

Christmas with the Street Pastors of Glasgow

By Lindsey Johnstone

In the basement of a Glasgow church, around a table littered with mince pies and Starbucks cups, bibles and walkie-talkies, the Street Pastors are comparing home-baking skills, cracking Brexit jokes and checking the messages in their Whatsapp group chat.

As the time approaches 10.30pm the jokes fall away and Stuart, who took early retirement after 24 years as a teacher to become the Street Pastors' co-ordinator, reads a passage from the bible and then adds his own take on it: "Jesus was born into homelessness – I would say a stable is emergency accommodation. Did Jesus understand sofa surfing? Of course he did, he stayed with people wherever he went. Did he understand what it was like to sleep rough? Of course, he slept rough."

There is a quick prayer of thanks for the free fish and chips they will be getting later from a city centre business owner who admires the work they do on his doorstep, and then the group heads out into an unseasonably mild but damp and drizzly Friday night in the city centre, armed with Mars bars, sandwiches, hats, gloves and scarves for distribution to Glasgow's needy, hungry and drunk.

In January, the organisation behind the Street Pastors – a multi-denominational group of Christian volunteers who walk the streets of Scotland's cities on Friday and Saturday nights offering help to anyone who needs it – will reach its 10th anniversary, and last week was commended in the Scottish Parliament.

Best known perhaps for handing out free flip-flops to women who've had cause to rethink their footwear halfway through a night out, the Street Pastors' work helping the homeless community was the focus of the speeches in parliament – and the first person they speak to tonight is James, who is sleeping rough.

He is hoping to make £75 from his begging, so that he can buy his sister – the only family member he is still in touch with – a pair of trainers for Christmas. Tonight the only help he asks for from the Street Pastors is that they take his phone to the church to charge it and return it to him later, but he has previously spoken to Stuart when he was contemplating suicide.

Stuart says: "We are absolutely seeing more and more cases of a combination of homelessness and mental health issues. And addiction issues. And the combination is a perfect storm – it makes the situation very complex, because which one do you start with?"

Five minutes later they give a pair of gloves to another homeless man, and then – when he asks them to pray for his mother, who is struggling with her own addiction issues – a new scarf and gloves, labels still attached, for him to give her as a Christmas present, and a hug. One of the volunteer pastors, Moira, says: "That's one of the main things about being homeless – people don't want to touch you. They don't get human contact. He may not have had a cuddle for a very long time."

It's not just the city's homeless who are drawn to the pastors – a man in a suit on a night out stops to ask if they will say the Lord's Prayer with him, and moments later a young woman out with her husband thrusts her bag at Gary, another of the volunteers, asking him to hold it while she looks through it for her phone. When she notices the badge on his jacket, out tumbles the story of how this is the first Christmas she will be spending without her grandmother, who died this year, and that as a lapsed Catholic married to an atheist, she doesn't feel she has anyone to talk to about whether her grandmother is in Heaven. This happens throughout the night; people will stop to tell the Street Pastors they admire their work or to wish them a Merry Christmas (and the goodwill towards them is palpable on the streets) and end up telling them things they haven't told anyone else. As Gary says: "The anonymity can make it easier – someone you don't know can be easier to talk to." The pastors only pray with people when asked, and speak to people of any and of no faith.

Crossing Royal Exchange Square, past the city's more upmarket bars and restaurants, Katy, a student at St. Andrews University, runs after them shouting for them to wait. There's no emergency though – she wants to thank them for helping her when she had had too much drink on a night out and fishes £10 out of her purse as a donation – which the pastors will use to pay someone's taxi fare home later.

Round the corner the doorman at a popular bar pulls them aside and asks for help dealing with a customer who has become agitated and anxious and whose tears have attracted negative attention from another group of men outside the bar. The young man is autistic and after they attempt to calm him down, asks the pastors not to crowd him, but instead waits a few steps away from them as they co-ordinate with the doorman to find his friend inside, who then takes over.

The pastors are linked to the city's CCTV network and work closely with both the police and door stewards. However,

as volunteer pastor Ian explains, when the project began ten years ago the police were initially wary. “They were a bit like, who are these Bible bashers and are they just more people we’ll have to look after? But now they see that we can handle some situations that they would previously have been tied up in.”

Like Kieran's predicament – he is sitting at a bus stop where he has just been sick, sobbing that he may have lost his job at a club because he has got too drunk there after finishing work. As he cries on Ian's shoulder and wails that he has made a mess of his life, Ian responds by telling him so has he, many times, and then calls his mother to ask her if she'll come and collect him, after attempts to persuade taxi drivers have failed, and reassure her that they will sit with her son until she arrives.

At this end of town, where the pubs and clubs are packed with students, the Street Pastors' role is more parental than spiritual – stroking hair (and holding it back) and helping provide perspective. A fight breaks out a few steps from Kieran's perch and two of the pastors peel off to stand near it – saying and doing nothing to intervene, just there if they are needed.