

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/17/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

Most of you are likely not aware of this, but our church has been tagged multiple time (I think we're up to four or five times now) in the past couple of weeks. Tagging a church is often considered a hate crime and therefore a felony. It seems clear from the writing style of this tagging that this was done by one or several gang members at a time when no one was around to identify them. It is a way of trying to "mark territory" and claim it for one's gang. We are addressing this situation in several ways, but I think it raises the question, "Why do people join gangs?"

Often becoming involved in a gang happens out the desire to find a place to belong. We all have that basic need to belong, to be part of a group that acknowledges us and values our presence and participation. Many of those who become active in gangs do so because they do not feel that they are not accepted anywhere else. Consider the children of immigrants. At home, they speak one language, while at school they speak another. They want to fit in with their peers, but are not able or sometimes allowed to express that culture in the alternate culture of their home, while those with whom they associate during the day don't fully welcome them because of differences in speech or dress or other societal identifiers. While some are able to rejoice and thrive in dual cultural environments, others feel isolated in both places and, therefore, look for a place to belong. Many times, the place that offers that sense of belonging is in a gang.

My wife, Sandy, has a relative who became part of a gang. He was not an immigrant, but problems at home which spilled over into school relationships left him with no place where he felt like he belonged. A few people on the fringe of school began to acknowledge him and he was drawn into their gang. Fortunately, after several years as part of the gang, he was invited into a community that helped him to become safely free of the gang. It also provided him a sense of purpose as he was trained in various jobs. The support he received allowed him to reconcile with his parents and develop a community that made him feel that he was a person of worth. Today, he is married with a beautiful family and a job of significance in his city.

Some years ago, I was teaching a confirmation class at the church I served when one of the mothers came in and told me that there were three high school students carving on one of our wooden picnic tables. I quickly grabbed a camera, went out and snapped their picture. The three young men jumped up, climbed over the wall of our property, and ran. Because of the picture, the police were able to find one of the three by using the school year book at a local high school. It turns out the three had decided to start a gang and that our property would be their headquarters. I was asked to be present at the trial for the young man who was found guilty. At sentencing, I asked the judge that the he be kept out of juvenal hall and instead be assigned to do community service at our church. My rationale was that, if he interacted with us and got to know us, he would have more respect for our property. Of greater importance, we might be able to offer him a place where he could feel he belonged. The judge very much liked the idea and said that this kind of opportunity would help a lot of first offenders. Unfortunately, because of the separation of church and state, he could not sentence him to be involved with our congregation.

There are many in our communities who desperately need a place to belong. And I'm not just talking about young people. We all have this need and far too many have been told or feel that they are not

welcome. I strongly believe that this is something that churches can and need to offer to those in our neighborhoods: a place to belong. By developing relationships with those who are not connected to a congregation and then inviting them to “come and see,” as the Bible says, we can bring them into a place of welcome, connection, and acceptance. Unfortunately, the church has too often been the one who tells people why they can’t or don’t fit in and that they aren’t welcome. That’s a message I believe JESUS strongly rejects. JESUS was about building and restoring relationships. HE never told anyone that they were not welcome. As HIS followers, we need to bring GOD’S message of unconditional acceptance and love to as many as we can so that they can find what we already have found: a place where we are welcome and where we belong.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey