

A Christian team of volunteers were introduced to the streets of Preston's in the battle to cut crime in hotspots areas. Crime Reporter STEF HALL speaks to Preston woman Nina Woodfield, one of the UK's first street pastors, six weeks into the scheme

ONE may wonder what drives a 54-year-old grandma-of-two to take to Preston's red light district and anti-social behaviour hotspots in the early hours of the morning.

But for Nina Woodfield the answer is simple.

She says: "I think any small step will make a big difference to people's lives.

Being a Christian gives you the strength and energy to do great things."

The pastors, from all denominations of churches across Preston, began their patrols of St Matthew's and St George's on December 12.

They are a visible presence on the streets to help anyone in need – from walking a drunken teenager to a bus stop or helping a vulnerable prostitute to get off the game and into a better life.

They have tried to help more than 100 troubled members of public, mostly 18 to 25.

Working in teams of six one night a week, they target those in need in streets like Meadow Street, Deepdale Road and Fletcher Road, which are affected by prostitution, drugs, and anti-social behaviour.

Nina, who has three sons and has been married to Bob for 32 years, previously worked in one of the UK's most crime-riddled estates in Longsight, Manchester.

She was forced to take a back seat when she was diagnosed with tongue cancer in December 2006 but the plucky mum battled the illness and was back helping people on the streets – this time in her home city – within a year of having gruelling radiotherapy treatment. She says: "The crime problems are different but there are still the same lonely people in Preston as there were in Longsight. There are the same feelings of hopelessness.

"In Longsight there was an attitude of accepting that young people were involved in gangs. In Preston there's not that mindset – people feel it's unacceptable to live like that." Among cases the pastors dealt with in their first few sessions were drunken teenagers and rowdy groups of youths.

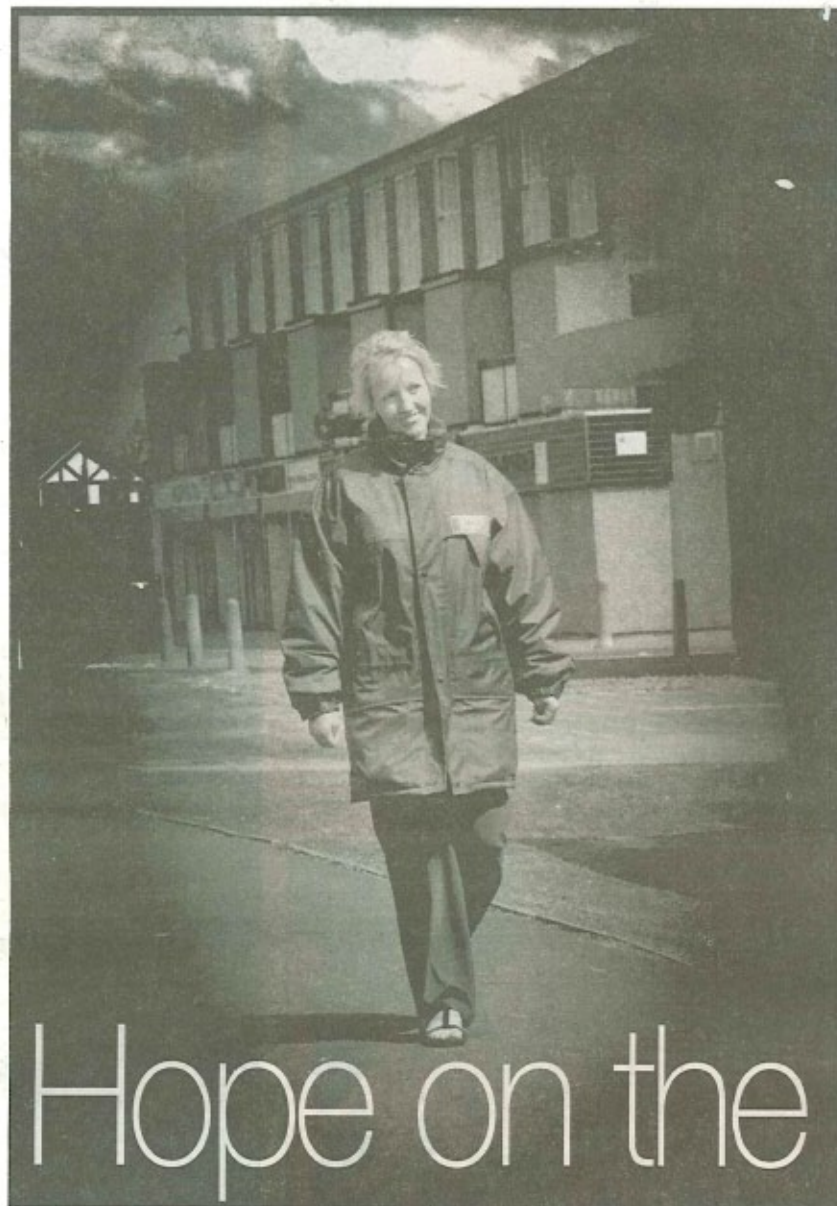
But one of the biggest concerns of residents in the areas they patrol is prostitution – a hot topic at Police and Community Together (PACT) meetings. Nina revealed street sex workers in the city had already asked the pastors to patrol areas where they feel most vulnerable, particularly dark alleyways in the red light district. She explains: "A few girls have admitted they don't feel safe and that there are a few characters hanging around. Last week it was fairly mild for winter and a lot of sex workers were out. One 17-year-old girl asked us for advice in getting off the streets. Another girl we spoke to said she was pregnant. "As a mum you feel for them. You feel sorry for them because they are stood there and

they are cold. I gave them chocolate and gave them a hug. They have never had anything nice." She adds: "We don't pretend to have all the answers. But that one bit of kindness for a minute can make all the difference – and that's all we can do. "If you can engage with them it is easier to explain to them

up and down with her and tried to talk to her to find out where she was going. "We also visited an off licence where anti-social behaviour had been raised as a problem at one of the PACT meetings we go to.

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– Street pastor Nina Woodfield



# Hope on the streets

about how residents feel about their activities outside their homes and that is a double success."

Street pastors are an inter-denominational church response to urban problems. The project began five years ago in London.

Under guidance from police, the council and the church, they will be deployed in areas where a Christian presence is considered useful.

Nina says: "The first night we went into pubs and shops because it was cold and that was where the people were. It was a matter of introducing ourselves. People did ask us what we were doing and were welcoming. Landlords even offered us drinks.

"One of the first jobs we came across was a young teenage girl wandering around very drunk. We walked

up and down with her and tried to talk to her to find out where she was going. "We also visited an off licence where anti-social behaviour had been raised as a problem at one of the PACT meetings we go to.

"There were around 15 young people in an argument but we managed to diffuse the situation. I think we have a calming influence.

"Sometimes our role could be as simple as walking a drunken person safely to a bus stop, or try to find out where they are going."

She admits: "It is a challenge to make people understand our role. One woman at a meeting demanded to know why we weren't tackling a street worker outside her home at 4am.

"There are limitations to what we can do because of our resources. It would be wonderful to have street pastors every night but we can't do that at this stage."

However church leaders are hoping now the public have witnessed the pastors' work it will inspire more volunteers to come forward so the scheme can be implemented in other areas of the city.

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