



# **‘THE DAMASCUS ROAD PRINCIPLES’**

by

Rev Robin Thompson

Rev Carver Anderson

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## Introduction

This paper has been written in response to the 8<sup>th</sup> round table meeting on guns, knives and gangs that took place at the Home Office on Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2007.

*Bringing Hope* is a Birmingham based Christian agency whose central focus is the personal transformation of 'broken and disaffected individuals', whose behaviours and attitudes threaten themselves, their families and communities. It uses a spiritually based paradigm to transform individuals following the teachings of Jesus Christ, to encourage and maintain hope in communities that have been broken and disengaged by forces beyond their control.

Our position is that the guns, knives and gangs Action Plan, which was circulated before the meeting is flawed and reactive.

These criticisms are not offered lightly, but with a heavy heart, in the hope of encouraging clearer thought and more effective action.

Unlike many action plans and initiatives based on theory, ideology and rhetoric, *Bringing Hope's* is based on the real, lived transformation of individuals and groups from all aspects of society and in particular those who were previously involved in gangs, drugs offences and general criminality and seven years of direct experience working with young people, their families and communities in 'at risk' places and situations. During that time, we have seen Action Plan upon Action Plan drawn up, imposed and discarded, offering at best, negligible improvements on the ground. They simply have not delivered the goods and served to demoralise those who put their hope in them and presented communities as almost beyond redemption.

Our long-term view allows us to see the recent media spotlight on guns, knives and gangs in London, Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham as the latest in long series of moral panics that focus on the 'sensational' destruction of people's lives, the breakdown in community relations and neighbourhood safety and the promotion of youth disengagement. Our perspective also allows us to see what the media rarely spotlights: that the communities in these cities have longer histories of self-help and community resistance focused around work-place, faith, social or politically-based groups and that these communities have been undermined, under funded and under attack.

In recent years, the addition of gun and knife crime to the 'usual' panics around substance misuse, violence, family crisis and gang activity have exacerbated the existing concerns of these groups to create and maintain community. The issues around guns, knives and gangs have also pulled together a range of statutory agencies, including the Police, Drug Action Teams, Connexions, and the social care, health, social, youth and probation services.

In its work with these statutory services and community groups, *Bringing Hope* has noted both worst and best practice and developed a more realistic and holistic response to the issues raised by guns, knives and gangs. The *Bringing Hope* paradigm for building strong communities draws on the best of faith-based traditions, social enterprise and public service provision. In short, it focuses on the encouragement of a regeneration and reconciliation context for the redemption of young people, families and communities, classed as 'hard to reach', 'disaffected' and 'socially excluded'.

## **Background**

At a conference in Birmingham (2004) on gun crime, Home Office minister, Caroline Flint stated:

Legislation and enforcement alone will not solve gun crime. Key to our work is building strong communities who will support our young people and divert them away from a life of crime. Although a number of positive initiatives have been developed to tackle gun crime locally, the wider picture is more mixed and an improved strategic multi-agency response is needed to meet the on-going challenge. (Flint 2004)

The minister's words highlight that current thinking is failing to provide effective solutions and that there is a need for finding new ways of meeting the challenges, new paradigms of intervention for inclusion.

It is our view that the responses suggested at the round table event were firmly located in failed solutions and offered little in terms of a realistic understanding of the real issues around enabling 'desistance' and promoting strong communities at any level.

The periodic moral panics around guns, gangs and knives put pressure on political parties to offer responses that diffuse the panic, confuse the issues and please the voters, all at once. In our view these panics define young black people as a threat to social values and interests. They are routinely presented by and in the mass media as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' and in need of greater control and incarceration.

This politics of panic proposes that it is possible to reduce gun crime by increasing streetlights, promoting video surveillance, putting more police on the streets and imprisoning perpetrators. These non-solutions are offered at the cost of delivering effective policies for increasing social justice and tackling of gun crime. With a proliferation of guns on the streets, the extension of gang affiliation, the crashing of the prison system and local services combined with the demoralisation and demotivation of community organisations over recent years, there is a need for more radical and relevant intervention.

### **The Damascus Road Experience**

One model for this process of redemption is St Paul's Damascus Road experience, recorded in Chapters 7-9 of the Book of Acts in the Bible. There are two aspects of St Paul's conversion that we would highlight.

The first is Paul's personal journey from self-righteous violence to an advocate for God's peace and justice. Acts 7-9 presents his journey from a person who 'watched the cloaks' of those who lynched a 'blasphemer', of someone who hunted down and imprisoned a religious minority, of a man so filled with hate and violence that he was blinded by his murderous mind set, to become a man of peace, perseverance and hope, sharing with, supporting and defending those he once persecuted. Paul's conversion is one of the most significant events in the Bible.

This transformation is mirrored in the lives of the people *Bringing Hope* has come in contact with during its work (see appendix). Their testimonies demonstrate a process where they too were faced with the consequences of their actions and called to account for them. Again like Paul, at this time, many are unsure what to do and are essentially helpless. They can no longer operate in their old ways, but cannot move beyond them without outside assistance and guidance.

The second aspect looks at the various responses to Paul's conversion from the established man of legal violence to the newly converted missionary. Acts 9 underlines Paul's reputation as a persecutor amongst the Christian communities. Ananias is terrified of going to visit the Pharisee, whose mission was to stamp out the new church. He is scared to heal the man who represents the sharp edge of the authorities' wish to wipe out those who threaten their power. The writer of Acts highlights the fear and suspicion that greeted Paul when he visited Christian communities. They doubted him, even after his challenges to those who previously would have supported his actions led to attempts to kill him.

As with the people in our cities, conversion brings consequences for those whose lives are changed and challenges to those around them. Paul the new convert was not freed from suspicion and threats to his life and the believers who supported and worked with him were in constant danger from the violence directed at both him and all Christians. It took time for relationships to develop and trust to grow. However, their experiences of living together through the persecution encouraged and enabled communities of believers to be established and nurtured across the Roman Empire.

### **Bringing Hope Model of Practice**

The *Bringing Hope* paradigm draws out three principles from the Damascus Road experiences of Paul and the testimonies of inner-city redemption.

#### **1. 'Each one reach one, each one teach one' Peer-Led Culturally Competent Mentoring**

Paul's experience as a Pharisee, a Roman citizen and an intellectual from Tarsus, made him uniquely qualified to debate with and disciple urbane Jews and Gentiles across the Empire. Whilst *Bringing Hope* has seen excellent work where those working with people involved in gang behaviour, it is our view that the most effective educators are peer-educators. With appropriate training and encouragement, those who have come from the street are best placed to minister to and mentor those who want to leave it.

A Christian Centred Social and Community Enterprise that works towards developing Peer Led Culturally Competent approaches and innovative support services, that will provide a strong evidence base of the transformation process that could inform a best practice model. This model of *peer-led culturally competent mentoring* offers a method of holistic intervention/prevention that is grounded in the realities of leaving the street with a greater measure of personal security and a greater probability of sustaining survival. In time, it might provide a stronger *best practice model* serving the needs of all not some young people at risk.

#### **2. 'We're all one people' Unity, Morality and Rites of Passage**

Successful peer-led mentoring takes place within and encourages the development of strong communities. Like other faiths, mainstream Christian teachings provide moral, spiritual and value frameworks for individuals distressed and disorientated by their conversions into a new personal paradigm and the temptations that can accompany it. This, of course, happens in all aspects of community life, but as the story of Paul shows, those involved in violence, whether lawful or lawless, can have much more to risk more immediately. For many gang members and ex-prisoners becoming involved in community/church life becomes the basis for accepting such risks and continuing on the journey of transformation.

The promotion of a truly integrated approach to building social and community enterprise and capacity, would remove some of the burden currently placed on public services that are failing due to limited resources and commitment. The promotion and harnessing of peer-led mentoring and local communities would renew community infrastructures and generate a formidable workforce, whose collective energy would have a significant impact in empowering young people to consider new options and choices in their lives and challenging all that stands in the way of their transformation and liberation.

### **3. Community Redemption and Reframing the Context**

Policy makers and service providers need to acknowledge what communities have been saying for years. That is, that gun crime, gangs, murder, corruption and social exclusion are human issues that cascade their effects throughout and between communities. The old paradigm tends to focus on the 'characteristics' of perpetrators and identifies solutions in terms of crime control, community safety/cohesion agendas.

The *Bringing Hope* paradigm, however, focuses on the impact of the realities and moral panics around guns, knives and gangs on public and social health. Here communities are understood as 'victims' of these things and the circumstances that encourage them. Ananias and other believers were afraid of Paul because of his murderous reputation, but allowed him space to change. This underlines a central focus within restorative justice, the willingness '*to repair the harm done to the victim*' and for the victim to be willing to accept the acts of reparation. In these terms, where the community is a victim in itself, then repairing the harm done should focus on healing and redemption, not retribution and punishment.

### **Conclusions**

From our grassroots context, we have argued that the failure to examine what young people aspire to, in terms of the 'real' opportunities available to them, has been a persistent weakness of policy making to address gun crime. Public policy makers have blinded themselves to the actual rather than proposed impact of their initiatives on the lives of young people, their families and communities.

Like the current action plan, these have promoted disillusionment and disengagement rather than individual desistance and community development.

We have argued that both public policy makers and those involved in unlawful activities that threaten public safety need to recognise the consequences of their actions and decide to change. The costs of

continued failure to do so are clear to see. Nothing less than changes of the ‘Damascus Road’ magnitude will do if major progressive inroads are to be made in individual and community lives.

This challenge to values, beliefs and current material aspirations is not an end within itself, but it provides a paradigm that exists and is being practiced every day by a number of those engaging with *Bringing Hope*.

It is not easy, but it works. It works in that it compliments current best practices and offers a model for other faith communities to lead on an agenda where the social responses are clearly failing and lacking in credibility, in spite of all the good work that is taking place.

We acknowledge the good work of groups, such as the Street Pastor initiative, Peace Alliance and similar partnerships within the statutory and voluntary sector, and we have learnt from and with them.

We are all mindful of the need for a radical and dynamic model, which would lead to a process of positive change given the crisis we face in our communities. To that end, *Bringing Hope* will continue to work according to the “Damascus Road Principles” in partnership and collaboration. It will carry on:

- Mobilising those individuals at risk by encouraging them to participate in processes drawing on the Damascus Road Principles
- Recording the stories of transforming individuals as the evidence base for the model of practice that works
- Developing Christian Social and Community Enterprise centres, providing an inclusive and integrated service approach, rooted within a community/public health paradigm based upon a foundation of the teachings of Christ
- Advocating for a more just and relevant resource distribution framework that commissions in response to outcomes as opposed to outputs. Evaluating resource allocation, service provision, accountability and outcomes according to the teachings of Christ and best public service practice.
- Working within the prison setting around the “Damascus Road” Principle across the UK.

**Reverend Robin Thompson & Reverend Carver Anderson (On behalf of *Bringing Hope*)**

## Appendix: Examples of Real Lived “Damascus Road” Experiences

### Testimonial 1

In 1991 the ‘Damascus Road Principle’ became a reality in the life of a 24-year-old man who had grown up in the hard-core environment of the ‘street life’ code. His life reflected the lived experience, which many young people are dealing with in this present time.

- He experienced 15 years of drug abuse
- From the age of 13 he was permanently excluded from all school’s in Birmingham
- He became involved in various levels of criminality and
- Participated in early gang related activity and crime

Fifteen years later, following what we have called the ‘Damascus experience’ this person is a founding member of Bringing Hope and achieved an MBA in 2006.

### Testimonial 2

This aspiring entrepreneur was arrested at least 15 times by the age of 17, had left school at 15, by 16 had her first child and eventually started selling marijuana to survive as a single mother from her flat.

This was her future until a chance meeting with the individual from the case study above caused her to re-consider her options and reach for new opportunities – this began her “Damascus Road” experience over a period of 13 years and she has not looked back.

After taking a social entrepreneurship course at her local church she set up a successful catering company and has provided services for Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu and for public service teams in the West Midlands. Her aim is to re-invest in the community through training and profits gained from her company.

### **Testimonial 3**

This individual was raised in the church but left in his teens to pursue more “creative” activities such as smoking and fighting. After a night of smoking and drinking he was confronted by his mum and challenged about his lifestyle. His reaction was to cuss and swear at her and he left in a rage. At that point, his mother never gave up hope and continued to pray that he would be transformed to a better and fruitful life. In 1977, his “Damascus Road” experience began. By his twenties he was a youth leader for his local church and then eventually he became the National Youth Leader for his church denomination, travelling the world from South Africa to the USA.

In 2003 he stepped down from this esteemed role to work with young people from the “road”, ironically, many of their parents had attended the “blues” or nightclub opposite the church in which he was raised. He continues to work in the heart of an area known for rioting, drugs and gang warfare and is one of the founding members of Bringing Hope.

### **Testimonial 4**

In 1996 while establishing one of Birmingham’s first state of the art hotel and conference centre this businessman dramatically had his “Damascus Road” experience.

Then in January 2003 he was driving past the location where days earlier two young women had been fatally shot. He felt like he ought to be doing something to address the social issues, which lead to violence and criminality.

As a white, middle class man with a successful business in the Birmingham suburbs he did not appear to have the links to do this work. However, shortly after that day in January he helped to transform an ex-offender’s life by giving him a job and countless others the opportunities not often afforded to them by people in the private sector. Many of them are now helping young people experiencing similar challenges through peer mentoring. He is now an integral part of the Bringing Hope Executive Committee.

### **Testimonial 5**

This young man had grown up in an environment of guns, drugs, knives and gangs but did not see himself as a gang member. He never had a father so lacked a role model and was living with his grandmother who was not fully aware of the pressurised environment that was surrounding him. At 18, he got caught up in fight when a knife was pulled on him. He was handed a baseball bat, which he used, fatally killing his peer.

The next day he was arrested and charged with murder. Just before his trial one of the chaplains from the prison spoke to him, challenging his lifestyle and he had a serious think. After a couple of weeks he was found guilty and sentenced to life. One evening on his own, he looked at himself and what he had done, the words of the chaplain came back to him and this brought him to his “Damascus Road” experience.

Because of this change in attitude, he conducted himself well in prison he is now in an open prison where he can work. He got married, bought a house and is looking forward to his release later this year. Even being in prison now he is able to speak to young people and youth groups about his regrets and subsequent transformation. When he is fully released this is what he hopes to do on a full-time basis in supporting Bringing Hope’s vision and work.

### **Testimonial 6**

A club promoter by the age of 18 this young man had the life of an MTV rap artist – the cars, the “bling”, the money and the girls. His nightclubs for the under 18s was rooted in giving young people a space to enjoy themselves but his motives shifted to securing his status through criminal activity but deep down in his heart he wanted a change. He was impacted by the death of his sister and the subsequent stabbing of his brother and he started to question the purpose of his life.

It culminated in 2005 with him beginning his Damascus Road experience.

After the birth of his daughter he started to look for somewhere to christen her. He came across a church, which despite his reputation and background welcomed him. He and his girlfriend became Christians and shortly after were married. This transformation in his life led to him using his business acumen to establish a youth network designed to empower young people from the inner cities.

At 25 years of age, he is now the Managing Director of two companies. This organisation provides advice and support to a range of different sectors on how to engage the youth and he also provides direct support for those directly and indirectly caught up in a lifestyle of destruction and death and seeks to work directly with Bringing Hope to provide exit strategies for those wanting a new direction.