


Word on the street

Christmas is a time for giving and the Street Pastors are giving their time to voluntarily walk the streets during the early hours of the morning in order to give something back to their community in Southend in Essex.

Syreeta Lund reports

 They walk the streets in groups of four, they wear a uniform and they provide public reassurance. Who are they?

You would be forgiven for thinking the answer was a community support officer, but you would be wrong, because the real answer is 'Christians'.

While most people would not be prepared to give up Christmas Eve with their family and spend the night walking the streets of Southend voluntarily dealing with the aftermath of drink-fuelled violence, the Street Pastors, ordinary local church goers are planning to do just that.

The Street Pastor Scheme was launched in Southend in May this year with the aim of providing extra help and reassurance to local communities.

However, while trained police officers are equipped to deal with the rigours of street life, armed with batons, CS spray and a pair of handcuffs, the Street Pastors only have their trusty Bible to rely on.

It is not that the Pastors receive no training, quite the opposite, as a voluntary force, they are given 12 days training on subjects ranging from conflict resolution and counselling to self-defence, just in case things turn ugly.

And they can always call on the support of the church – as while they patrol, there are Christians praying back at the base for them, base being a church smack-bang in the heart of Southend.

So, on Christmas Eve, like any other Friday or Saturday night, the Pastors of Southend will be out in



Street Pastors meet a policing team in Southend

Credit: Ron Poulter.

force between the hours of 10pm and 4am – the graveyard shift.

The Street Pastors have already done 34 tours of duty and spoken to 1,600 people.

They have financial backing from Southend Borough Council under the Crime Reduction Partnerships.

Their remit may sound familiar, like unpaid police officers or community support officers, but the crucial difference, as David Ince, coordinator for the Street Pastors in Southend points out, is their independence.

Although they work in liaison with local police, they do not have any specific powers and just act to gain the trust of the community and help make people feel reassured.

Mr Ince spent 37 years in the police service involved in forensics before taking on his current role as

coordinator of the Street Pastor Scheme after retirement.

'I have been involved in Christian organisations for the last 50 years. Initially people on the streets were not really sure about us and who we are as an organisation.'

But the work of the Street Pastors has been well publicised and people now recognise them and the work they do.

As Christians thousands of years ago were espousing the values of charity – followers today are trying to put this into practice in modern day Britain.

Mr Ince explains: 'I felt I had been called to do this. When we are out on the street at 2.30am, people ask us why we are doing it, it's because we care. People do not come into churches as much anymore – so we are going out to them.'

Southend has a population of 177,000 and six million visitors every year. There are 285 police officers covering the area and 17,000 crimes committed every year.

The Street Pastors patrol the streets of the nightclub district in Southend, offering advice and counselling to a whole array of people, such as the homeless or victims of crime and they can sometimes find themselves stepping in to dampen the fire of potential fights.

The fact that people do not see them as being directly associated with the police means they can sometimes gather intelligence from the community in a way police officers can not.

Mr Ince recalls how a mum approached the Street Pastors as she was worried her son was keeping a firearm at her house, he

was able to inform the police, with her permission, and get the gun removed.

'She did not want to speak to the police because she was worried about the consequences,' says Mr Ince, adding that they do keep confidentiality but if they are informed of a serious matter they warn the person they are speaking to that the information will have to be passed on to the police if they continue the conversation.

Chf Supt Steve Currell, who works in Essex Police as a divisional commander at Southend, is the main contact for the force and was involved at the inception of the scheme.

He is a member of the Christian Police Association and was initially asked by his force to look into the Street Pastor Scheme as he already had contacts within churches in the community.

Churches in Southend wanted to take part in helping to make the community safer and Chf Supt Currell saw an opportunity.

'I thought that we could be missing out on using the resources of local churches, many of who have buildings and youth groups already.'

Although he is Christian, he says the Street Pastors do not go out to preach to people, adding: 'If they are asked what does being a Christian mean, then the pastor will explain, but they do not preach.'

'They do not walk around saying, "you must believe in God", or have it written on a sandwich board.'

Southend has around 600 night clubs and the street pastors cover the main nightclub district, based around Lucy Street.

'Once people realised what we were doing and we established a relationship, around 95 per cent of the time we found we were treated very well. We had young female teenagers saying they liked us because it made them feel safe and less vulnerable.'

'Some people will come out of pubs and clubs worse for wear. We keep an eye out as we know that others may take advantage of them by stealing their wallet or handbag.'

'The police have been really pleased to see us. We have had a positive reaction because it reduces problems for them.'

The Street Pastors have a protocol which includes calling into command and control for Essex police to give them a dedicated incident number which, when called up on the screen, gives details about the Street Pastors and where they are patrolling that night.

There are 16 volunteers in Southend; they always patrol in fours, including a team leader, and

they wear a uniform which consists of a blue baseball cap, blue anorak with 'Street Pastors' on the back and on the front. It costs £250 per volunteer for their training and uniform.

Chf Supt Currell had a meeting with church leaders back in June 2004 and set about ways to provide some funding for the project.

Working alongside inspectors in the Southend division, Chf Supt Currell managed to gain £10,000 funding from the local Crime and Disorder Partnership and Go East, who provided Government funding.

'We had to set out what we could do and what we wanted to deliver,' says Chf Supt Currell.

But, if they are a uniform presence to reassure communities, what are the differences between them and police and CSOs?

'We do not deploy groups of street pastors together with police officers. They are not police officers or PCSOs - they are members of the community. They are no different to park wardens.'

'Just under half, 40 per cent of all crime on the Southend division is criminal damage, so it helps to have people there who can also provide a presence.'

'Sometimes they will spot someone trying to commit a crime, graffiti or whatever, they see the street pastors and then run off, so it is having an effect,' he says.

The Street Pastor Scheme is overseen by an umbrella organisation called the Ascension Trust, a Christian Charity, and was originally

set up in London in January 2003 by Rev Les Issacs, director of the Trust.

Chf Supt Currell says that if there is a robbery victim, someone lying on the ground, the pastors stay with them so they are not victimised further and help them until the police turn up.

'They encounter homeless people and give advice. They are there to provide help and support. They prevent fights from taking place. It's good to see the church getting out onto the streets. They are not there to evangelise people but a force for good.'

Street pastors must:

- Be a church member and be able to receive 12 days training covering a range of subjects including: awareness of the local community, child protection and defence skills
- Be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau
- Be over the age of 18 (although there is no upper age limit)
- Each Street Pastor team consists of three groups of four, each of which work a minimum of one night a month, usually from 10pm to around 4am

If you would like to know more look at:
www.streetpastors.org.uk



Credit: Ron Poulter.