

JOHN
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Reflections

During the summer

DURING the summer the editor of this paper had a high number of letters on one subject that provoked deep feelings.

Why do people leave churches?

I found it at least interesting and probably ironic that at the height of this correspondence *The Baptist Times* headline (August 6) was 'Back to Church Sunday keeps on getting bigger.'

This campaign has captured the imagination of many churches. As Ian Bunce, the BUGB's head of mission said: 'It's such a good initiative – inviting someone you know to something you love.'

The tone of some of the correspondence about why people leave churches was not so loving.

There is clearly a lot among people who go through this experience. It is seen as a breakdown of relationship. Perhaps Baptists feel this more acutely because of our emphasis on covenant and fellowship. This can quickly become a question of blame and fault-finding.

When I used to teach a class on personality and faith at one of our colleges, I would start by stating, 'People are regularly leaving my church. Why do you think this is?'

The first replies were always either 'They don't like you,' or 'They don't like the worship.'

I invited the students to treat these possible answers as symptoms. They do not disclose the reason. They invite further investigation.

Alan Jamieson has written much on this in the past decade. In his latest book, *Chrysalis* (Paternoster) he explores why for some people the very things that once inspired and nurtured their faith can become lifeless and even frustrating, and what might be done about it.

An earlier book, *Gone but not forgotten* by Philip Richter and Leslie Francis, was challenged by some at the time for its narrow research base, but many of its observations have been confirmed by the likes of Jamieson. They suggested people leave churches because of:

The changing nature of commitment in contemporary society

Loss of certainty in their faith

A perception that the Church is part of a culture that has had its day

The inability or unwillingness of a church to meet, reflect or respond to their stage of faith

Change of home, health, family issues, work problems, retirement

A childhood in the church and the need to escape

The demands placed on them by the fellowship

The church has not met their expectations and they do not feel they belong

So it would appear that anything might prompt a departure! What we do about it is another matter. Back to Church is one response.

Some people will be ready to come back to church. They have moved on from their original cause for leaving. They can consider a return. This is a cause of joy and affirmation. The moment has been given and it will be providential.

Gone but not forgotten helped me to work out a number of ways to make a church less 'leave-able' and also to accompany those people who had to go.

The couple who told me they were leaving because the children had left home and they no longer needed the youth club that brought the whole family to our church in the first place. The person who had become a member at the end of my predecessor's ministry – but now she had gone, so would he!

This confirmed the observation of Richter and Francis that the reason people leave a church is the same as the reason that brought them there in the first place.

We need to understand that some people just have to go and they are not coming back. Some may go to another church.

Others really have left the traditional forms of the Church. For them, no matter how contemporary, kingdom-centred and full our church may be, we are still part of a redundant form of tradition.

We might be a 'fresh expression' or 'new way of being church' but it's still a vain attempt to create a new model of an outmoded form of transport. They are not for turning.

Are they prophets of ways unknown, or just deserters who have let us down and make our faith feel unstable and inept?

(To be continued)

The Revd John Rackley is minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath

On foot patrol with streetwise Christians

Like it or not, they're taking the country by storm. **Jenny Williams** goes on patrol with London's Street Pastors

*Paddington Station, London, 4am Saturday
(Waiting for the first train home)*

SINCE 10pm, I've wandered London's streets, hung outside its bars and clubs, and talked with bouncers, kebab vendors and revellers.

It's what Street Pastors do every weekend. And it's seen some remarkable results.

Towns and cities across Britain have recorded massive drops in street crime where Street Pastors operate. In Camberwell it's coincided with a reported 95 per cent reduction in street crime; 74 per cent in Peckham.

They're transforming the cities they wander and sparking local and global interest – more than 100 teams operate throughout Britain, and more than 70 per cent of London boroughs now have the teams. Europe, America, Africa, Australia and Antigua are looking to follow suit.

It works like so: in teams of four, churchgoing volunteers patrol their local streets on a Friday or Saturday night from around 10pm–4am. They visit pubs, nightclubs and parties and build relationships with those they meet.

The point is simply to be a safe presence. No hellfire preaching here, it's about dialoguing, listening, and if asked to, offering prayer (they also carry Bibles, just in case).

Tonight I join a team led by Glenn Walters. A former military policeman during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, he has also taught in London and spent several years as a missionary in Southern India.

The experiences served, he says, to prepare him for work as a Street Pastor in the challenging, predominantly Muslim areas of East London.

Glenn became a Christian 15 years ago, then aged 35. And his own past has enabled him to relate to the people he meets on duty, as well as assess and defuse

uncertain, potentially volatile situations.

'I've done a few things in my life,' he explains. 'I've been there and done it: the booze, the drugs, the lot. I know that it's empty. People aren't going to be satisfied with that week after week. It's meaningless, and they know that.'

Glenn now works full time for London City Mission, and is based at Ridley Christian Centre, Forest Gate – tonight's base.

At 10pm, the team (Glenn, joined by Diedrick Meij, Chris Blake and Len West) gather for briefing, prayer and, to my surprise, a couple of hymns before heading out.

'Let's pray that, for all the right reasons, it'll be a night we'll never forget,' finishes Glenn.

The team act as protectors, mediators and chaplains, encountering people on the verge of suicide, others with nowhere to sleep, those who've been attacked and robbed, the drunk and aggressive.

'We saw one man kicked in the head,' recalls Chris. 'We thought he'd died in front of us.'

'This is the real world,' adds Glenn.

'It's in a desperate state and you see that at night on the streets. You can either hide from it, or go out there and make a bit of a difference. I don't think we're in this world to wrap ourselves in cotton wool –

certainly not if we're doing the Lord's work. You find people with all sorts of problems, and, more than anything, the great need is for a relationship with God.'

Exposure to London's darker face can prove daunting – even for a burly former military man ('It'll stay peaceful tonight by God's grace: it's tough around here' offers up one bouncer).

A sense of discernment is important in this role. Alcohol breeds unpredictability, so it's smart to know when to talk, and when to back off.

Sure enough, fights break out feet from us. Police teams scramble to intervene. As they do, the Street Pastors pray – some silently, some aloud (and eyes always open) – and speak with the people around them.

Len (a youthful 83) has spent three weekends in a row on duty. The usual is one per month. As the pubs empty out, he appears unfazed both by the ugly turn in atmosphere, and the generational gulf that separates him and the revellers; chatting to teenage pubgoers and comfortably assisting the team. 'In my faith, what I receive, has got to be given,' he explains. 'And you can't give, unless you go. You've got to get out there and use it. It's obviously not something the Church does enough of.'

'That's why Street Pastors was started,' continues Chris. 'Because the Church wasn't getting outside enough. Thank God for people who want to do. There are people around the world who are doing. God puts something in their heart and they go, they don't wait for anyone else, they just go.'

It's the police who bear the brunt of public hostility, something the team is keenly aware of, and rarely receives in anything like the same dose. They're somewhat neutral territory; unthreatening, trustworthy, reliable.

Which doesn't, however, automatically translate to 'credible'.

The initiative has hit headlines for distributing lollipops and flip-flops to inebriated partygoers. The novelty drew widespread attention to the cause, but some felt it threatened to eclipse the scheme's true purpose. Flip-flops are a sideshow. Nevertheless, its reputation for credible outreach is growing, says 29-year-old team member Deiderick, who arrived in the UK four years ago from South Africa. 'I think it's getting there. In the beginning, people are sceptical that you're going to evangelise to them and preach doom and gloom. But if you keep coming back, if you're not fake with them and you don't go in with an agenda, if you just come in love, they start to respond.'

The sentiment is echoed by people



From left to right: Len West, Diedrick Meij, Glenn Walters and Chris Blake



Nightclub bouncers often stop to chat with the team

Street Pastors explained...

Revd Les Isaac, director of urban charity, the Ascension Trust.

Teams usually consist of four churchgoers, each of whom will work a minimum of one night a month, patrolling the streets and visiting local pubs, nightclubs and parties, usually from 10pm–4am, have undergone a CRB check and completed a 12 day training course

THE INITIATIVE was pioneered in London in 2003 by the

For information, go to <http://www.streetpastors.co.uk>

throughout the night. Christian or otherwise, they're impressed that the Church has found its legs – and used them to walk right into testing terrain. 'Too many Church leaders are hypocritical,' one bouncer offers. 'They need to lead by good example. It's great that these people are out here.'

The team has built solid relationships with the nocturnal locals. Bouncers and club owners stop to talk, genuinely pleased to see them.

But the majority of people, the team will meet just once, and fleetingly so. It's therefore vital to leave a good impression.

And they do.

It's an unlikely team. An affable if mismatched family, they're formed from different nations and generations. And diversity is no bad thing. All the time learning from one another, the team is making waves, united in their desire to serve Christ practically.

For most of the night, the atmosphere is easy. There are lots of laughs, laid-back chat, and I watch team members get alongside and genuinely connect with passers-by.

'People ask, "How much do you get paid for it?" You say, "Nothing" – they can't believe it!' laughs Chris. 'It touches them because they realise you're out there for them, walking the streets late at night. It gets them wondering, "Who would do that?"'

And curiosity does get the better of many. The agnostic, atheist and even those of other faiths stop to ask questions, or for prayer on the street.

Courage, often fuelled by alcohol, sees scores come forward to question those in the know. It can also open the mind to the possibilities of God, notes Glenn.

'Although we don't go out to evangelise, the opportunities arise quite naturally. People are certainly open to it – when they see the words "Street Pastor" emblazoned on your clothing, they'll ask questions straight away: "What's a Street Pastor? Why do you do it?" And one thing leads to another.'

During the night they encounter a man outside a club. He asks them to pray for him. They do so and hand him a John 3:16 tract. His reaction shocks them all.

'I will never forget that,' says Chris. 'The change in his voice and look on his face as he read that.'

The man's friend came out of the club to see what he was doing. The man replied, 'These people have prayed for me and I've got a Bible in my pocket. I'm going home, this is not the place for me to be.' And off he went.

'We're not there to badger anyone to become a Christian,' continues Chris. 'But God can work in mysterious ways.'

After a while in Forest Gate, the team move on to nearby Stratford.

Teenage Christians approach us throughout the night, shouting encouragement. 'That's what it's all about man! It's taking it to the next level!'

'Our children need us here, now,' says Chris. 'You look at them and think, "They have no-one to look up to, no role models.'

'You've got to be who Jesus calls you to be. You've got to have his heart, his compassion. How else are you going to save lives? You could be saving their life without even realising it. You can't profess to be a Christian if you're not going to live the life.'

An unlikely mix the team may be, but they're an undeniable hit. Its members share a tireless enthusiasm for their role and kindness toward those they meet. No hellfire in sight, no pew-filling agenda.

The Street Pastors project has proved highly infectious. Which is no bad thing.

But what's important now, notes Chris, is that the people taking up the cause remember its original goal – to listen to the people.

Credibility will take time to build. It'll take the unity and grit of teams like these.

It'll take love, authenticity and patience.

In a word, it'll take grace.

Which is why, as these churchgoers stroll London's streets, they can do so with their heads held high.