired teachers and elders and will be developing a relatively complete program to be shared with the School Superintendent and members of the Board of Education. At this point, we know that one component of his proposal will involve a strong emphasis on creative multi-cultural experiences for the students.

Track 4—Collaboration, Communication and Community Synthesis:

It cannot be over-emphasized that all three of the areas referenced above are very interrelated and overlapping. Collaboration and communication between the tracks is most important. As we move along with our process of “learning from our doing,” we will have to be synthesized so that our activities can be continually refined – discarding that which does not work and further developing that which does. Once we reach overall agreement, we should:

- a.) Select several representatives from each of the tracks to form a collaboration team. It is very important that the collaboration team not become an independent decision making entity. Its function will be primarily to share the progress and challenges from each of the tracks and to serve as a coordinating mechanism.
- b.) As the work progresses and as trust is being built, the collaboration team should strive to arrange meetings between parties that at this stage are unwilling to meet together.
- c.) As soon as this whole initiative is refined and agreed upon a regular meeting schedule for the collaboration team should be established.

Time For a Change! Is There Hope? What Is the Evidence?

Some might think of this proposal as fanciful and distant. Can this notion of a paradigm shift really work? The idea of churches and religious institutions, street groups and gangs, parents and neighborhood leaders, police and law enforcement, city government officials, and representatives of civil society all working together – not mainly to put our children in jail – but rather to nurture and guide our youth into becoming powerful and responsible adults. What a beautiful notion! The challenge is to **change the way we think and act. That’s the paradigm shift.**

If this idea is to work everyone has to change. Gangs and street groups have to change. Churches and neighborhood leaders have to change. The police and law enforcement have to change. Parents and educators have to change. Is all of this really possible? Can we really do this? Our answer is: **Yes We Can!**

In our faith tradition we are taught that **all things are possible for those who believe**. The challenge before us is to help each other to believe in this amazing possibility. Showing respect for each other, promoting hope and promoting new possibilities, talking things through, and working things out actually can all work. In fact, it is already working. We want to offer the following four examples as evidence.

The beating and banning of ALKQN Member Russell Kilfoil (King Peaceful) from the city operated Transportation Depot (July 2008): Two days after Jorge Cornell made the call for peace and street groups or “gangs” to work together for the uplifting of the community, the blood brother of Jorge, Russell Kilfoil, was assaulted and given a written notice banning him from the Depot for a month by security officer B.W. Meadows. Russell reported that the beating, caught on tape, was unprovoked and the banning unjustified. Russell’s initial attempt to take out a warrant was rejected by the Magistrate based on the false assumption that Meadows was a sworn Greensboro police officer. Several days later, after clarifying that Meadows worked for a city contracted security firm – the Lankford Company – a warrant was taken out on Meadows. With the help of the Beloved Community Center (BCC) Russell was put in touch with the Human Relations Commission (HRC). A thorough investigation was undertaken by the HRC that substantiated the claim by Russell that he was assaulted and unjustifiably banned from the Depot. The City Manger subsequently took steps to prevent Meadows from future work on City property. Although the warrant was taken out charging Meadows with assault in July, it was not served until after the HRC Report and broader public exposure of the incident in the *YES Weekly Newspaper*.

Lesson: Instead of retaliating violently for unjust treatment, those referred to as gang members took the lead in working with the community to address this unjust situation. A second warrant has been sworn out against Meadows by a person unrelated to and unknown by Russell. What is described above is a living example of a “gang” becoming a force for peace and justice making.

The handling of the shooting of ALKQN leader Jorge Cornell (King J) several weeks after the public call for peace (August 2008): Several weeks after calling for street groups or “gangs” to turn away from violence and unity for peace and to work with the community for justice, Jorge was shot through the back of his shoulder with the bullet coming out of his chest. He was also shot in the leg. The GPD gang unit strongly indicated that the incident was “gang” related. They also indicated that there was no cooperation from the ALKQN suggesting that members of the ALKQN fired back and they knew who the other supposed gang was. The GPD Gang Unit subsequently changed their initial public position and stated that the ALKQN was cooperating. On the night of the shooting, from his hospital bed Jorge authorized Rev. Nelson Johnson and Russell Kilfoil to publicly state that there was to be no retaliation by members of his Nation and that whoever shot him was forgiven.

Lesson: That under most stressful conditions, Jorge and the ALKQN continued to stand for and work for peace. The questions arise what role did the GPD Gang Unit play in this whole incident? Was there an interest in instigating a “gang” war? In any event, the behavior of Jorge and the ALKQN demonstrate a commitment to peace and justice making.

The de-escalation of tension at Smith High School related to harassment, a fight and subsequent suspension of Smith student and ALKQN member, Damien

Mebane(October 2008): A 15 year old Smith High School student, Damien Mebane, who was also a member of the ALKQN, was put out of school allegedly for fighting. Damien reported that he was harassed, provoked and put in the position of having to defend himself. It was also his conviction that he was identified by a GPD officer (who worked at Smith High School) as a member of a violent “gang.” The ALKQN could have retaliated against the young man who was fighting with Damien as might have been expected from a violent “gang.” Instead, Jorge asked Rev. Johnson to assist him in resolving this situation. With the help of Mayor Yvonne Johnson, a conference call was arranged between the Mayor, the new School Superintendent, the Director of the Human Relations Commission, and Rev. Johnson to share with them that a dangerous situation was developing at Smith High School that needed their attention. The Superintendent assigned Mr. Tony Watlington of his office to work with the situation. After several conversations with individuals, a meeting was arranged between Damien, Mr. Mebane, his father, Mr. Lucius Wells, Damien’s Smith High School counselor, Jorge Cornell, and Rev. Johnson. The situation was worked out to the mutual satisfaction of all parties involved. Jorge visited the Smith High campus and had a good discussion with the assistant principal. He was invited to continue to work with school officials to help keep members of his organization in school.

Lesson: A potentially dangerous school environment, as well as the possible jeopardy to the education future of several students, had developed at Smith High School. Under the leadership of Jorge Cornell and with the help of the community, the ALKQN played a constructive role in helping to de-escalate tension at Smith and to get young Damien placed on a positive educational track.

The resolution of the conflict at the Four Season Mall resulting from the expulsion of several members of the ALKQN (November 2008): On a November afternoon several members of the ALKQN went to Four Season’s Mall to pay a bill and do some shopping. Before they could pay the bill, they were met by mall security forces and questioned about their presence in the mall. In the course of the discussion the mall security personnel identified them as a “gang” and gave them a limited (I believe five minutes to leave). In a chance meeting, Terence Muhammad (TC) of the Nation of Islam happened along. He attempted to negotiate with mall security. He was then asked to leave the mall also. TC, together with Jorge Cornell, took the lead in arranging a meeting with the Mall manager. The manger, after hearing the situation, apologized and welcomed members of the ALKQN to the mall and stated that he would speak to mall security and insure that the situation would not reoccur.

Lesson: Again members of the ALKQN were mistreated. Again, they had the opportunity to react violently. Instead, they took the road of seeking to work through the injustice they had received. Again, the ALKQN demonstrated consistency in the call for peace and justice.

Summation: As we have acknowledged, there is crime; there is drug use; there is anti-social behavior. None of this justifies creating broad categories that demonize people and create second class citizens who receive second class treatment or

mistreatment. This unfortunate situation, which grows out of our history and is deeply imbedded in our culture, is intensified by the GPD policy of “suppression” of gangs. We believe this policy must be changed as part of a community paradigm shift. Further, the cases above demonstrate that, if work with properly, many gangs and gang members can become an even greater constructive force for peacemaking, justice making and community building. ***Finally, with faith in the possibility of real change, let us move forward working together to make Greensboro the Moral Capital of our state and a leader in our nation.***