

© The Catholic News & Herald, Feb. 6, 2009

Confronting a gang culture

Diocesan youth ministry takes pro-active approach to emerging problem

by KATIE MOORE

staff writer

CHARLOTTE — As times change, so too must the pastoral approach of diocesan ministries.

In the Diocese of Charlotte, the Youth Ministry Office is continually adapting to address the latest developments in its field.

The most recent effort to tackle an emerging trend affecting youth in the diocese is the addition of a gang education and prevention resource to the Diocesan Youth Ministry Handbook.

“Early last year I was contacted by members of the youth ministry team in the Diocese of Charlotte who were concerned about some of their youths and the possibility that they were affiliated with a local gang,” said Paul Kotlowski, director of diocesan youth ministry.

After researching the issue, Kotlowski realized “this is a problem that is not going to be going away.”

He talked to local police officers and attended a community education night in Guilford County.

“That was incredibly eye opening,” he said.

He then began searching for other Catholic dioceses and agencies that had written materials addressing the issue of gang involvement among youths.

But his search did not turn up any results.

“I thought, ‘somebody needs to make something,’” he said.

Kotlowski began developing a resource to educate youth leaders on the fundamentals of gangs and equip them with the tools they need to deal with the issue.

The resource addresses issues such as warning signs, gang influence and gang structure. It contains anti-gang resources, a gang presence assessment tool and a prayer to end gangs.

After sending an electronic copy of the resource to youth ministers in the diocese, Kotlowski said the overall response was one of appreciation.

“They are thankful that the diocese is taking a pro-active approach to this emerging trend,” he said.

“I thought it was a great idea to give us a tool to help us work with these teenagers,” said Jeanine Marsilia, faith formation coordinator at St. Phillip the Apostle Church in Statesville.

Marsilia was having problems with a few of the teens in the church’s faith formation program.

“We started seeing destructive behaviors in our classrooms,” she said.

A few of the youths had gang names tattooed on their hands and were wearing gang colors and bandanas to their faith formation classes.

But the biggest problem was that they were trying to recruit and intimidate other teens to join their gang.

“When you see behavior problems you need to deal with them promptly before it gets out of hand,” said Marsilia, who ended up asking the gang members not to return to the classes.

“They are kids that are lost,” she said. “They are struggling and they look to the gangs for structure.”

“Some of them still can be helped,” she added, but the real challenge is finding the right balance. “It’s hard because you don’t want it to affect the other children.”

Marsilia said the resource has been helpful because it is something she can give to the parents.

Sharon Hoilett, faith formation director at Our Lady of Consolation Church in Charlotte, also has found the resource helpful, although she hasn’t had any direct problems with gang involvement among her youths.

After receiving the resource, Hoilett requested to schedule an in-service workshop — a follow-up service offered by the diocesan Youth Ministry Office.

“We haven’t had any outward signs,” she said, but “it is something that we need to talk about with our kids.”

Hoilett said that the church has been warned by police about gangs in the neighborhood. They stressed “we should be careful with our kids because of activity that goes on in the area,” she said.

The church has responded to the warning by adjusting the weekend faith formation schedule — eliminating the wait time between Mass and classes.

As a teacher for Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, Hoilett said that she “realizes the problems the kids face in the school system.”

That was “one of the reasons I wanted someone to come out and talk to the kids,” she said. “It’s just another form of awareness.”

On the diocesan level, Kotlowski said his plan is to “continue to raise consciousness, keep channels of communication open and continue to take a pro-active stance to confront problems as they emerge.”

“The culture of gangs stands in direct contradiction to the culture of life,” he said. “We need to do whatever we can as a church to promote a culture of life, which means providing an alternative to destruction and evil.”

“If we have one kid who is in a gang, that is one too many,” said Kotlowski.

Contact Staff Writer Katie Moore by calling (704) 370-3354, or e-mail kmmoore@charlottediocese.org.

Youth Ministry is funded in part by contributions to the Diocesan Support Appeal. This year’s DSA campaign runs Feb. 1 through March 8.

WANT MORE INFO?

To view a copy of the gang education and prevention resource, go to www.charlottediocese.org/ourservices-ym.