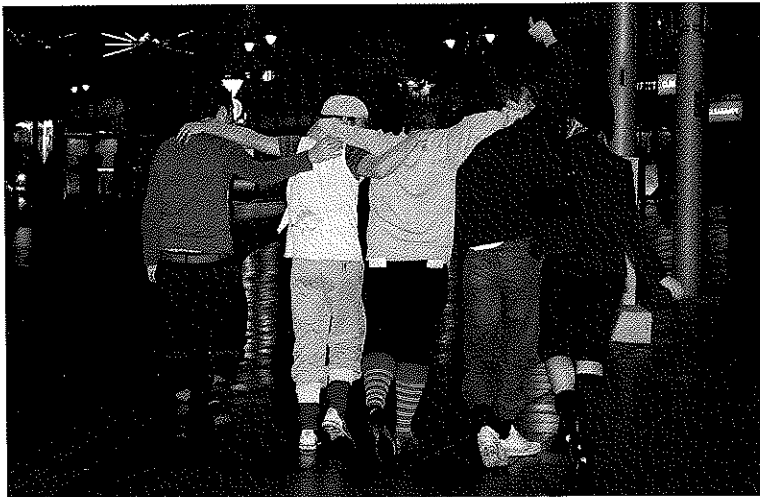


A calming influence on the streets

Jackie Hamilton JP reports on a night with the 'street pastors'



In September I went out with the Tunbridge Wells street pastors as an observer to learn about this project.

There are five teams of six, who take turns to meet on Friday evenings at Christchurch on the High Street, close to the bars, nightclubs and music venues of the town. They go out at about 10pm, wearing easily identifiable blue fleeces and baseball caps saying 'Street Pastor', with mobile phones to keep in regular contact with one of five parallel support teams, also on rotation, who remain at Christchurch to pray for them, take messages, and make tea for the breaktime at about 00.30. They remain in threes, or altogether as six. The project was started in London, and is run in Tunbridge Wells by people from 23 local churches of all denominations. There are similar projects in Maidstone and elsewhere.

The street pastors walk around the key areas where people gather, to help those in need. They take lollipops, which are a good point of contact and can help to diffuse aggression; water for vomiting drunks; and flipflops for those unable to walk in high heels after a few drinks. They will ring for friends, parents or taxis when people have no other means of getting home, assist people onto the last bus, and will let people wait at Christchurch for their lift if that is best.

They are trained, over 12 sessions, by the police, probation, drug treatment and mental health support agencies etc, and learn skills including first aid, and being non-judgmental, not only about race/gender/religion, but also about lifestyle and behaviour. They are legally enabled to receive drugs and offensive weapons including knives when offered to them, to take them off the street (subsequently handed to the police).

They also talk to people if that is what they want, but their training specifies that this is not a missionary role – they will

talk about religion but only if specifically asked to do so. Most conversations are about the people themselves, and many drunks seem keen to open up to these 'uniformed' strangers.

SEEING THE PASTORS AT WORK

On the evening I joined them (wearing a hazard yellow 'observer' tabard), we met several groups – some looked very underage and were clearly drunk – who were used to their presence on the streets, asked for lollipops, and were very happy to chat. Many pubs and clubs had bouncers who were also very used to the street pastors and mostly very welcoming. Several groups of youths were hanging around on the common, along with a number of beer bottles, because they were too young to get into where they wanted. Some brief abuse was shouted from a travelling car (and one girl shrieked as she recognised me from a youth court hearing), but there has only occasionally been real hostility. The street pastors said that they talked through this with the angry, intoxicated individuals and on both occasions it arose from unresolved bereavement for which God was blamed, and the street pastors were representatives to take the flak. It is possible that the underlying problems were also contributing to the alcohol/drug abuse, and perhaps the conversation about the issue was helpful. I do not see that it could have done any harm.

Drunk youths were often left alone by their friends, especially once they start vomiting, which puts them at significant risk of harm. The police find the street pastors very useful for such youths, as they can engage with them in ways the police can't, and, for example, help them to disperse, or intervene to ring for a lift or taxi to get them home. They were out on the Tuesday evening of the GCSE results following a specific police request to do so. Although the bars would not serve alcohol to these year 11s (and some results were for year 10s), some youths have circumvented this by pre-drinking, mostly vodka, in the local parks beforehand, which has been an issue on previous such occasions and when clubs hold under-18 nights.

I was impressed with the calm and open approach of the group I observed. That night's group leader quietly gained a great deal of information while out, for example about an incident involving the police (a snatched handbag) and an altercation resulting in some customers being evicted from Wetherspoons as we arrived; and the team's focus was practical and friendly rather than evangelical. The presence of sober, sensible adults on the streets to help those in need through Friday nights is, in my view, a good thing.

For more information, visit: www.streetpastors.co.uk