

A NIGHT OUT IN BROXBOURNE

It's 9pm, on the last Friday night of the month. Eight of us meet at Nigel's house to have a coffee, a jaffa cake and to pray for the night's activities. We are the Broxbourne Street Pastors, Christian volunteers from local churches across the borough and part of a nationwide initiative started by an inspired Christian pastor, Les Isaac, several years ago and now in many major cities and towns across Britain and other parts of the world. We have been trained over a three month period, or are currently undertaking this training.

In between slurps of coffee and bites of jaffa cakes, we pray that God will prepare the way for us on the streets of Hoddesdon, Cheshunt and Waltham Cross, that He will keep us safe and guide us in our conversations with the people we'll meet. We pray too for other Street Pastors in other towns and cities, that they will be safe and have good conversations. We inform the local police where we will go, but that generally is the extent of our dealings with them.

Around 9.30pm, wrapped up in our thick Street Pastor coats and baseball caps, we venture out to give our time to the people of our community. We're out there to get to know people in our communities, to build relationships with them, to find out their needs and what can be done to help them. We care, we listen, we support and we help where we can. We do it because we are Christians who believe we should be reflecting what Jesus used to do during His ministry....that is, loving and caring for people, giving time, trying to make a difference.

First stop is Broxbourne High Street, and Station Road recreation area, where we have struck up good relationships with the Park Guard who run Friday night activities for interested teenagers from the Pavilion there. Sometimes there are more than a hundred teenagers there, other nights, only a handful. We chat to these young people, aged between 12-20, about what they do at night, what it's like living in the area, the problems they have. They are interested in why we're not sitting at home by the fireside with our cocoa. They are impressed when we say we do it because of our faith, and that we are volunteers. These kids sense our commitment and respect it, despite their otherwise negative attitudes to authority. They tell us of the ready availability of drugs in the area, and how easy it is to get alcohol. Nigel shows his break-dancing skills, dances with a group – and we've made friends for the evening. Ros is recognised as a local teacher, and this always provokes much good-natured banter, but also visible respect. Next time they will remember the uniform and come up more readily for a chat.

We move on to Cheshunt, walking through Grundy Park and then around the pubs and clubs of the Old Pond area. We engage several groups in conversation, chat with the Pub Security Officers, cafe and chip shop workers, taxi drivers, revellers. We check that a swaying, solitary girl knows how to get home, and we follow her discretely to make sure she's safe. We chat to a young man lying on a bench in a pool of vomit, buy him some water and walk him round till he feels more himself. He hugs us all fondly, leaving traces of his dinner on our coats. We'll pray for him at the end of the evening.

We drive to Waltham Cross – now it's about midnight or so. We meet Chris for the third time outside his pub. We always have a good chat with him because he is really interested in our motivation for doing what we do. He can't quite believe that we are unpaid, driven by our faith and enjoy what we do. He walks off shaking his head! Alex, a nineteen year old reveller, asks us who we are.

"So how much do you get paid, mate?" he asks.

"Nothing! We do it because we like to think we help people feel a bit safer on the streets at night, and we believe as Christians that we are doing what Jesus would do if He were here now!"

"Respect Man, you're doing a great job!" and with that, Alex revels off into the Waltham Cross night.

Here we pause for a kebab, a bag of chips, a drink – and we have made friends with the workers in the cafe on the High Street by now. We have a chat, a joke, ask how the evening has gone for them, share our chips and kebabs and move on to Hoddesdon, to "Faces" night club. It's around 1.30 now, and people are coming out of "Faces" on to the street where a long line of taxis wait patiently for revellers to fall into them. We hang around chatting to the doormen, sometimes to revellers who ask us who we are. Once we helped break up a fight, administered first aid to a very distressed girl and ensured an ambulance was called. Mostly, we just ensure folk are safe and have the means to get home.

It's now 2am and we walk back to Nigel's house, signing off with the police as we do so. We pray for the people we have met, thank God that we have been safe, and then tiptoe quietly into the early morning air back to our beds and a welcome bit of sleep.