

Society: Off diary: Brothers in arms: US preacher arrives in Birmingham to support the city's Peace Week

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Body

"We don't call people gangsters or gangbangers, we call people brothers and sisters, and we're here to find ways to lift people out of their pain, find alternatives. We need an economic and educational summit in north-west Birmingham."

These were the words of US civil rights campaigner, and an organiser of the Million Man March, the Rev Al Sampson, launching Birmingham's first Peace Week (July 29-August 9) by challenging the city's politicians and business leaders to invest in one of the UK's most deprived areas, while calling on the armed gangs to lay down their weapons.

The Baptist preacher, ordained by Martin Luther King in 1966, plans to open the doors of America's 200 black schools and colleges to inner-city Britain.

"One of the biggest problems we have is education. We are looking at how we can connect black people across the globe. We have some 200 black schools and colleges in the US that have places. What we are talking about is matching potential and aspirations with opportunities," he says.

The Rev **Jamal Bryant**, religious adviser to R'n'B star P **Diddy**, and the sisters of Belfast murder victim Robert McCartney all support the event. They have come to the city at the invitation of Bill Brown, coordinator of the Birmingham-based arm of Disarm, a charity that aids victims of gun crime.

Backed by the Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Rev John Sentamu, and part-funded by regeneration agency Aston Pride, the week and a half of discussions and debate is, say organisers, a direct response to the gang feuds that continue to dog the city in the wake of the shootings of teenagers Charlene Ellis and Letisha Shakespeare in 2003.

"We've found that if young people have creative alternatives they'll renounce the drugs," says Sampson. "There is a 30-year history to the drug problem, some of these young people are drug babies, people can see the collateral damage to their families."

More details of Birmingham Peace Week at www.peaceweek.co.uk

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