

The good questions come late at night

“You’re a church, what are you doing out on the street?”

I’ve heard so many talks over the last few years about the importance of living a life that provokes good questions rather than attempting to answer questions that no one is asking.

This question by a female police officer to us was a powerful moment for me.

I suppose there is more than one answer to her question. Why were seven of us from Bloomsbury Baptist church sleeping rough on Fleet Street on a Wednesday night in June?

We’re doing a course called Just People and have been looking for a way to put our faith into action. We were attempting to listen to our friend, Michael, and responding to his invitation to sleep with him on the street. Some of us were doing it because others were. Some thought it was a good political action. Some want to challenge the City of London’s new policy of cleaning the streets.

Michael comes to our church each Sunday for lunch so we’ve got to know him and he’s been telling us about the City’s new policy over the last seven weeks of police waking him up, asking him to move or get wet with their sprayer and then hosing down where he has been sleeping. It happens once per night. He thinks that Boris Johnson wants the City cleared of all homeless people. Michael is getting increasingly tired and fed up but doesn’t want to be provoked by the police or react in a way that could give them a reason to arrest him.

He’s been sleeping on Fleet Street for two years and is similar to some of his friends in that he doesn’t have a drug or alcohol problem. He says that being six months away from collecting a pension means that he doesn’t want to get involved in the system. He will be able to decide about where he lives then.

When we were asked by the police officer why we were there when being on the street is so unsafe, I suddenly felt the importance of being there as a church. If it is so unsafe shouldn’t we experience it for ourselves? Being there made it possible for us to listen to Michael’s situation in a whole new way.

We were given a lot more than we gave- Michael’s hospitality and care of us really touched me. He stayed up all night to make sure we were safe and invited a friend of his to come and meet us. Debbie told us that she’d been homeless for three years but was now in a flat and employment. She and Michael have supported each other and I’m struck by the community that is possible for people on the street.

We are seeing a very unique side of street life but it’s worth noting that not all homeless people are dirty and disconnected.

Over the course of the night we meet John, an American tourist to London with no place to stay. He's been in the country for two days and has been riding around on the buses all night. He asks to stay with us. His calm nature fits in well with our group but the next morning we witness the other side of street life. When we don't provide a shower where and when he wants it, he yells at Simon, our minister, and calls him a liar and tries to push him down some stairs.

We call the police and they want to arrest him but Simon talks them into warning him. The experience makes us much more realistic about street life. When you don't have walls to separate and protect you from people then you end up getting tied up in their issues and for all of our good intentions we were not able to include John in what we were doing once he got aggressive.

And this is as it should be. We are not professionally trained or super-human. We are not the answer to the issues in John's life. We hope that by spending a few hours with us he was able to experience our care for each other.

Before John got angry we all said the Lord's prayer together and it felt much more meaningful to say 'Your kingdom come on earth' after a night on the street. Our night is just one of many for Michael and John but we have been changed and from on I will not view all homeless people as the same. I will look people in the eye and say hi when it's appropriate. I will work to protect the human rights and dignity of all people in our society.

And I will never underestimate the power of a few Christians trying something new. We are hopefully a few steps closer to listening to our city.

If it hadn't been 2am I would've asked the police officer if she would prefer for us to stay safely in our church building. Our faith is not safe and the fact that most churches promote a happier, better life after salvation but then are not willing to take risks is a major hindrance to real growth. How can we follow Jesus if we don't even try to put his teaching into practice?

If I'm honest, I am afraid of the way that Jesus lived. All I can hope is that we will learn as a church to take risks and remember Jesus' words in Luke 6:46, "Why do you keep on saying that I am your Lord, when you refuse to do what I say?"

Jill Clark, 19 June 2008