From violence, hope

WORK with student leaders from schools and universities on their experience of violence brings hope, not gloom. These are the words of Crispin Hemson, Director of the International Centre of Nonviolence (ICON), which is based at the Durban University of Technology.

As part of the research work on nonviolence within education, he has been working with different groups, here and at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Hemson explained: “In December we ran a three-day workshop with nine school student leaders, and focused in particular on the issues of gender. We worked separately with boys and girls, and the outcome was markedly increased confidence by the girls. This led to much more honest and direct communication on the issues of violence and how gender impacts on it.”

At the end of the workshop, the group developed a statement that set out their views on these issues.

The statement included the following clauses:

- Unemployment is the cause of insecure citizens with no respect for others, resulting in xenophobia and discrimination.
- It is hard for some young people to have self-acceptance given their backgrounds and the way they are living. Some of us pretend to be rich when we are poor. Communities and families need to promote self-acceptance and communicate that young people are valued.
- We have a cultural value of respect, and the way we do things should reflect the respect we feel for others. Sometimes this idea has been misused by older people to justify abuse.

The research findings were presented at a recent conference in Plymouth, in the UK.

Where does this work now go? ICON is part of a group developing a foundational programme at DUT, which will include focus on nonviolence.

“What the work revealed is that young South Africans have experienced very high levels of violence, of all kinds, but also that they do not give up hope. We intend to bring into that programme what we have learnt from working with young people”, said Hemson.

ICON has also launched a Facebook group called “Friends of International Centre of Nonviolence”. The purpose of this group is to enable young people in particular to exchange their thoughts and experiences related to their work for building a better society, whether through individual initiative or through societal action.