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Street Pastors at work in Southampton

THE CHURCH HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

The UK Church is undergoing a social action revolution. In the second of our three-part series, **Sam Hailes** looks at how Christians are living out their faith on the streets

A teenager stumbles around in the dark, alone and lost. It's Friday night and what began as a fun night out has turned sour. The young woman has been separated from her friends and has had far too much to drink. How will she get home safely?

Until recently there were no organisations, let alone Christian groups, who would be on hand to help. With no crime committed, it can't be a policing priority. With no injury to attend to, an ambulance is

unlikely to be called.

But over the past decade, the Church's social action revolution has hit the streets. Street Pastors are now present in over 270 locations up and down the country. They exist to provide practical assistance to hundreds of vulnerable people in town and city centres on Friday and Saturday nights. What is especially remarkable is that this unashamedly Christian group has an excellent reputation with the police force and local councils.

Communications officer Rosalind Davies believes Street Pastors has 'invigorated' the Church and been 'great PR' for Christians. On a personal level she says the project has helped her 'rediscover' the great commission.

EVANGELISM ON THE STREETS

Christian organisations draw varying and sometimes opposing conclusions about evangelism in the context of



Street Angels work in town centres in the UK and abroad

social action. Christians Against Poverty (CAP), for example, say it is 'famous in the Church' for the way it unashamedly marries social action and evangelism.

But others are much more cautious. Both Street Pastors, and the similar group Street Angels, say they do not exist to evangelise.

Street Angels was founded by Paul Blakey MBE after he was alerted to the shocking prevalence of violence, sexual assault and binge drinking on the streets of Halifax. The town had a reputation as the 'Wild West of Yorkshire'. Drinks were as cheap as 50p each, which led to 10,000 people descending on the town centre each weekend.

'Myself and my wife thought that our town deserved better than the reputation it had on weekend evenings,' Blakey explains. 'It had become a no-go area for the majority of people.'

REDUCING CRIME

Street Angels now operates in 130

“ STARTING A STREET ANGELS PROJECT WITH A CHRISTIAN ETHOS REDUCES CRIME

towns across the UK. Its volunteers can be found on the streets, inside nightclubs and at festivals, offering help and support, chaplaincy and detached youth work.

Wherever violent crime and anti-social behaviour take place, Street Angels are regularly present, Blakey says. 'We've got lots of figures from external sources such as

the police that say starting a Street Angels project with a Christian ethos reduces crime.' He explains that violent crime in Halifax had reduced by 42% within one year of the Street Angels team being born.

One of the few differences between Street Pastors and Street Angels is that the latter allows non-Christians to join, whereas the former require applicants to have been a member of a local church for at least one year.

Blakey explains that having a mixture of Christian and non-Christian Street Angels on a team allows the Christians to share their faith with the other Angels. 'When you're mopping up sick at 2am, that's where you can have the conversation about what motivates you to do this,' he says.

SURPRISING STATISTICS

The Office for National Statistics says the proportion of young people who binge drink at least once a week is down from 29% in 2005 to 18% in

2013. Is the hard work of Christians on our streets paying off?

Blakey says it is. 'Because we're building relationships with people... they are sometimes challenged – "Why did I get into that state that I needed someone to help me? Perhaps I need to be drinking less."'

He points out that Freshers' Weeks now often include events that aren't centred on drinking excessively, which he sees as proof that 'we're helping to change the culture' and God is hearing the Christians' prayers.

Street Pastors agree that more people have been 'moderating their behaviour', but Davies says that teams still regularly see 'alcohol-fuelled conflicts, aggression, emotion, illness and accidents'. There's still much work to be done. And thanks to the voluntary nature of both Street Pastors and Street Angels, that work is being done by ordinary Christians up and down the country.

THE CHURCH HAS GOT ITS PLACE BACK

Aside from his work with Street Angels, Blakey is upbeat about the Church's broader influence on society.

'If you look back 50 or 60 years, the Church was involved in so much. We started the school system, health system, welfare system and then the government took it off us. We've spent 50 years not realising our full potential within society.

'Now that the government has made a mess of it, effectively, we've got our place back. Look at what the Church is providing in this nation; Street Angels is bringing crime down, food banks and debt management – the Church has found its place.

'Christ is the answer to every problem, need and issue. We should be the ones out there delivering cutting-edge professional and radical services to everyone within society...I think it's great that we are leading the way in this country.'

In 2014, the World Health Organisation examined 196 countries and found Britain to be the

13TH HIGHEST FOR HEAVY DRINKING.

28% OF BRITONS were classed as having had an episode of heavy drinking in the previous month – almost twice as much as the global average.

55,190 HOMELESS APPLICATIONS

were made during the first half of 2015.

Research by Crisis shows that

62% of single homeless people **ARE HIDDEN** and may not show up in official figures.

2,744 people are estimated to be **SLEEPING ROUGH** on any one night in England, according to Homeless Link.

The number of rough sleepers has

INCREASED BY 55% since 2010.

It is estimated that alcohol misuse

COSTS THE NHS in England about **£3.5BN** every year.

HOMELESSNESS

While Christians providing pastoral support to late-night partygoers is a recent development, the Church has long been fighting the issue of homelessness through soup runs and shelters. But straight-talking Pastor Pete Cunningham of Green Pastures believes churches must do more.

'There are 40,000 churches in the UK. But how many of those 40,000 ministers walk past homeless persons on their streets and never pick them up?' Cunningham asks. 'They don't bother about them.'

Although these are strong words, they aren't spoken from the sidelines. Cunningham's social enterprise, Green Pastures, is currently housing 717 people. The 'no-nonsense' pastor believes the UK Church contains the potential to help many hundreds more.

Green Pastures uses funds from its investors to purchase properties (the number currently stands at 67) across the country. Each property is run and maintained by a local church or Christian organisation. And it's down to those Christians to find and house homeless people in their area. Local Housing Allowance produces the rental income needed. Green Pastures say that this model allows the needy to be housed and the Church to serve through providing pastoral care. And since investors can expect a 5% return, it seems everybody wins.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The initiative came about 18 years ago after Cunningham re-read the story of the Good Samaritan and had 'an epiphany'.

'The Good Samaritan took the money out of his own pocket – he took total responsibility for a stranger. We felt challenged by the Holy Ghost that the Church had abrogated its responsibility, left it all to local and national governments and they had



LET'S GET ON AND DO THE JOB FOR JESUS

made a pig's ear of it.'

The 73-year-old pastor believes the Church has the potential to 'cure homelessness' in the next 15 years.

Green Pastures puts a big emphasis on evangelism. It pays full-time pastoral care workers to work in their properties and half of the people they house become Christians.

'I'm simplistic in my thinking,' he admits. 'Let's get on and do the job for Jesus.'

When asked about whether the average Christian can help the homeless through giving money or food, Cunningham's 'no-nonsense' approach shines through.

'Well, people are homeless. What they need is somewhere to live. So why don't they get in touch with us, and we'll buy them a house?'

Green Pastures' story is inspiring and challenging. But is it really as easy and straightforward as it appears?

'I'm not saying it's easy, I'm saying it works. We've had houses that have been burnt down. We've had three people murdered in our property. I've had people spit in my face and threaten to kill me. It's not easy. But the thing is, did Jesus have it easy?'

RETHINKING HOMELESSNESS

The number of people sleeping rough in England has risen every year since 2010. The causes of homelessness include unemployment, low income, abuse, family breakdown and poverty. Alastair Murray of charity Housing

Clara's story

Born in Spain, Clara grew up in London. Her family home was violent and abusive, and she

ran away several times. She drifted between different jobs but really wanted to have a family. When she did marry, eventually having five children, the relationship became increasingly abusive.

Moved by the death of her first child, she began to regularly attend church. After being diagnosed with postnatal depression, Clara found it increasingly difficult to cope with life. Once she and her husband were divorced, she decided that her children would be better off without her, and moved out.

Clara struggled to find accommodation and bounced between sofas, shared houses and

unsafe hostels. She was exposed to violence and drugs.

She was desperate to live an independent life, and find her own safe space where she could rebuild a relationship with her four daughters. Fortunately, she was able to move into a scheme supported by Church Housing Trust. Beck House in London has been a life-changing experience

for her. It has allowed her to get a handle on her health issues, feel safe, and plan for a future involving her children.

She has become so involved that she is now tenant inspector, after having been successfully elected as tenant representative for the house. She will be nominated to move on soon, and choose her own independent flat in the borough.



Justice, which describes itself as the 'national voice of Christian action to prevent homelessness and bad housing', says the Church can use its assets of land and property to help the destitute.

'In many parts of the country, sadly church attendance is in decline. There are a lot of churches that don't have architectural merit and aren't really needed. We encourage churches, when they're looking at redevelopment, to think about affordable housing as part of that development.'

Murray explains that a local housing association, council and church in the Diocese of Gloucester recently worked together to replace

a 'huge sprawling Victorian vicarage' with a modern vicarage and 14 affordable housing units for young people at risk of homelessness.

'Where the Church can create affordable housing, that's a powerful message to the local community about the Church's priorities. We're trying to encourage churches of all denominations to seriously consider whether affordable housing can be part of any redevelopment,' he says.

SHOWING GOD'S LOVE

Every homeless person has a story to tell, and these stories are often

surprising and moving. Marksteen Adamson has spent more time than most with homeless people on the streets. His award-winning book and photography exhibition 'Behold the Man' aims to make people think again about homelessness (see the September 2014 edition of *Premier Christianity*).

Adamson warns that even the basics of how we feed the homeless may need rethinking. 'Quite often the things we do don't express God's love. A lot of Christians will be quite controlling in the way they give. They'll see a homeless person, go to Tesco, buy a sandwich and come back and give it to a homeless person.

'But they haven't asked that person what they like to eat. The idea of giving someone a sandwich without asking them what they like is arrogant. I wouldn't do it to my children, so why would I do that to someone who is homeless?'

But Adamson is upbeat about the Church's impact nationwide. 'If it wasn't for what churches and people with a Christian heart did, the world would be a horrible place for people who are destitute. Having a place to come and talk with people is a massively invaluable service that the Church can provide...What Jesus calls us to do is to be there for people – even if they're not changing,' he says.

UNCONDITIONAL GIVING

Adamson says that Christians can give money to those living on the streets, but this should be done unconditionally. 'Don't expect the money will go to what you think it will go to,' he warns. 'It's very likely it will feed their habit.'

He explains it's 'almost inevitable' that homeless people will turn to drink and drugs.

'Homeless culture is centred around drinking and doing things that make you feel warm...Heroin makes you feel warm. It takes away your feelings of anxiety.'

The night I met a Street Pastor: Sandy

For more than 20 years I worked as a bouncer in the pubs and clubs of Stirling. It's an aggressive job. I've always lived with violence, and I've had a big fight with alcohol over the years.

What I normally did with a troublemaker or someone who was really drunk was to throw them off the premises onto the pavement. I didn't care what happened to them. As I got to know the Street Pastors, I found I had a conscience about this. When the Street Pastors were around I found myself calling them. I would tell them that I had thrown someone out and ask them if they could come and see that they were all right.

I told a Street Pastor called Maggie that the Jehovah's Witnesses had given me a Bible a long time ago, but the print was too small and I couldn't read it. One night Maggie came up to me and

gave me a large-print Bible.

I'd never thought about faith before then, but I started to think about it because of my conversations with the Street Pastors. I didn't like the lifestyle I was in, and the violence. I found a church that has become home for me, and after I'd been there a while I put my hand up at the end of the service when the pastor asked if anyone wanted to find out more about being a Christian. A few months later I was baptised.

I've been on an addiction recovery programme run by a church in the town. The violent side of me has died down. In my younger days, I was not patient. It's only recently that I've learned to tolerate people and give them a bit more leeway.

For the full story, see *Faith on the Streets* (Hodder & Stoughton) by Les Isaac and Rosalind Davies



'If someone has an addiction, they will also be an expert liar because they want to carry on doing what they're doing. Your body doesn't want to stop and it needs to be fed constantly. So you'll lie and steal... The only answer is a change of heart – with Jesus that can come, with a lot of prayer.'

The idea of engaging with homeless or drunk people on the UK's streets is a frightening one for many Christians. But the dramatic

growth of projects such as Street Pastors suggests that Christians are increasingly willing to step outside their comfort zones and serve in this way. As Davies says, 'Jesus tells me to go, rather than to stay and wait for people to come to me.' ●

In the final feature in this series published next month, we'll look at how churches are providing social care across the age spectrum: everything from kids' clubs to marriage courses and work among the elderly.