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Last Updated: 9:06 pm | Thursday, May 6, 2010

Keeping faith with the children of Cincinnati

By Krista Ramsey • kramsey@enquirer.com • May 6, 2010

In April, Joellen Grady, executive director of the Council of Christian Communion, sent a letter to 130 local churches. She invited them - beseeched them, in fact - to meet to talk about how the religious community can reach out to Cincinnati children.

Out of the 130 churches invited, 30 people came.

It was, perhaps, not so much a cold shoulder as a shrug. But to people who work with disenchanted and disengaged youth, that shrug was ominous.

There are few formulas for helping the youth of this or any other city that do not rely on churches, temples and mosques to be part of the solution.

Even those who give no credence to their spiritual leadership - who may, in fact, be suspicious of it - recognize that religious organizations are an essential part of the framework of communities, and that they have people and resources that can be brought to bear on a need.

At an [Enquirer roundtable on violence](#), participants - from trauma physicians to street workers to Hamilton County Coroner O'dell Owens - spoke of a desperate need for the faith community to engage with youth now.

"Churches should be open Monday through Thursday to feed those kids, tutor those kids and love those kids," Dr. Owens said.

Abdul Bilal, a street advocate with Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence said, "We as street workers can do all we can on outreach, but we're not taking these young people anywhere if the faith-based community doesn't step up."

Grady wants people of faith to flood into four youth programs - the Hamilton County Juvenile Court Youth Center (2020), Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, YMCA and Cincinnati Public Schools Learning Centers - to serve as mentors, tutors, teachers in after-school programs and simply stable, caring adults in children's lives. The Council of Christian Communion (formerly the Council of Churches) will offer training, arrange background checks and make connections.

This is not the place for proselytizing, Grady says. It is the place for showing the compassion and commitment to humanity that is common to all faiths.

"It doesn't matter your race, what community you're in, what school you're in," she says. "We are not taking care of our children, and we are going to pay dearly."

In June, Grady will try again, reaching out to more houses of worship. She plans to target the west side of Hamilton County first, then to approach the faith community in Butler County. She believes that religious people are willing to help, but not sure how.

But as communities, faced with a surge of violence among young people, want to set expectations for the religious community to be a better partner, it's an appropriate time for the religious community to express expectations of its own.

Too often it is called into social issues only as a desperate last measure. It's also asked, increasingly, to blindly endorse school levies, new civic programs or other campaigns. Then it's conveniently put back on the shelf.

There are clear boundaries between church/temple/mosque and state that need to be heeded for the good of all parties. At the same time, the religious community deserves to be treated with the same respect as the business, arts, education and health communities. That means recognizing that it is a good source of insight into citizens' needs and struggles. It is a source of significant influence in many citizens' lives. And it has useful suggestions to contribute to *preventative* programs, rather than just being called in to head off disaster.

Krista Ramsey is an Enquirer columnist.

To take part

To be notified of the Council of Christian Communion's June meeting on Partnering for Youth, call 513-351-6789.