

## Front line work - by Canon Neil Cutcliffe

I got involved because churches from different denominations are working together on the ground and because there is a great need for something like this in Newtownabbey.



These kids are a strata of society that no church is reaching. They believe the church has no interest in them. This gives us a chance to do something for them. It is not a preaching mission.

In training, we learned about working with the police, the council and other social bodies, about drug and alcohol awareness and first aid. Our first experience on the streets was in Belfast. There you might never meet a person twice, but in Newtownabbey we are meeting the same groups regularly.

Since we started, anti-social behaviour in the areas we work in is down by 60 per cent. We are not a police organisation. We do not take drink or anything off anyone. We are not heavy handed. We do get a bit of abuse at times, but it is really low key.

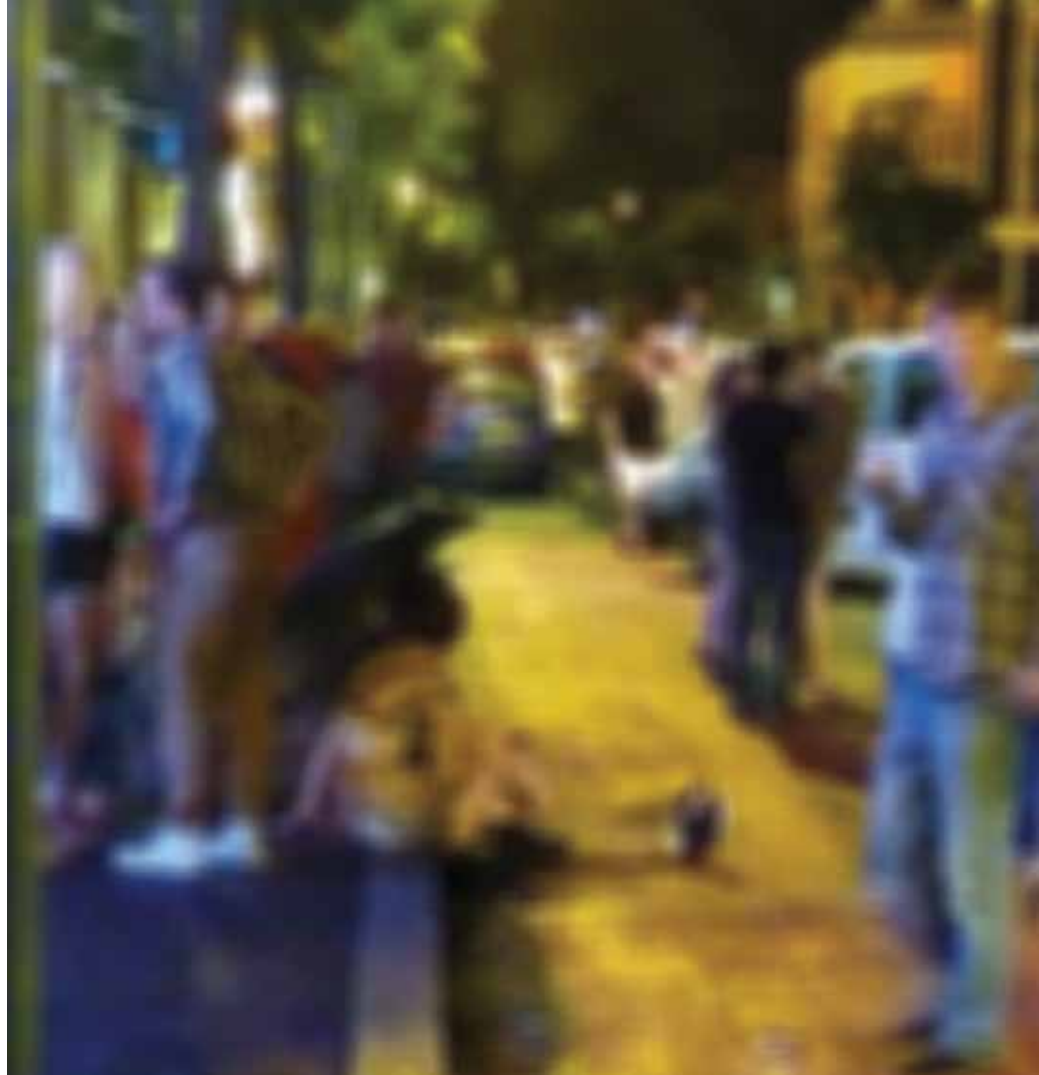
Drugs are a bigger problem than alcohol. You have to use your common sense and you do not put yourself in danger. If there is trouble you walk away. We are there to help kids and chat to them and make them feel they are valued.

I would recommend anybody to give it a go. It strengthens the links between churches and individuals and it strengthens your own faith. We are out there on the streets seeing things happening, kids changing over the weeks as they get to know you. This is front line work.

**Neil Cutcliffe is rector of Mossley and a Newtownabbey Street Pastor.**



Street pastors at work.



A late night

# More volunteers needed together to make nights

At weekends, in the early hours of the morning, our city streets come alive. Young people spill out of pubs and clubs heading for home.

For some a good night out can turn bad. After too much alcohol emotions run high, arguments develop, there may be a queue for taxis, or no taxis at all. Girls have cast off their platform shoes and walk barefoot on pavements where bottles and glasses lie smashed.

Street Pastors are there to help. In Belfast city centre during 2012 Street Pastors prevented 28 assaults, gave assistance and advice to 339 people, handed out more than 400 pairs of flip flops to barefoot young women, prevented almost 30 assaults, helped more than 150 people get home and lifted nearly 5,000 discarded bottles and glasses.

Street Pastors is a cross denominational ministry which works in partnership with Belfast City Council and the PSNI. They

are on the streets on Friday and Saturday nights and their aim is to care, listen and help. They are in radio contact with CCTV control so pastors know what is happening where and can report any difficult situations.

Street Pastors also work in Newtownabbey. The only other branch of the organisation in Ireland is in Cork.

Trevor Betts, co-ordinator of Belfast Street Pastors, said there are around 30 volunteers, but the organisation needs more Christians to join them.

"We are trying to encourage as many people from different churches to become involved," said Trevor. "We have 30 volunteers and we would like to have 130. We only ask people to go out once a month and ideally we would have four

## Making a difference - by Janet Hanna

I really enjoy being part of Belfast Street Pastors. It's good craic and you meet some real characters

We go out once a month. We meet at about 10.30pm, have a cup of tea, check we have everything in our bags like our first aid kit, gloves – I am obsessed with picking up glass bottles because I see them as potential weapons – flip flops for the girls, water, sweets and a brush and pan for broken glass.

We hit the streets about 11.30. There are three or four of us in a team, always at least one female and we cover quite a few miles each night.

There are lots of young people, often girls on their own because their friends have left them behind. When I was young we all went somewhere together and left together. Now they send each other texts saying they are going on somewhere else, the message isn't seen and they just leave, which means lots of girls waiting for lifts on their own.

It is not always young people who need our help. On my first night out we came across a man in his sixties lying on the ground who was really intoxicated. We were afraid he would choke. We practically carried him home as none of the taxis would take him in the state he was in. I dread to think what might have happened to that man if we had not been there.

I can honestly say I have never felt threatened on the streets. I have had only good experiences and most people just want to talk. I genuinely feel we are making a difference in people's lives.

**Janet Hanna is a Belfast Street Pastor and member of Christ Church, Lisburn.**



Janet Hanna from Christ Church Parish, Lisburn, is a Street Pastor in Belfast.

night scene in the Shaftesbury Square area of Belfast, one of the locations Street Pastors can be found working at weekends.

# ded as churches work ht time streets safer

teams made up of four members out every Saturday night."

All Street Pastors receive 50 hours of training and practical discipling on the streets. "Often the people we meet will have had too much to drink, but people are mostly good natured and so appreciative of what we do," said Trevor. "We offer basic first aid, give the girls flip flops, we carry water and even sweets which can help calm a potentially violent situation. We pick up bottles and sweep up broken glass.

"We are a positive presence. We do not preach at people although all our pastors are Christians. We talk to people and if they want to talk about issues Christian we are happy to discuss things with them. We also give them a card. But this is not about street evangelism."

"This is about the church being out on the streets helping out in a positive, practical, caring way and as we do that we do get

to talk to people and sometimes be a signpost to help them on the right way.

"Not long ago, on the footbridge over the River Lagan, we came upon someone contemplating suicide. We were able to talk him out of it. We often find young girls who have had too much to drink and have become separated from their friends. We wait with them until they get a lift home"

Belfast Street Pastors target four night zones, the City Hall, Cathedral Quarter, Odyssey and Shaftesbury Square / Botanic Avenue.

"These places are a completely different world late at night," said Trevor. "Everyone is piling out of the pubs and queuing for taxis. Often they have not planned how they are going to get home and with drunk people there is the potential for things to get out of hand. We are there to help people get home safely and make Belfast a better city."