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## Gangs of Osceola County

**County needs to step up intervention, prevention and suppression tactics to stem gang activity.**

12:00 AM EDT, June 16, 2011

**As the Rev. Remer Baker Jr. knows, confession's good for the soul. Tough to address the failings without admitting the sin exists.**

**And over the years, the Kissimmee minister has witnessed telltale signs of a certain sin.**

**Idle hands and loitering bands of youth haunting certain pockets of the city. Juveniles on the west side sporting black jackets and branding themselves as the "Black Knights" or "Black Flag." And last Friday, the funeral of Rashan Hasaun Ortiz, gunned down at a high-school graduation party in what Baker believes was another spasm of gang-related mayhem.**

**Still, Kissimmee officials aren't in a confessional mood. Not that Baker's about to wait and see if burying yet another innocent casualty of gang violence loosens their tongues. He's staging an intervention. Armed with input from his flock at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church, which he called together Wednesday night for an emergency meeting, Baker and other ministers next week plan to visit City Hall. They're bringing both proposals and an urgent plea: confess the city's worst-kept secret.**

**"There is no need to be quiet about it when everybody knows it's going on,"**



**Baker says. "We do have a gang problem and just need to face that ... and do everything [possible] to combat the problem."**

**Baker's right — though it shouldn't take heavenly inspiration for city and county officials to realize they need to throw the kitchen sink of intervention, prevention and suppression strategies at an increasingly dark trend.**

**Since 1991, Florida's ranks of gang members have soared 400 percent to more than 45,000.**

**Osceola has more than 500 gang members and about 20 active street gangs that increasingly have made their malevolent presence felt.**

**On Jan. 18, 2009, three members of the Crips gang-raped a Poinciana woman in a rental home while two others watched. In October 2010, members of the Bloods gang stabbed a man to death at a Buenaventura Lakes house party.**

**It was the first homicide Osceola officials had tied to gang violence. But it wouldn't be the last. Two teenage gang members later were implicated in two separate homicides.**

**Yet, usually gang-related crimes are kept quiet. Florida police agencies, including the Osceola County Sheriff's office, insist blaming gangs glamorizes thug life and entices new members.**

**Perhaps. But self-imposed police gag orders also leave citizens in the dark regarding threats in their communities, putting them at risk. Officially, at least.**

**Even if the cops aren't talking, the crimes and the gang-related colors the perpetrators wear speak volumes. "Even the children know it," Baker says.**

**Baker plans to ask city officials to step up prevention programs, and appeal to police to boost their presence and beef up efforts to target the most violent gangs. For their part, his congregants promise greater visibility in the community. Good. It's a community problem that requires a community solution and commitment, and yes, money.**

**Prevention and intervention programs are often the first casualty during budget crunches. But given the growth of gangs statewide, mothballing anti-**

**gang programs is dangerously shortsighted. Stamping out gangs now before drive-bys become routine will save money — and lives.**

**A wise place to start? Reviving the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program in Osceola schools. A federal study suggests it dramatically cuts the odds of kids joining gangs.**

**Last night, Baker preached to the choir. Next week, he hopes to preach to City Hall. For Osceola's sake, its leaders need to listen. Then act.**

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