

THE VALUE OF PARTNERSHIP

Two notable contributions are being made by faith groups to the welfare of this city, that I want to draw to your attention tonight.

The first is that of St John Ambulance, an active presence at every major public event, in the realm of sport and entertainment. A former leader of the Council once said that the Millennium Stadium could not open without its St John's volunteers. There are several hundred trained first-aiders in the city alone. They are supported by a professionals working with 4,000 volunteers in Wales. This represents nearly eighty years of development and partnership between voluntary and public bodies.

In contrast, Cardiff Street Pastors are hardly a year old, but already winning praise from the police and local authorities for the work they do on the streets of the city centre on weekends, among vulnerable clubbers. Since they began, there has been a marked drop in violent street crime. There are now several dozen of them, backed by Ignite ministries with support from South Wales Police. It's a fresh expression of the potential for formal partnership between voluntary and public bodies.

What both of these have in common besides faith motivation is that they are what social planners call 'first responder' organisations. St John's has taken advantage of this idea, in its use of the strap line St John Cymru-Wales – the first to care' in its publicity.

In my thinking, all those teams of volunteers who go out on the streets caring for rough sleepers, substance abusers and insecurely housed people, with food, clothing, support and good cheer, are also a group of 'first responders' to those coping with personal, domestic and social crisis.

It's no innovation in response to a new problem, like the Street Pastors. It's not well established with civic standing like St John's, but Street Care by any other name has been there serving the poor around the world over many years, at least forty in my personal recollection here in Cardiff, but in reality probably a hundred and forty, generally speaking in a quiet grassroots way, unless big philanthropists got involved in setting up caring institutions.

The setting up of the Huggard Centre for the homeless 25 years ago was probably the last time that the work of a growing coalition of voluntary Street Carers in this city attracted philanthropic support on a large scale. Meanwhile, local government social service provision for the needy has improved greatly. The Council works in close partnership with the Salvation Army and Huggard, and will do so in redeveloping the Huggard site to provide improved services in the next couple of years.

However, statutory care provision has never got close to eliminating the need for voluntary soup runs and the need to organise voluntary Street Care teams. In fact, the local authority took the initiative to raise the question of mutually beneficial partnership between its social services and volunteers, first three years ago, then again last October.

In several meetings of Street Carers, it's been remarkable to discover how different teams had so much in common, in shared values and standards of service. How keen many volunteers are to be better informed in order to be more useful, realising that partnership brings mutual recognition, exchange and support to build up work already being done and make it more effective. This is no takeover. Professionals and volunteers need each other in this like other 'first response' endeavours.

The outcome is this the first of a series of training evenings, and the start of a process where Street Care workers can be identified and accredited publicly as safe working, trustworthy people. Some of us know just how vulnerable and needy people can be abused and exploited by others, so a modest formal recognition of Street Carers for what they are, benefits those who suffer, and will hopefully ensure mutual support and encouragement for all volunteers.