

STREET PASTORS

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH FLIP-FLOPS AND PRAYER

Faith Today joins the volunteers who take God, and a lot of TLC, onto the nation's streets after last-orders.



STREET
PASTOR

It's 3am on a Saturday morning on the streets of a town in the heart of middle England. Streets that, by day, throng with buggy-pushing shoppers and retired couples are, at this time of night, a very different scene. It's club chucking-out time: young revellers, who have spent the last few hours dancing and drinking, are everywhere. In the main pedestrian area, two bunches of lads aged about 18 are involved in a stand-off: around them girls with mascara-smudged faces are trying to avert a fight.

There are some ugly exchanges, and a couple of police officers run up the street towards us. And then, just to one side of the action, a middle-aged woman gets out her mobile phone, presses a button, starts

to speak. 'We need some back-up,' she says in an urgent tone, her eyes still on the boys nearby. 'Pray for us.'

It may sound an odd call to make: but Lucille Payet is a Street Pastor, one of a growing number of Christians who choose to give witness to their faith to young people by patrolling the streets of towns like this one – Kingston-upon-Thames – on Friday and Saturday nights. The young people they encounter are often drunk and frequently disorderly...and one of their tactics for dealing with trouble is to phone back to Street Pastor HQ (based in a local URC church) to ask the other volunteers gathered there to pray when a potentially dangerous situation needs to be defused.

on her own, helping her sober up so she can get into a cab,' says Sharon Maxwell, another member of the team.

The Street Pastors' caring comes in various guises. As well as the prayer, and the concern for those who have been injured or are drunk, the pastors carry a backpack filled with the sorts of useful bits and pieces that might be useful to the youngsters as they make their way home at the end of a long evening: plasters for danced-in feet; emergency blankets for those who forgot to bring a coat, and are now freezing cold; bottles of water; and flip-flops, for girls who really can't manage on their high heels for another second, and would otherwise walk home barefooted. 'The flip-flops are very popular,' says Lucille.

As the pastors walk around the town centre, they look out eagerly for glass bottles – on the night I join them, 67 bottles are safely disposed of. 'It's to stop them being used as weapons later on,' says Tessa. 'It's one simple thing we can do that makes a difference.'



So why does a churchgoing Catholic like Tessa or Estrella become a Street Pastor? Estrella says she heard about it through a talk given during Mass. 'I've got four grown-up children myself, so I've been through what you go through when your children are growing up,' she says. 'Like many people in towns like this one, who have seen the night-life and the goings-on, I've always thought that what's most needed are ordinary adults who can be around to give caring

advice, as well as to talk about God and about belief.

'When you're a Christian, you're called on to help others. And I'm a Christian, and here was this call to help....so I did.'

Estrella joined the Kingston team four years ago. In the early days, she says, there was more drunkenness and more violence – she'd like to think that Street Pastors have been part of why there's now less trouble on the

town's streets. But there are still nights when things are difficult; and many parents, she says, would be surprised at what goes on when teenagers go clubbing. 'I think many would be shocked and frightened – parents don't always realise how vulnerable their children are in these circumstances,' she says.

It's nearly 4am now, and Sharon has just picked up one more bottle, lying on its side in the gutter. The lads who were angling for a fight have, happily, dispersed. 'It's often like that,' says Tessa, as she turns to head home. 'Prayer does make a difference.'

Could you be a Street Pastor?

- There are around 5,000 Street Pastors nationally
- Training takes place over 12 days, across five months
- Some pastors have additional first-aid training
- Street Pastors must be over 18 (there's no upper age limit) and a church member
- For more information on Street Pastors, see www.streetpastors.co.uk