

Faith groups weigh in on youth gang prevention

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Abdiwahid Osman Haji, representing the Islamic Information Centre in Ottawa, was among those who spoke at the second Faith and Gangs Roundtable event, held Feb. 9 at Rhema Ministries Ottawa on Chatelain Ave. *Submitted*

EMC News - To many, faith is a powerful thing, to some, it could be the ultimate answer to youth gang prevention in Ottawa.

The topic of crime and youth gang prevention was once again discussed and debated at the second of three Faith and Gangs Roundtable events, last month at Rhema Ministries on Chatelain Ave. The first, which took place in November, was held at the Nepean Sportsplex while the third is scheduled for early June. The sessions are the result of a joint effort between the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) and Crime Prevention Ottawa.

"The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative is a volunteer group that began three years ago as a means of bringing together groups and organizations to look at youth gang issues," explained Mike Justinich, business analyst with Crime Prevention Ottawa.

Since its formation, OYGPI has conducted reports, organized workshops and attended conferences all related to youth gangs and crime prevention.

"One of the things OYGPI completed was a literature review of programs and what kind of relationships there were with the local faith communities," Mr. Justinich continued. "We gave the document to local faith leaders and asked if they would be interested in coming together to discuss it."

This request led to the first Faith and Gangs event, which more than 30 people attended.

"We had faith leaders, police officers and members of the community on hand," Mr. Justinich said. "We gave an update on our initiative and the police gave a talk about the gang situation in Ottawa. There was enough interest for a second forum, which took place Feb. 9. Close to 65 people attended that session including Coun. Maria McRae, the media and the police."

As a result of these first two sessions, action is already being taken.

"A couple of faith groups have already begun activities in their respective communities to encourage young people to stay on the right path," Mr. Justinich said. "One of the things that came out of our research was the need for a strong mentoring presence. There are many single-mom households in Ottawa where her young boys may be struggling because they don't have a male mentor in their lives."

"The main goal of these roundtable events is to provide the faith communities the information they need to broaden their knowledge in terms of what they can be doing to improve things in their communities," he added.

As well, he said that an interesting spin-off to the roundtable events has been the cooperation experienced amongst the different faith communities.

"They have really been able to connect," he said. "Maybe the Muslim and Christian communities are well networked amongst themselves, but they do not have many opportunities to get together. There was some real excitement and energy in the room on Feb. 9. It was one of few times these groups could get together and discuss a common goal in a non-religious setting. Learning ways in which they can help young people in their communities grow up to lead positive, productive lives is something they could really come together on."

He also added that the involvement of the faith communities is only one aspect of an overall solution.

"We really see youth gangs and crime prevention as a community effort," Mr. Justinich said. "Everyone has to play a role. Research shows that people who are involved in gangs have no positive connections in their community. Human beings have a need for making connections, so they will find one. It is up to us to help them make the right ones."

According to research conducted by OYGPI, there are six priority areas in Ottawa as far as youth gang issues are concerned, running from the Bayshore and Britannia area into Foster Farm and Carlington in the west end. Other priority areas lie in the downtown area and the city's southeast end.

Mr. Justinich indicated that, of these six areas, the west and southeast priority areas are more problematic than the other four. While the gang situation in Ottawa is not nearly as problematic as it is in Toronto, Vancouver or the U.S., Mr. Justinich explained that it is important to deal with it now before it escalates. He said he also believes that the focused efforts of faith leaders in these neighbourhoods can make a positive difference in the lives of young people involved in gang activities.

For more information about the OYGPI and upcoming round table events, see www.crimepreventionottawa.ca.