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Knife crime wake-up call

AS figures indicate that knife crime is at its highest level in a decade – with more than 21,000 offences recorded in England and Wales last year and one in five offenders aged under 18 – Chair of the London District the Rev Nigel Cowgill is calling on the Methodist Church to “wake up” and invest more time and money to help make local communities better and safer places to live.

Writing in this week's **Methodist Recorder**, Mr Cowgill (one of the three London District Chairs) says: “I am aware that there is great work being done across the Connexion

by **JOHN SINGLETON**

to tackle violent crime in our communities, but we must think bigger. As a Church we have a responsibility and it is part of our discipleship to seek to work together with others – with local Churches Together, with people of other faiths and of no faith. If we don't do this we are not living out ‘Our Calling.’”

Suggesting that the Methodist Council set aside funding for projects who want to work with local communities in specifically tack-

ling gun, knife and other violent crimes, he says that money should be available “with immediate effect” for this purpose.

Mr Cowgill is also suggesting that the next 3Generate focuses on the issue through workshops and creating a “safe place” for young people to talk about how they might have been affected by such crimes.

At the next London District synod on April 6 the afternoon session will be cancelled and mem-

bers of synod encouraged to join a “Standing Together” rally in Trafalgar Square organised by the Ascension Trust (and supported by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) from 2 - 4 pm. This will be preceded at synod with a presentation by the Lambeth circuit who are working with young people to try to combat violent crime in their community. The theme of the rally is solidarity with families and communities impacted by violent crime, working against violent crime and finding effective solutions to combat such crime.

Mr Cowgill says that one of the factors in the increase of knife crime has been the fall in the number of police officers in the last eight years and the “never-ending budget cuts” by central Government resulting in the closure of community and youth centres.

A Government spokesperson said Chancellor Philip Hammond has given police forces £100 million, while Home Secretary Sajid Javid has unveiled plans for “knife crime prevention orders”. See “Addressing the increase in knife crime” – Page Eight.



Rubbish by a river in Islamabad, Pakistan.
Photograph: Hazel Thompson/Tearfund.

Increased funding to help tackle plastic pollution

INCREASED funding is now available for Tearfund's work tackling plastic pollution in some of the world's poorest countries.

Plastic pollution (see picture) is a problem around the globe.

Following generous public support for Tearfund's Matched Giving appeal, the UK Government has agreed to increase the target of Tearfund's appeal from £2 million to £3 million. This means donations up to £3 million will be doubled by the British Government through UK Aid Match.

International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt made the announcement alongside Sir David Attenborough at an event

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Addressing the increase in knife crime

WE have all seen the horrific news over the last few weeks across our cities, towns and villages that violent crime is on the increase. For several years there was a marked decrease in knife and gun crime, but recent figures show the number of young people killed by knives rose by nearly 50 per cent last year amid a surge of violence. In 2018, 76 people were reportedly stabbed to death in London and 306 in the UK as a whole. Of those, 23 were children (under the age of 13).

So far, 19 victims have been killed from stabbings in 2019 across the country. Of course, there is not one reason we can identify as to why this is happening. However, I would agree with many commentators that there are a number of factors as to why we have seen this increase in violent crime throughout the country, including the number of police officers in England and Wales having fallen by more than 20,000 in the last eight years. Local councils are at breaking point with the never-ending budget cuts they have had to make because of Central Government cutting their funding.

Throughout my ministry I have seen community centres and youth centres having to close because grants have been slashed to a minimum and they cannot afford to open the doors.

In my second year as a pro-



Voicing a View

by NIGEL COWGILL

bationer minister, the unthinkable happened that on a Good Friday a boy of aged 14 was stabbed to death a matter of yards from one of the churches in my care. He was not in a gang, nor had he been in any trouble with police or other authorities, but was with a small group of friends he went to school with in a local park. At that time, I was chair of the local inter-faith group and my Baptist colleague was chair of the local Churches Together group. We met together praying in the immediate hours after the stabbing. We then approached the family and asked if we could organise a silent march of peace for the community – they agreed only if we could end up outside their home to say prayers.

It was envisaged that we would not need the police or stewards as the police told us we would only get a handful of people. However, as the march started, there was more than 700 people walking in silence through the streets of East London. In our silence we were demanding that all members of the community, including the Chu-

rch, took action, and words were not enough.

As we reached the home of the victim I prayed with the family and friends in the street and an action group was set up to work with young people and communities with the support of the local council. I am sure that the fruits of this action group has made some difference to that community to this day. This was part of our discipleship to walk with those who were hurting, angry and in pain, as it is today as we see what is happening on our streets across the country.

Reawakening

Recently I had the privilege and honour to carry out jury service for the first time and while it is not right to go into the ins and outs of the case, it was a profound reawakening as I sat in the court room and listened to the stories of how three young lives, all under the age of 25, had been ruined. Violent crime affects not just the victim and the perpetrator, but so many other people as well – family, friends and the wider community, young and old,

black and white.

I ask myself why the Church is not investing in communities, or if they are, why do we not hear about it to make them better places for people to live and work? Our vision as a Church seems to be so inward looking at times. I am excited that the Church is investing in evangelism and discipleship and is taking this seriously. However, within this vision where is the mention of working with our local communities in a radical and meaningful way? We need to wake up and invest time and make our communities a better place to live. If we do this, then people will see the



Church as a place of welcome that has something to say to our society and see us as a place of hope.

The reaffirmation of "Our Calling" is much more than the headline "The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the Gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission"; it calls each of us to radical action with our communities, to work for safer places for people of all ages and to invest time and money in places across the Connexion which are serious about their communities as a whole.

I am aware that there is great work being done across the Connexion to tackle violent crime in our communities, but we must think bigger. As a Church we have a responsibility and it is part of our discipleship to seek to work together with others, with local Churches Together, with people of other faiths and of no faith. If we don't do this, we are not living out "Our Calling".

I want to suggest a number of things the Church could do if we were serious about engaging again with our communities, who at present are not only feeling disconnected by our political leaders, but also by the Church.

- Set up small groups from a variety of backgrounds. The group must have on it people of all ages and all backgrounds which would include people of faith and no faith to produce resources – for example, videos, workshop re-

sources about how communities can work together in shaping their own lives;

- That the next 3Generate has a series of workshops based around the theme of knife and gun crime, the effects on local communities and creating a safe place opened throughout the weekend for people to talk about how they might have been affected by such crimes;

- For the Methodist Council to set aside funding for local projects which actively want to engage in working with local communities in specifically tackling gun, knife and other violent crimes. The grant application must be kept to a minimum and need not go through committee after committee and money available with immediate effect;

- For the new team in the Evangelism and Discipleship Cluster to produce Bible studies on the theme of creating safer communities as part of our discipleship and "Our Calling".

It is only when we as a Church take our communities seriously and work with them in tackling violent crime and committing ourselves to making them safer places for all people we will be able to say that we are living "Our Calling". Let us work together as a Church in investing our time and resources in our communities so we can yet again see glimpses of God's glory as we live out our discipleship day by day.

The Rev Nigel Cowgill is a Chair of the London District.