

## Real life



Linda Freeman had retired and was ready to put her feet up. But she's now busier than ever patrolling the streets at weekends. Andy Evans met her



# *I'm working hard since I retired!*

Imagine the scenario. You've just retired and have moved to a different part of the country to be nearer to your grandchildren. After a life of work, you're looking forward to putting your feet up. But then, something that can only be described as divine intervention takes place and completely changes your plans.

Well, that's exactly what happened to Linda Freeman soon after she retired from her job with a housing association and moved 160 miles from Buckingham to Bury.

"I went to a women's meeting at a Methodist church where three ladies were talking about the work that they did. I had just retired and was thinking, 'Oh, what

can I do with the rest of my life?' Then these women spoke about Street Pastors, and it was as if God spoke to me and said, 'I want you to do that.'

Street Pastors is an organisation where Christian volunteers go onto the streets of town centres at night and provide practical help to club revellers – not exactly what Linda had had in mind for her future.

"At first, it was a bit of a shock to my system and I thought, 'I can't do that – go out at night on the streets and do all those things that they're telling me? But God insisted,'" says Linda.

"So I went for prayer with these ladies and took it back to my church, where I found out that there were like-minded people who'd been wanting this for a

long time. So we called a meeting and we eventually got a team of 18 together."

That was in June 2011, and since then the Bury team has increased to 30 Street Pastors – with Linda, 62, as chief co-ordinator. The Pastors are on a rota and a team of ten goes out every Friday and Saturday night into the town's busy centre.

### Practical help

But what is it that Street Pastors actually do? "We go out from 10:30 at night until three in the morning – not to preach, but to care, listen and help in practical ways," explains Linda. "We do get asked lots of questions by people, and if they ask directly about our faith, we will share it with them. But we don't go out directly





Linda Freeman at work as a Street Pastor in Bury

to evangelise. Our purpose is to be out there and show God's love on the streets. So we'll give out flip-flops to the girls who are too drunk to walk on their high heels or we'll give out water to those being sick.

"Basically, we just look out for the vulnerable ones, especially the girls who are on their own. We make sure that they get into taxis to get home, or we phone up family for them and get them lifts, and look after them.

"We're also trained in first aid, which is sometimes needed when we get all the fights going on, and we also look out for the homeless. We talk to them and we feed them. So we're there for everybody – there's never a dull moment. We're always kept very busy."

But their hard graft is paying off, with no reported cases of rape in Bury town centre since Linda's team began its work. There have also been some dramatic examples of the team's influence.

"The Street Pastors once found a man sitting on the edge of a bridge which goes over a railway line, saying he was going to jump. So they spent two hours with him, just chatting, and gradually they talked him down. We've stayed in contact with him ever since. There was

also an incident where a group of boys was beating up another lad. The lady in charge of our team that night knew if she didn't do something he'd be dead. So she went running across, screaming at the top of her voice, 'Leave him alone! Go away!' She didn't stop to think about her own safety at that point. He was unconscious, but that particular night we had a retired nurse with us, who knew exactly what to do and we called an ambulance straight away. But that could have ended in tragedy.

### Very grateful

"But we don't have to intervene always. Often, we just stand there when fights are breaking out, and the people disperse. We know that it's God's peace that's being shared out there, and the police are very grateful to us."

Another group that is grateful for the presence of the Bury Street Pastors are the young people themselves, who have taken the peaceful volunteers to their hearts.

"We see a lot of the young people every week out there," says Linda, "and they come up and give us big hugs and say, 'You're doing a great job. We're glad

you're here looking after us.' It's lovely. They can't believe that people are actually out there caring for them.

"We've got one lady who's 79. She's had two heart attacks but she comes out more often than all the others because she loves it. The young people call her 'granny' and they love her – and they'll open up to her."

The work of Street Pastors is making a huge difference to Bury town centre, but Linda hasn't finished yet and has plenty more plans up her sleeve.

"God has shown me that the future is to try and bring change into the whole area, especially with young people. So I want daytime teams to go out onto the troubled estates, and school pastors to go into local schools and build up relationships there with the young people – to show them that they don't have to go out and get drunk to have a good time.

"I'd also love to have somewhere warm to take people off the streets, so that we can help them more. It could be a multi-agency thing with drug and alcohol counsellors and medical people there to help. It's been my prayer for many months now because I've seen that need. So that's the future."