

### The Westside

### RECONCILIATION REPORT

## Gangs



As my former-gangster friend Fletcher Williams says, “You don’t reach gangs, you reach gang members”. We try to

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reach people, and later are often surprised that friends are members. We avoid asking about gangs, so as not to be mistaken for informants. The average Chattanooga gang member on record is 23 years old (“Comprehensive Gang Assessment”, City of Chattanooga, Sept. 13, 2012 , p.27). Most of these guys and girls are reachable. Some hardcore guys ignore me, even if obviously addressed. I can be invisible! It’s the guys in their mid-to-late teens that are most feared by others, since they may be out of control.

The Chattanooga Police Department lists 1,391 “validated” gang members in Chattanooga, in 40 gangs, mostly splinters off the Bloods, the Crips and the Gangster Disciples (Assessment, p. 31). Striking is this small number. In the Chattanooga area, there are likely 1,391 churches of all kinds, without exaggeration. Except for a handful of churches represented by a few of their members, both black and white churches are absent. Striking is the lack of Christian presence at the Westside (College Hill Courts) housing project, in light of the super-abundance of churches. I asked a well-connected youth ministry leader about coming into the project to develop friendships. No, his ministry is school-based. Most churches that do venture into the Westside come in vans to take people to their church--a “come” mentality. People must come to be served. Instead of going into the entire world, the world should come to us, where we are comfortable (and they are not). If one church could befriend and become family to just one gang member, there would be no gang problem in Chattanooga, and no need for a

Gang Taskforce. Women on our team are close to a female gang leader.

Very few of the guys and girls on the Westside streets go to church, even among those who credibly profess Christ. A friend found a job through a referral that the Lord orchestrated. That job was ending, and a drug test was required before the next referral. To pass the drug test, he decided to stop smoking weed, and then for three straight Sundays he went to church—the first time in six years. Jeremy and Chanet Faber and Dawn Coulter are building a house church at the Westside, together with Fletcher and Pam Williams, residents there, and others.

The desire for jobs surprises Westside workers. Census data show that 33% of the larger Westside area is in the labor force (Assessment, p. 23), but the percentage is probably less where we work. Some will take an honest job paying maybe \$10 an hour, over selling drugs that can bring in hundreds a day. One guy said it’s because he doesn’t have to look over his shoulder. Some



need soft job skills (basics to gain and keep any job) and others simply need an advocate to locate a position, and encouragement to spend the money well, save, and honor God with the income. A strong incentive to get a job comes from fear of going to jail for failure to pay child support. For others, simply having a child sobers enough to want to provide for it. Most don't know their own father, maybe seeing him a few times in their life, if at all. Some in their 30s and 40s are just tired of hustling, moving in with girlfriend after girlfriend, and dodging the legal system. They are ready to change. Others live up to the hopes of a solid friend, and join the workforce, finding freedom and self-respect.

What about safety in the hood? Wrong question, but recently a guy I've worked with for years dissed me for not giving him money (that time). Within 30 minutes, he found me and apologized. He was sternly warned by a friend who I couldn't restrain. By God's grace, guys look out for us. The safest place is in God's will, and that is not always safe (Matt. 8:23-25; Acts 9:15-16).

What does the Westside need? Good News. Bad news is everywhere. One friend works 4-5 days a week, and takes home about \$170 biweekly, due to child support. A hard-working woman, with a heart for the handicapped, cannot find a job due to a felony. People are evicted, belongings strewn on sidewalks. Last week a twenty-one-year old was shot five times in the head—Bloods killing a Crip. Police race through the project, cornering and dragging guys to jail. The attraction of drugs, gambling, alcohol and sex wears off, and their cost mounts. People appear and disappear. Recent Chattanooga gang crimes were committed 95% of the time by blacks, and 76% of victims were black (Assessment, p. 28). Some people knock on doors at all hours, blare music, and brawl. When folks who have had enough just want peace, we share Who can give it.

Redemptive friendship is a gift that any Christian can offer. Any Christian. We point to the Redeemer, while being Good News, as we identify needs and offer help. Distrust is rampant in the hood. Being a reliable friend is a rare gift. Simply showing regularly up can give comfort. People may not be open to friendship until they hit bottom. Many at the Westside are close to the bottom, with homelessness at ground zero. Christian boots on the ground are the best way to deal with the gang problem. If just one person gains the trust of the community gatekeepers—people are always watching—that person can become a gatekeeper and funnel in many others who can serve. The more servants, the more light moves into dark places. Of those embracing light, some will be gang members.

## Short-term Ministry Opportunities

**§. Sudan, July 13-27, 2013.** See [www.rmni.org/global-and-short-term-missions/sudan.html](http://www.rmni.org/global-and-short-term-missions/sudan.html)

Our sixth trip—we're able to design ministry opportunities around your gifting. South Sudan is wide-open to ministry at this time. Evangelists, teachers, builders and medical personnel are needed. The fee is \$2,300, plus airfare to Africa, visas, immunizations and outfitting. Call us at 423-822-1091 for information. It's not too late if you move quickly.

**India, July, 2013.** See [www.rmni.org/global-and-short-term-missions/india.html](http://www.rmni.org/global-and-short-term-missions/india.html)

Our fourth partnership with this well-established and loving Indian ministry, we need teachers of youth, men and women. Medical personnel are also able to work in this environment. The fee is \$2,300, plus airfare to India, visa, immunizations and outfitting. Now is the time to apply.

## Prayer and Praise

- ↑ We're grateful for the many opportunities of 2012, and for the gifts of prayer, friendship, encouragement and money received. Thank you!!
- ↑ Choice workers for the July, 2013 trips to S. Sudan and India in 2013 are needed. Please pray also for their funds to come in.
- ↑ Peace at the Westside after a gang-on-gang killing on Jan. 28. A meeting of top gang leaders is imminent.
- ↑ Men at the Westside to become drug-free to pass a drug test for jobs, and for job acquisition and success. Pray for salvations.
- ↑ That we will teach with excel-

- lence in S. Sudan and whenever the opportunity arises. Pray for team unity and that no one will become sick or injured.
- ↑ For the interlocking block machine—it arrived!—the best men to train, that training will go well, and that a profit will enable Kingdom projects—not just pay workers.
- ↑ The foundations of a house church at the Westside are strong. Pray for a viable church to develop.
- ↑ We're grateful for a

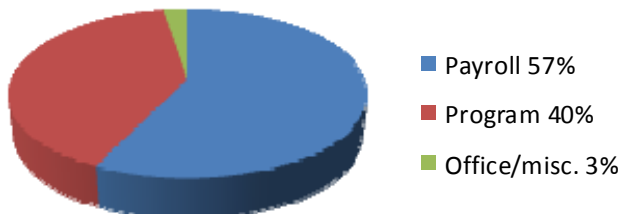
- good webmaster and for website design direction. Pray that we'll be able to keep the site fresh and useful.
- ↑ Now about 15 volunteers are working at the Westside—pray they will be effective.
- ↑ Pray for 5 other S. Sudan projects to progress well and for wisdom in managing them.
- ↑ For the ability to push forward the AfAm missionary census
- ↑ My wife's mother, a saint, passed into God's presence on Jan. 12. We're appreciate so many who have comforted.

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[www.RMNI.org](http://www.RMNI.org)

### 2012 RMNI Expenses \$79,694



### 2012 RMNI Income \$82,466

