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THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL

The rise of Christian graffiti • p10/11

START GETTING READY FOR LENT - P13

Call to forgiveness

By PAUL HOBSON

A BEST-SELLING Christian author has spoken to *The Baptist Times* about his hopes that an initiative aimed at reducing youth violence can have a positive impact in the United Kingdom.

Johann Christoph Arnold is a founder of *Breaking the Cycle*, a programme in which former gang members and police officers talk in school assemblies of their experiences.

It was set up in response to the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, and aims to show young people that violence is not the solution to their problems.

Instead, the programme stresses honest communication and forgiveness as a way of resolving conflicts.

Breaking the Cycle is touring schools in England for the first time this week.

Mr Arnold is a teen counsellor and author of many books, including *The Lost Art of Forgiving*. He is a member of Church Communities International (formerly known as the Bruderhof Communities), and a key speaker in the programme.

He told *The Baptist Times*: 'We live in a culture of bloodshed and violence, but that does not mean we should retaliate.

'Our task is to show the children there is a much, much better way to respond.'

He added: 'I spent the world looking for stories of forgiveness in incredible circumstances.

'Forgiveness is the only way. Anger and revenge is a cancer that will destroy you.

'When you forgive you are not doing a service to the offender - you are allowing yourself to move on.'

Mr Arnold will be joined on the speakers' podium by ex-New York gangster Sergio Argueta.

Mr Argueta, 29, realized his life had to change after his best friend was sentenced to 12 years in prison for killing a man when Sergio planned a drive-by shooting in retaliation for a friend's murder.

He subsequently earned a Master's degree in social



Picture: Shivaji Moullick

Orissa sees thousands protest violence

UP TO 20,000 Christians in Orissa, North East India, protested last week against the burning of their churches by Hindu extremists and what they said was the failure of the country's National Council of Minorities to respond adequately.

The attacks, which started before Christmas, saw around 700 people fleeing their homes. Some went to relief camps, while others took refuge in the forest. At least three people and perhaps as many as nine died, while scores more were injured. Tensions were high because of the presence in the area of Hindu fundamentalist teacher Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, a campaigner against the inroads Christianity is making among India's Dalit people. Violence broke out after he was said to have been attacked.

The violence has been widely condemned both within and outside India. Last week's protest was organised by the Global Council of Indian Christians, and an earlier protest in New Delhi was organised by the All India Christian Council. BMS World Mission spokesman the Revd David Kerrigan said, 'BMS is waiting to see how best we can help our historic partners in Orissa. We are currently evaluating possible relief grants but would ask British Christians to pray for believers in Orissa at this time.'

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work, and has dedicated his life to educating young people on the importance of resisting gang life and its devastating effects.

Sheriff Paul Van Blaricum, a 30-year veteran of the Ulster County police in New York, is another speaker.

Mr Arnold said: 'We have been to some of the most chaotic schools in New York, where before we started we thought there was going to be a riot.

'But once the stories begin, the kids become absolutely quiet. Afterwards, they have so many questions.

'I believe there is a spark of God in every human being, and that people want to change.'

The tour begins at St Bonaventure's RC School, Newham, today (Thursday) and will travel to three more schools.

Organisers then hope to find UK speakers to bring the same message across the country.

Youth and gang violence is a growing problem in the UK, with 27 teenagers murdered in London alone in 2007.

Mr Arnold said: 'The programme is beginning to have an international flavour, and I find that very significant. I hope that it spreads.

'It seems authorities over here - law enforcement, education and clergy - are looking for an answer.

'But it's a two-way thing - we need to learn from you as well.'

David Shosanya, the regional minister for mission with the London Baptist Association, welcomed *Breaking the Cycle*, describing it as a 'fantastic initiative'.

He said: 'I think the organisers are very perceptive in the title - it is about breaking that cycle.

'A lot of these youths have grown up with dad in a gang, and just carried on.

'I think we have been remiss in not learning as quickly as we could from the US. This problem has been there for many years, and they have some very good practice around it.

'This programme is another tool among tools that needs to be used to address the problem.'

Mr Shosanya, who grew up in Tooting, said both the number of gangs and accompanying youth violence has increased markedly in London recent years.

He explained to *The Baptist Times*: 'There has been a huge increase, not just in the existence, but also in the nature of gangs.

'For example, 20 years ago there were five or six formalised gangs in London, and the rest were groups of young people hanging around.

'Now there are at least 80, and that's just in the Afro-Caribbean community. With

that comes an increase in drug trafficking, prostitution, extortion and acts of random violence.'

Mr Shosanya, who is involved in the training of street pastors (of whom between 40 and 60 are Baptists), also encouraged churches not to ignore the issue.

'A lot of people involved in gangs have relatives who are churchgoers, but because it's often not on the agenda, they do not know how to deal with them.

'Church has an extensive social network, and more should be made of that.'

Contact 01580 883300 for more details on 'Breaking