Bronx clergy get trained to advocate in court for troubled youth to reduce crime recidivism

Bronx Clergy Roundtable will stand up for troubled kids

BY KERRY WILLS / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Young people accused of crimes in the Bronx may soon have their priests, pastors, rabbis or imams standing beside them in court.

Next month clergy members will attend free training in how to advocate for youth as part of a six-month program in crime prevention and recidivism reduction.

“We all have small ministries, laying on of hands,” said the Rev. Que English of Bronx Christian Fellowship Church. “We’re just not having the impact we need for our borough. To create impact requires synergy.”

English leads the Bronx Clergy Roundtable (BCR), a collaboration of about 300 clergy, politicians, and members of community agencies and nonprofit groups who try to solve problems plaguing the borough.

On Feb. 21, select members will attend a two-day program at Community Connections for Youth (CCFY) that will introduce them to the juvenile court system, teach them how to stand with a young defendant and speak out for him, and help them consider what more they can offer young people facing criminal charges.

The Rev. Ruben Austria, CCFY’s executive director, said about half of families whose youth are facing criminal charges say they belong to a faith community. The problem is, most don’t tell their spiritual guides about their teen’s trouble with the law.

“That’s something they tend to hide from their social networks,” Austria said. “It’s a thing of shame.”

And yet, judges look for adult figures like clergy to vouch for young people. It can make the difference between a teen going to a detention center or entering an alternative program.

Some clergy may opt, after the training, to create such programs in their own houses of worship. That’s the goal of CCFY – to get grass roots organizations to create support systems for South Bronx teens aged 13 to
15 who might otherwise choose a life of crime.

“Courts are looking for who’s going to be responsible for this person, who will guarantee he’ll be responsible,” Austria said. “It’s not something to be done lightly ... but some will be saying we’ve gotta do more for these kids.”

English said about $45 million is spent each year to incarcerate Bronx residents, and about 17,000 people return to the borough annually after prison terms. The recidivism rate is 87% in the Bronx. The BCR aims in the full six-month program to decrease the recidivism rate by 10%, helping 5,000 people who are let out of prison each year.

There’s still room for clergy in CCFY training program. Call BCR at 718-231-1033 or email fight4thefamily@aol.com for more information.

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