STREET PRAYER:
A CASE STUDY OF THE USE OF PRAYER BY STREET PASTORS

Sylvia Collins-Mayo

It is not often that prayer is the focus of attention in the British press, but in early 2012 it became the topic of headline news on two occasions. The first related to a court ruling that the Council of Bideford, a small town in south west England, was acting unlawfully by including prayers as an agenda item at the start of council business. The judge ruled that local government councils do not have the right to formally summon councillors to pray (BBC News Devon 2012). A flurry of public debate then followed about the desirability of mixing prayers with politics. The second occasion was when Fabrice Muamba, a player for the (then) premier league football club Bolton Wanderers, collapsed on the pitch due to a heart problem. Tabloids and broadsheets reported and commented on appeals from family and friends to ‘Pray 4 Muamba’, which seemed to generate a widespread ‘prayerful’ response from the public (Williams 2012). Both of these examples raise a number of questions about the meaning of prayer in modern British society and in particular its place in civic and community life. When and why do people pray? What benefits or otherwise do they see prayer as bringing? Does prayer have a role to play in public life? If so, what form do such prayers take in a society where half the adult population does not ascribe to any religious tradition, and the other half is increasingly diverse in its religious affiliations (Lee 2012)? The purpose of this chapter is to explore these questions through a case study of prayers and praying in a south of England Street Pastors project – Street Pastors ‘Knightsborough’ (SPK).

SPK is one of over 160 Street Pastor projects launched in Britain since 2003 through the Ascension Trust (Isaac 2009; Street Pastors 2012); the number of projects continues to increase, including a developing international presence. The Street Pastors organisation nationally describes itself as an interdenominational Church response to urban problems. Volunteers from churches work alongside, but independently from, the police, councils, and other interested parties patrolling troubled areas in towns and cities, befriending and caring for people who are in trouble or who
might cause trouble for others. By providing a positive and practical presence on the streets their aim is to enhance communal safety and help reduce crime and antisocial behaviour. As such, Street Pastors is a faith-based variant on a broader spectrum of ‘citizen’ or ‘volunteer patrols’ which from time to time have been launched in the UK and elsewhere. A current example of a secular patrol is Street Watch (Street Watch 2012). Street Watch volunteers seek to promote good citizenship and community cohesion, and to reduce antisocial behaviour and fear of crime by engaging in high visibility patrols around their local area – aims somewhat akin to Street Pastors. Another increasingly well-known patrol group, which like Street Pastors has a faith-based origin but unlike them does not insist that its volunteers are churchgoing Christians, is Street Angels (CNI Network 2012).

SPK was established in 2006 to help mitigate the relatively high levels of alcohol related violence and vulnerabilities that were associated with Knightsborough’s thriving night time economy. A typical SPK night starts at 10.00 pm on a Friday or Saturday evening and finishes at 4.00 am the next morning. During the night, in two or three shifts with breaks at a central base church, the volunteers walk around the town engaging with people and tending to a range of physical, emotional, and spiritual needs as they come across them. For example, they interrupt situations that are brewing trouble by chatting with the protagonists; they administer aid where people are sick or injured; they chaperon vulnerable individuals to taxis and buses; and they listen to those who are worried or in distress. Running throughout these activities is prayer.

Prayer lies at the heart of SPK’s identity and operation – volunteers pray before, during and after their patrols; they pray ‘back stage’ in the base church and ‘front stage’ on the streets. As such, SPK provides an interesting example of prayer in action. Volunteers’ prayers lie in the gap between formal public worship and the private prayers individuals offer on their own. Like prayers before council meetings, SPK’s prayers are ostensibly for the facilitation of public service – the restoration and maintenance of community safety, law, and order. Like prayers for Muamba, SPK’s prayers are also spontaneous lay prayers, sometimes drawing in members of the public, and are concerned with immediate situations and specific individuals. The study of SPK prayers and praying therefore offers the researcher an opportunity to explore some of the social roles and meanings of prayer in everyday life.