



SATURDAY NIGHT'S ALRIGHT FOR PASTORING: From left, co-ordinator Paul Senior, Sally Senior, Alan Hart, Val Hart and Audrey Costley
Photo: YSGRMGZL-05

Street pastors on hand to support late-night revellers

A QUIET revolution will be taking place in Bishop's Stortford town centre from this Saturday night.

Street pastors will be on patrol, offering comfort, help and advice to revellers and helping to defuse potentially troublesome situations.

The volunteers, who range in age from their late 20s to 70s, will be out in groups of four in Stortford each Saturday from 8pm to 2am.

The innovative scheme is the 75th to go live nationwide since the first was launched in Brixton, south London, five years ago by a Rastafarian who switched to Christianity and founded the Ascension Trust.

Although the volunteers are drawn from church congregations across Stortford, the pastors will not be pushing any religious message, simply seeking to be a friendly face on the street.

The Stortford scheme's co-ordinator, Paul Senior, from the town's Community Church,

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explained: "Our aim is not to step into fights to split people up. Our main role is to engage with people. If we find people who are drunk we will talk to them and, if necessary, call a friend or taxi for them to get home."

Mr Senior, a 56-year-old retired Metropolitan police officer with two grown-up sons, said the message was: "We are there because we care."

Experiences elsewhere showed that often people would approach the street pastors to talk about personal problems unconnected with their night out. It could be about a bereavement or if they are depressed.

"In this economic climate, there may be elements of despair and people just feel they would like somebody to talk to," he said.

To date, 12 volunteers have been commissioned, with more

in the pipeline. Pastors will patrol one Saturday a month and, as more come on board, the scheme will be extended to Friday nights.

They have undergone training since April in 12 modules, including counselling, mentoring, rights and responsibilities, awareness of social backgrounds, drugs and knowing your community.

They have been liaising with agencies including the police, youth service, probation, child protection and Citizens Advice Bureau.

"We have slightly more men than women and the youngest is 27 and the oldest is in their 70s," said Mr Senior. "They'll be paired up, two men and two women, and always go out in a group of four."

"I'm really looking forward to it. A lot of people will think our crime rate is low and wonder 'Why are we doing this?', but there are more dimensions to Christianity. We care about our community."