

Nightclub Chaplaincy – chaplaincy in ladies loo!

Natalie Newton reflects on youth work project that turned into good chaplaincy practice.

In 2001 the Wakefield Methodist Circuit, with ecumenical support, set up a project called 'NightLight'. The premise was that the church would be a light in the darkness of the Wakefield nightclub scene. At that time the city was notorious for drugs and violence within its nightclub culture, with people travelling from all over the north of England to visit the infamous 'Westgate Run'. Probably the club with the worst drug and violence reputation was 'Foundation' and that's where NightLight was to be based.

Every Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 10pm – 2am the NightLight team would be in the club – a male and female chaplain offering love, support and friendship to clubbers and staff in a non-threatening way. As the female chaplain I would always spend most of my time in the ladies loo as this is where girls go to chat, chill out and find some space! I was always amazed by how much of themselves people shared - perhaps as a result of drink &/or drugs, perhaps as a result of a friendly face and a listening ear in an unexpected place. Most of the conversations were around boys, clothes and their night out, but then once in a while someone would share about an abusive father or boyfriend, their drug habit or deep depression. Once a girl broke down and told me that she only had weeks to live due to advanced-stage cancer. No-one else in her world knew as she didn't know how to tell them, but she needed to get it all out. I was there for her. I listened. I cared.

I also spent a lot of time with regular clubbers who came out night after night, week after week. This gave me the opportunity to build and develop relationships with these girls, and consequently see the changes in their lives. It happened very slowly and not very often, but through this project, one girl came off drugs and got clean, two others got jobs and turned their lives around, and a woman got help to stop her abusive behaviour towards her husband and children. And those are just some of the stories I know about!



It quickly became apparent that the male chaplain would find it difficult to engage with people in the same manner, and they often found themselves either being asked for or offered drugs rather than having any meaningful conversations. In the end, after 4 years, the project folded, largely due to the difficulty in finding male chaplains to get involved.

I rarely talked about God, Jesus or the church while I was in the nightclub – I didn't believe that was why I was there. We tell of God's love and compassion through us just being there as well as by the love and the opportunity to talk we offer. The young people are in the nightclubs, that is where they feel comfortable, that is their territory, and I believe it is where Jesus would be if He went to Wakefield, or any city, listening to and serving those in need.

I didn't really think of NightLight as chaplaincy at the time, but looking back I don't think it could be classed as anything else. To be honest it was one of the hardest things I ever did – hard house and trance music was never my thing, and after 12 hours of it every week, I am sure it never will be! But in this unlikely environment of a ladies toilet in a notorious nightclub in a then violent city, I learned more about Jesus – the man he was and who he is to me today – from those experiences in the nightclub and through the people I met there, than I ever thought possible. And the acceptance, honesty and genuineness that I received from the clubbers would put many a church congregation to shame!

