

**8** *What's going on*

# Weapons dumped

**A programme to place bins outside churches is taking knives and guns off London's streets, reports PHILIP HALCROW**

**S**EVENTY-SIX knives were inside the last time it was opened. There were also 76 knives the time before. 'And every time it has been opened, there has been a gun inside,' says Major Nigel Schultz about the blue metal bin outside the Salvation Army church in Barking.

The bin is one of 23 placed across 13 London boroughs by Word 4 Weapons. The Christian-based organisation works with churches and other faith groups and with the police and local authorities to provide secure bins where people can get rid of weapons. In return, those binning their knives and guns are offered bags containing comics telling the true stories of people who have left behind a life of crime, books containing information on issues such as housing and legal help and Bibles.

'There have been some really nasty-looking weapons left in our bin,' says Nigel. 'People have handed in knives with vicious serrated edges, daggers and some Nazi knives, which somebody probably had in their house for years but then they got the message to get rid of knives from their

home. Someone may have a knife, thinking it is ornamental, but their kids could take it.'

Word 4 Weapons began when Michael Smith, a Christian working as a traffic officer in the Metropolitan Police, 'decided enough was enough'. In 2005, nine teenagers in London were murdered in stabbings. In 2006, the figure was 11.

Michael says: 'So many young lives were being lost to gun and knife crime. Then, early in 2007, there was another killing. I stood up in my office at work and prayed: "Lord, what can I do to help change this?"'



Michael Smith started Word 4 Weapons

**So many young lives were being lost to gun and knife crime**

'And the Lord said to me: "Ask the young people to swap their weapons for my word."'

At first, he was unsure of what exactly to do.

'Then my mind went back to when there had been a weapons amnesty in London. I remembered seeing little red wheelie bins outside police stations but thinking that they would not do much good. I had doubted whether anyone would hand in a weapon outside a police station, apart from Mrs Miggins who had been in her shed and found some old weapons that her husband had in the war. I figured that young people wouldn't turn up to a police station and hand in a weapon, because they would be afraid of being arrested.

'I had the idea of getting a strong bin that a passer-by could not get anything out of and placing it away from police stations. I realised we could put it outside a church – and when people handed in their weapon, they could get a Bible from the church.'

Michael told the Christian Police Association about his idea and it offered support. He contacted Paul Senior, a graphic artist who produced *Cops and Robbers*, a comic which told true stories of people who had their lives turned around by God. Paul agreed to

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# So far we have collected 9,000 weapons

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supply comics for the bag of resources, which can be handed over or posted out to people who have binned their weapons.

Paul also accompanied Michael on a visit to a recycling exhibition at the NEC, Birmingham, which they hoped would help them obtain some bins. They were not having much success with the exhibitors until they came across a stand promoting the recycling work of The Salvation Army.

'We got talking about our idea with a man named Trevor Shaw, who was on the stand. Trevor said The Salvation Army had some old book banks which it was no longer using. He told me he would get the bins painted up in whatever colour we wanted so that we could use them.

'The Salvation Army has been supporting us ever since.

'We piloted the scheme by placing two bins in Islington. In just over six months, they netted 116 weapons.'

To run the scheme successfully, Michael

## They would just throw their knives in the bushes

needed the support of police.

'Some police were enthusiastic about it,' he says, 'because they saw it as a way to get knives off the street. Others were not, because they felt that evidence was going to be lost.'

Michael points out that the scheme is a surrender rather than an amnesty. 'With an amnesty, the power of arrest is taken away by the Home Secretary. With a surrender, a person can be arrested for having a knife in a public place. So our literature will always explain how to wrap up a weapon securely so it cannot cause any harm to anyone and so no one would deem it feasible that you are carrying it to use for an unlawful purpose.'

In Barking, Nigel Schultz emphasises that the police are supportive of the Word 4 Weapons scheme.

'We have a good relationship with the police, and we hope that will continue as a way of getting rid of the knives,' he says.



Nigel Schultz hopes the Salvation Army helps people get rid of their knives



The Salvation Army and the other members of the Barking and Dagenham Faith Forum became concerned about knives after some incidents in the borough, says Nigel:

'We did some research among young people and the information we got back was quite frightening. For instance, a 14-year-old is bullied for his pocket money.

After it happens a couple of times, he wonders what he can do to stop it. So he decides to take a kitchen knife to school. The next time he gets bullied, he pulls out the knife. But the bully takes the knife off him and stabs him.

'After we did the research, we planned to go around various churches and schools to talk about the problem of knife crime. Then we came across Michael and Word 4 Weapons.'

The secure bin was placed outside the Salvation Army hall.

**N**igel is convinced there is a need for it. He tells how a community event in a park ended with a fatal stabbing. He also talks of a conversation he had with a 17-year-old: the teenager said that he was unable to go to a nearby shopping centre because, being from outside the area, he would be knifed.

Nigel cites various ways in which a knife can become a danger.

'The common reason given by young people for carrying a knife is that they feel they need some sort of defence. So a 15-year-old might go to a fishing or hardware shop and, because they look older, they get away with buying a knife. But once they get home, they suddenly wonder what they can do with the knife. What if their mum finds it? So they hide it under the bed or in the wardrobe.

'They know they shouldn't have the knife and they get a guilt complex about it. They know that if they walk about town with it, they're going to get into trouble.

'After two or three months, their friend says to them that they are having some problems and need a knife. So they sell the knife to the friend. They are relieved to get rid of it, because they didn't really need it. But they have given it to somebody who really does think they need it – and that is when the fishing knife or penknife becomes a danger.'

Nigel also describes how young people on an estate would dispose of their knives in a hazardous way. 'When they saw the police patrolling, they would just throw their knives in the bushes. The



PHILIP HALGROW

problem is, children would play in the area. You would have five-year-olds playing games and in the bushes there would be knives and blades.

'So the problem of knives is not just about violence. Knives can be a problem in all kinds of ways.

'Our knife bin is a small drop in the ocean. But if it removes knives from young people or helps people to think about getting rid of knives, that is a good thing.'

Michael is excited about what Word 4 Weapons has achieved across the capital. 'So far, we have collected more than 9,000 weapons,' he says.

But he wants to do more.

'Although we have 23 bins in London, it is not nearly enough. We need more than 100.'

**The police and The Salvation Army empty the bin at Barking**



NIGEL SCHULTZ