In Cayman Islands, Adventist pastors offer at-risk youth alternative to drugs, gangs

Posted: 04 Oct 2011 09:00 PM PDT

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They aren't shirking responsibility. Ministers in the Caribbean nation are mentoring young people in the community who are vulnerable to drug abuse and gang involvement.

The Cayman Islands has seen a sharp and "unprecedented" rise in violent crime this year, said Dannie Clarke, president of the Adventist Church in the country. He and his pastoral team have observed more young people turning toward a life of crime, baited by the sense of belonging and quick money that gangs promise.

Absenent parents and few positive influences only worsen the situation, he said.

"We want to be there to support them, to put a hand on their shoulders," said Dannie Clarke, Adventist Church president for the Cayman Islands. For some churches, that means offering young people sports and social programs.

"We want to be personally connected to these guys before they reach a place where they consider doing something that can have catastrophic consequences," he said.

Through a community prayer and mentorship program launched last month, Adventists are offering an alternative to gang involvement. Pastors hold community meetings and prayer rallies once a week, where they offer counseling and support to young people "on the fringes," Clarke said. They pray for the community, law enforcement members, perpetrators and victims, and their respective families.

The pastors have observed that many young people who join gangs are really seeking "someone to respect them and validate them," Shian O'Connor told Cayman 27 news recently.

O'Connor, a pastor certified in counseling, helps monitor the group's efforts, ensuring that each pastor follows counseling best practices, Clarke said. The pastors meet weekly for on going training.

Many young people reluctant to talk to the police or other authority figures find it less threatening to speak in confidence with a pastor, Clark said.

Affected young people are already opening up. One even helped solve a string of murders. Another passed a note to Clark after a recent community meeting. "It just said, 'Please give me a call. They have my name on a hit list and I want to talk to somebody because I fear for my life,'" he said.

The church is working with the police department to provide a place where young people can request protection or aid cases in safety and confidence, Clark said. Pastors won't share any information without the young person's expressed permission, he added.

The pastors' efforts got a boost last week when Cayman Islands Premier McKeeva Bush and