



Dressed to thrill but not for the chill... two young women walk past street pastor Peter Wilson in the city centre while, right, Peter and his wife Maddy chat to a group of lads enjoying a night out



Warm words and helping hand on freezing night out



Peter Wilson is happy to be there for people

Temperatures drop as low as -5C as Wolverhampton's team of street pastors patrol the city centre, giving aid and assistance to the revellers.

Kept warm by their faith and a sense of helping out the community, the team members offer a reassuring presence on the cold streets.

Street pastors is a Christian volunteer organisation, whose role is to be there for people who have over indulged on a night out, whether it is medical assistance, help finding their friends, or simply a foil blanket to keep them warm.

They usually take to the streets at around 10pm and stay out until the early hours of the following morning.

Peter Wilson, who helps run the Wolverhampton team, says: "Street pastoring is a great idea and we're happy to be there for people who need us."

Pastors must be members of a church and the night begins with a prayer for the city to be looked after, and for God to show them where to help.

While the work pastors do goes unnoticed for many people, it is clear to see it is important, even on a quiet night.

The pastors carry back-packs full of accessories to help out the city centre

Street pastors go out in Wolverhampton city centre at the weekends to keep an eye on revellers and make sure they are safe, **JON PRITCHARD** joins a Saturday night patrol

revellers. One of the most used is, surprisingly, plastic flip-flops.

When women wear brand new shoes, or maybe heels that are a bit high, they often take them off on the way home after a night on their feet. But walking barefoot is not wise, so the free flip-flops are available from the pastors to protect their feet.

Looking after vulnerable people is an important part of being a street pastor. In a quiet part of the city, they spotted a young woman sitting on her own.

Joined

The pastors spoke to her and, fortunately, she was only waiting to be picked up by a friend, who soon turned up and they drove off into the cold night.

Mr Wilson, who is a Fallings Park Conservative councillor on Wolverhampton City Council, is joined by his wife, Maddy. The couple moved to Wolverhampton from Yorkshire more than 20 years ago, and settled in quickly.

Mrs Wilson says: "Wolverhampton

has such a wonderful social community; we hope we can help keep that alive."

The pastors also liaise with doormen at the pubs and clubs which builds up community relationships and trust. The team carries radios tuned into the same frequency as the doormen and police, so pastors can keep in touch with what is happening in the city centre.

While chatting to the doormen at Gorgeous, they see a young man comes running to be sick. His girlfriend follows and begins to look after him. She decides it is time to go home, so the pastors look after her boyfriend while she goes to get her friend from inside the club.

He starts to get angry but the pastors are trained to know when to talk to someone and when to leave them to it.

They diffuse the situation by letting him walk off, and keep an eye on him from a distance.

Mrs Wilson says: "It's very important not to go marching into a situation and make it worse. Sometimes we just quietly pray for no one to get hurt. We



Maddy Wilson readily joins in the fun with this reveller

don't try to convert people to Christianity or preach to them. That's not what we're about. We're just here to help out if we're needed."

One moment epitomises what street pastors are all about. When walking down Dudley Street, a female reveller runs towards the group. She had bumped into them on a previous night out and knew about the work they did.

Planted

Being under-dressed for the freezing weather, she asks for a foil 'space blanket' to keep her warm, and the pastors duly oblige. This sort of meeting has happened almost every week since Wolverhampton Street Pastors was set up more than five years ago.

The national organisation was set up by the Rev Les Isaac in Brixton in 2003, but the idea was planted during a trip to Wolverhampton in 1992. He was paired with the then vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Heath Town, the Rev Alistair Palmer, who was reorienting his church

to be more focused on his community. This had a big effect on Mr Isaac, who set up the Ascension Trust, the organisation which runs the pastors.

Now, just eight years after pastors first took to the streets, there are more than 100 teams, stretching from Cornwall to Scotland. Police have said the number of incidents on nights out fall when the pastors are there.

A Wolverhampton police spokeswoman says: "They are a friendly face and are available to offer advice and support to anyone who needs it. They have been able to assist us during the Keep It Safe initiative over the last few years carrying out reassurance patrols in the city centre together with officers."

This Saturday, with thousands of people cramming into bars and clubs, was incident free for the pastors.

Mrs Wilson says: "If it's quiet night then we're happy. It means everyone is having a good time. We just want people to know we're there for them if anything does go wrong."