



Hope and a future: Off the Street

Article by Peter Cheney. Peter is a journalist and a member of First Rathfriland Presbyterian Church

Peter Cheney finds out how one church's work with local young people is creating hope in inner East Belfast and being recognised for the difference it's making.

Church volunteers are working at attempting to turn round lives in the heart of East Belfast.

Mountpottinger Presbyterian Church's **Off the Street** project aims to give young people alternatives to anti-social behaviour and crime by providing diversionary activities and encouraging them to develop and use their skills. More importantly, it's also opening doors to share the gospel in a broken inner city neighbourhood.

This good news is taking place close to the Short Strand/Albertbridge Road interface, an area which has been, and continues to be, blighted by riots.

It started almost five years ago with a small group of local young people who, up to that point, were only known for being a nuisance in the area. On occasions they had even tried to push lit matches under the door of the church hall. The first small step was taken in December 2005, when they were offered supper at the birthday party of a church teenager. That first night they wouldn't even venture through the door of the church hall - the food had to be taken out to the street corner. One of them laughed and asked, "So do you think this means we're going to be nice to you now?" That winter the construction of the bridge began. They started to drop in at the church's Wednesday evening homework club - initially simply to get out of the cold and wet, but as time went on, relationships started to form and it was clear the young people saw this as a place where

people cared. The need for a youth group of some kind was clear. An informal Wednesday evening programme (starting each week after homework club) was set up. Initially it was affectionately known as the 'ASBO Club' by the young people and the volunteers alike. However, three years ago, when the homework club teacher was at a school interview for one of the boys she heard him announce in front of four senior educational representatives, that he went to ASBO Club every Wednesday night, it was realised that a new name needed to be found! Hence **Off the Street** came into being.

RELATIONSHIPS

Off the Street usually involves between 15 and 25 teenagers. Some are already mums and dads and sometimes come with the baby in a pram.

Good relationships between the leaders and young people are crucial. One of the most striking things that the volunteers have noticed, is the fact that nearly all of the young folk crave approval and want to be liked, even though some have track records of totally unacceptable behaviour in the community. This means that once trust has been built up, the young people will listen when they are challenged about their behaviour and its consequences.

Other lifestyle issues are also dealt with, e.g. a doctor leads workshops on how alcohol, smoking and drugs can damage their lives. Young people are encouraged to discuss their

self-esteem and their identity, which has included learning some Irish history. Volunteers help them to write CVs and facilitate work placements where possible. They have been taken on residential to Alton Towers and Kirkham, near Blackpool. One of **Off the Street's** next projects will be a camp in Newcastle, for both young people from the church and **Off the Street**.

Last year, some of them dressed up in their pyjamas (and Onesies) and went collecting for Children in Need in the local area. They raised over £350 and the whole thing was their own idea.

Each night's activities depends on the group's mood. In the halls, they can play football or table tennis, watch TV, cook or do craftwork. However, at the end of the night, they always get round a table and have supper together - an invaluable time for relationship building.

"They want light in their darkness," a volunteer told ReachOut. The volunteers meet teenagers who have been in unbelievable trouble by the time they are fifteen, but once an interest is taken in them, and that absolutely has to include pointing out the error of their ways, a number try so hard to change - they want to be different and get approval. Jeremiah 29.11 is a key verse for the volunteers to share: 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

She continues: "They let us talk about God when the opportunity arises. Once you have got the relationship, it's amazing how it comes up naturally."

These are "not stupid kids" and while there is no excuse for the actions of a number of them, there is always a story behind what they did. Abuse is common. Many households are headed up by grannies, as the parents are absent. Teenage mums bring their babies to afternoon services of thanksgiving - a time when the door is flung wide open to bring the gospel message to family circles who would otherwise never darken a church.

Relationships have also been built up with local schools and Youth Justice Agency. The agency is the statutory body which often deals with young offenders under the age of eighteen. Through 'youth conferencing', plans are put in place, which not only involve some kind of reparation, but also community service activities. The aim is to divert a young person's behaviour to more positive activities, before they end up being dealt with by the courts and getting a criminal record before they are even eighteen.

Through Homework Club, **Off the Street** and other church activities, community service placements have been facilitated, along with personal development and educational support. Relationships are also built up with whole families through this work and the 'family/community/education/justice system' support package is making a significant difference to some of the young people. A few other congregation members have got involved

in this work and several teenage boys have responded in a most positive way to having a male role model who is able to teach them new skills and attitudes.

The project took a new turn just after Christmas. Whilst community service placements were being undertaken, the volunteers felt this still wasn't a long term solution to the empty futures that many of the young people face, so when Youth Justice asked for the facilitation of six new placements, the answer was, "No. We don't have enough work for them all to do and they are still being put back into the same situations afterwards. Unless we can get funding for a workshop, which might eventually lead to a small business for them, we can't take any more." Two days later, a substantial funding package was offered which enabled the setting up of a woodwork/craft workshop. The boys make garden items and the girls make jewellery. However, the sharing of the building with other church organisations was somewhat of a logistical problem. **The problem was solved when the church was offered a large upstairs room in an industrial building, just across the street.**

The workshop hopes to sell its products on the market and, in the long term, give young people the skills to set up their own small business. As with other inner city areas, jobs are scarce, many teenagers leave school with practically no qualifications and hope for a better future is often in short supply.

The work with local young people has now been nominated by the Youth Justice Agency for a 'Criminal Justice System Northern Ireland'

award. The work stands out because it is voluntary (therefore a free service to government) and the leaders are there for the long haul. While most of Mountpottinger's members now live further up the Castlereagh Road, they still have a heart for the place where they grew up.

According to its minister, Revd Johnston Lambe, the church is learning to be part of its community again and he would value other churches praying for them as they develop the work.

"The bottom line is to get opportunities to talk to them but we need the relationships to get those opportunities," Johnston says. **"It's to give young people, as well, a sense of hope. That is what the gospel is: hope and a future."**

He adds: "How can you give kids a gospel message without saying: "We are here to help you and be with you in the most traumatic situations you are going through in life?"

