

THE connexion

Inspiring stories from the Methodist Church



CUTTING EDGE



Rachel Dalby, Editor

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THE connexion

Issue 35

Winter

A very warm welcome! If you're new to church, an occasional or regular churchgoer, or someone who visits (or is thinking of visiting) a Methodist building for another reason, then this magazine is for you.

Methodism's founder John Wesley is estimated to have travelled 250,000 miles in 50 years to teach people about the Christian faith. During his travels, Wesley (and his fellow travelling preachers) relied heavily upon local community members to provide rest and refreshment.

Among Wesley's hosts was a Cornwall couple who, in 1744, extended their stone cottage to ensure that he and his associates could establish Methodism in the region. Two hundred and eighty years later, the cottage (now a museum) has started hosting workshops for schoolchildren to learn about Wesley and his teachings. You can find out more on pages 14 and 15 of this magazine.

One of Wesley's key messages was that God's love is for everyone, and this remains foundational to Methodism today. On pages 4 and 5, you can read about a new faith-based hairdressers that's welcoming, and sharing God's love with people who feel unable to go to an ordinary salon.

Another important strand of Methodism is the outworking of its members' faith via practical action to journey with people in need. On pages 8 and 9, you can read about a church that's providing community members with warmth, food and company during the winter months. And on pages 24 and 25, you can learn how a Methodist couple are expressing their faith through serving as foster parents.

Other highlights in this issue include the relocation of the first Methodist Church-sponsored RHS garden, and a report from a visit to The Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands Methodist District by the Vice-President of the Methodist Church, Carolyn Godfrey.

Wherever you are in your own life and on your own faith journey, it's our hope that you will be inspired by reading about the people and projects featured in these pages.

Rachel Dalby
Editor

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Social justice is Youth President's priority

“I think it's vital that young people are seen as Church now, in the present, not just being in training as the Methodists of the future,” says Bea Hulme, the new Methodist Youth President.

Bea (22), who was welcomed into post with a service at their home church in Penrith, Cumbria, in the autumn, adds “I hope to meet as many young people as possible during my time in office. I'm especially interested in getting young people to have conversations around social justice that will encourage and motivate them to take action for a more just society.”

The Youth President role is a full-time one-year salaried position serving the children and young people of the Methodist Church in Britain. It involves meeting and representing young Methodists to ensure that their voices are heard, and to help them be involved in every aspect of Church life.

During Bea's welcome service, the Revd Tim Cooke, the Superintendent Minister of the Penrith Methodist Circuit, said, “Knowing Bea as I have for nine years, we are so proud they are from Cumbria and have stepped up to this role. Bea will be a real advocate for forging ahead with passion in sharing God's love, advocating for young people and mobilising them across the country.”



Where beauty is more than skin deep

A new high street hair salon is offering spiritual makeovers to its clients.

Reporter Anaïs Pedron finds out more.

“We want people who come here to feel the worth and the value that God has for them”, says Darren Middleton as he combs through his client’s hair. “Everyone needs to feel loved, so we’ve re-imagined the concept of Church and community to create a space where faith, service and everyday life intersect in meaningful ways.”

Is this the first professional hair and nail salon in Britain to be faith-based? “Well, it’s certainly innovative,” replies Darren. “During my training as a hair stylist I found that the salon environment fostered deep and meaningful conversations that often surpassed those I’d had in traditional church settings.

“It brought me the opportunity to get alongside people, share the good news of God’s love and to tell them that God loves them. I thought to myself, ‘there’s something in this’, so I explored the idea further.”

PARTNERSHIPS

As part of the South West Peninsula Methodist District, which covers Cornwall, Devon, the Isles of Scilly and Somerset, and with financial support from the Methodist Church in Britain’s New Places for New People initiative, the salon, named Rev7, opened its doors for the first time in the autumn.

“We’re in Plymouth’s vibrant Mutley Plain area, at the heart of a diverse community,” says Darren. We’re putting a focus on reaching out to vulnerable individuals and marginalised groups, and, when necessary, we can close the salon so that someone who needs a calm and quiet space, maybe because of emotional or mental health issues or vulnerability, can visit.”

The salon has already forged partnerships with local charities and other organisations in order to extend

its reach. These include an agency that helps local homeless people, a charity that supports individuals recovering from substance abuse, and a Christian ministry that serves the city’s sex workers.

LOVED BY GOD

“If anybody needs to know they are valued and loved by God, it’s the women who are working on the streets,” says Darren. “We’ll be offering to journey with these women by providing opportunities to train in nail care and hairdressing. Equipping them with new skills means they will have alternative career options.”

“Everyone needs to feel loved, so we’ve re-imagined the concept of Church and community.”

A spiritual component of the salon, dubbed ‘the fringe’, offers a space for clients to explore faith and to engage in deeper conversations about spirituality. This is designed to complement other mission work in the city, contributing to a network of support and exploration for people interested in the Christian faith.

Darren’s journey to becoming a hairdresser began unexpectedly during a sabbatical from his work as a Methodist presbyter following a challenging period in his life. “At that time, I needed to get my head out of church. A chance comment about hairdressing led me to enrol on a training course, where I discovered a new passion and an unexpected avenue for ministry.”

INCLUSIVITY

Rev7, designed to become financially self-sustaining through its business model, is overseen by a church steering group chaired by former MP Sir Gary Streeter, and includes industry experts. Its seven core values of listening,

learning, living, lifting, linking, loving and lavishing, guide the salon team's approach to their work and interactions with clients.

Putting inclusivity at its heart, the salon has joined Transparent Presence, a transgender and non-binary support network, to show that it's a safe space for the transgender community. A partnership with a local transport company also means that disabled people can access the premises.

"We're trying to lavish God's love on people in a practical way," says Darren. "Our conversations, interactions, relationship-building and trust are all vital in order for our community members, who may never step into a traditional church, to go forward and discover God's love for themselves."



"We're trying to lavish God's love on people in a practical way."



What have a hair salon, a beach, a forest, a pub and a cafe got in common? They're all home to Methodist Church New Places for New People (NPNP) initiatives – new Christian communities for people with questions about life and faith who struggle to connect with traditional forms of church.

Many of these communities are journeying with people who are at the margins of society, especially those who are experiencing financial hardship.

The Methodist Church in Britain sees starting NPNPs in every circuit as a vital part of responding to the gospel of God's love. Find out more at: Methodist.org.uk/NPNP

The Revd Darren Middleton

"We're putting a focus on reaching out to vulnerable individuals and marginalised groups."





Beacon of hope in challenging times

A soft play centre in a church hall is shining God's light into families' lives. Editor Rachel Dalby visited The Lighthouse to find out how.

Sasja (3) scrambles through a tunnel, chasing the new friend she's made. "She absolutely loves it here," says her dad, James. "I don't know what we'd have done without this place."

James and his partner, Chloe, have been bringing Sasja and their 14-month-old son, Luke, to The Lighthouse soft play facility at Offington Park Methodist Church, Worthing, West Sussex, every week since it opened.

"Before we came for the first time, we thought it would be too hectic, but it's actually really calm and the volunteers are super-friendly and helpful," adds James.

Feeling the challenges of parenting two young children during the ongoing cost of living crisis, and with nowhere else affordable to go during wet weather, James and Chloe were excited when they first heard about the play centre.

LIFELINE

"Life's been really hard, if I'm honest," admits Chloe. "The rising shopping and heating costs have really hit us, and the rent increases locally mean that we're now being priced out of our home. Over time, these sorts of things add up and I'm now also struggling with my mental health."

As a part-time worker who also shares the caring responsibilities for her 85-year-old nan, Chloe doesn't get much time to socialise with other parents. "Bringing our children to The Lighthouse means that they get to play with other children while James and I chat together or talk with other adults.

"I didn't imagine before I came here that something run by a church would prove to be such a lifeline for us. It's a really nice community base."

AFFORDABLE

Worthing's two commercially-run children's play centres closed down months ago, and the town's status as a coastal day trip and holiday destination means that other family activities can be pricey.

“I don’t know what we’d have done without this place.”

The church’s minister, the Revd Dawn Carn, explains that it was a priority for the church, part of the West Sussex Coast and Downs Methodist Circuit, to ensure that The Lighthouse was affordable and accessible to everyone, regardless of their budget.

“We charge as little as possible so that we can cover our running costs,” says Dawn. “We subsidise the entrance price for families who need a bit of extra help, and we make sure that everyone who comes here feels loved and supported.

“We’re partnering with local charities in order to journey with people at the margins of society, including refugees, and we’re already reaching people across a relatively large geographical area.”

FEELING SPECIAL

As well as bookable play sessions, The Lighthouse, which opened in the church hall in the summer, hosts children’s birthday parties and plans to run special activities in the run up to Christmas and Easter.

Manager Tess, who has a background in hospitality and felt led by God to apply for the role at The Lighthouse, explains that it’s her team’s mission to ensure that every child – and every adult – who comes through their doors feels special.

“We welcome around 100 children in our busiest weeks, and that means that our brilliant volunteers can chat with a lot of adults, most of whom don’t attend

“Life’s been really hard, if I’m honest.”



Looking down on the cafe area

church. We can listen to their worries and concerns and can signpost them to more specialist help if needed.

“Parents can relax over a drink and snack from our affordable cafe counter while they keep an eye on their children.

“A children’s Bible story during our weekly school holiday toddler sessions means that our visitors also have an opportunity to hear about the Christian faith.

“At The Lighthouse, we’re representing God, so this place needs to be the best it can possibly be.”

Penny Fuller, the Children, Youth and Family Team Coordinator for the Methodist Church in Britain, says: “Creating and offering spaces that are safe, supportive, informing and fun for under fives and their primary care-givers to play and be together is essential for healthy child and family development.

“These spaces also offer exciting opportunities for churches to connect with their communities in order to share God’s love and provide opportunities to explore faith and spirituality.


“The key to developing and growing these spaces is learning, from your community, what they need. Find out what sort of spaces and activities are relevant to them, and then plan accordingly.”

For support in starting a Methodist Church children and family ministry from scratch, please email: childrenandyouthteam@methodistchurch.org.uk



James, Chloe and their children

Warm space is a gateway to **HOPE**

A man with short dark hair and a serious expression is looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a camouflage-patterned jacket over a grey hoodie. The background is a warm, wood-paneled room with other people sitting at tables, suggesting a community space like a church warm room.

**“Having
a meal
here is
a huge
help.”**

Justin arrives at
Saltash Wesley
Methodist
Church's
warm space

As the winter weather bites, many community members are turning to church-run warm spaces for daytime refuge. For Justin, a warm room inside his local Methodist church has become the gateway to a renewed sense of hope.

“The things this church is doing have impacted me in many ways,” says Justin, as he finishes his meal in the pop-up warm space cafe inside Saltash Wesley Methodist Church.

With its Scandinavian-style furniture and friendly volunteers who chat gently with the familiar faces who come and go, the cafe has a chilled vibe that many high street coffee shops would envy.

Having heard about the warm space through a local food bank about a year ago, Justin has since become a regular at several of the community outreach activities launched by the church to meet community needs.

NUTRITIOUS FOOD

“First of all, having a meal here is a huge help,” he says, explaining that using this simple service, which provides many with the only nutritious food they will eat that day, has led to him being offered other types of support.

“I’ve also been given help to sort out my bills and admin work, such as getting hold of my birth certificate so that I can start to get back on track,” he reveals, adding that while these things may seem small, they can make a big difference in helping people to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Justin adds that he has also received emotional support, along with help to build his self-confidence, from volunteers at the church. After pausing for a moment, he reflects: “It’s nice to know that I can come here if everything else fails. There are people here who will help, and this gives me new hope for the future.”

WARMTH AND MORE

Jo Couch, administrator for the church and for the South East Cornwall Methodist Circuit, part of the South West Peninsula District, said the church’s current outreach programme had grown organically from its original offer of a warm space.

It was estimated that at least 13 per cent of people living in England experienced fuel poverty last year, while many more felt that they could only justify putting on their heating during the most severe spells of weather.

The Warm Welcome Campaign website, which lists around 4,000 of the community warm spaces across the UK, including the one at Saltash Wesley Methodist Church, can be found at: warmwelcome.uk



Church administrator Jo Couch chats with visitors



A volunteer serves breakfast

“We knew that, while the warm space was vital, it wouldn’t be enough on its own.”

While Saltash wasn’t among the communities to be hardest hit last year by fuel poverty (when someone on a low income can’t keep their home warm at a reasonable cost), the region as a whole had the biggest gap, on average, between the cost of the energy bills people in fuel poverty were being asked to pay and what they could afford.

“We saw the terrible effects that this had on our local community, including an increase in homelessness,” said Jo.

“We knew that, while the warm space was vital, it wouldn’t be enough on its own so we opened shower facilities and laundry services, and we act as a mailing address for people without a permanent place to live.” Supported housing places and addiction support groups are in the pipeline.

The success of the church’s initiatives relies heavily on the dedication of volunteers. “Around a dozen help with the regular warm space lunches,” said Jo. “We are blessed with some of the best.”

“Something unbelievably wonderful had happened.”



Hush the Noise

The run up to Christmas is loud.

So much expectation.

So many voices.

Telling us how to celebrate, what to wear, what to eat and drink, what to watch and what to buy.

Here, the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler contemplates the value of finding a moment for quiet.

It's quite a few years now since my children were born, but the memories of being in the hospital delivery room remain.

One of those memories is of the moment immediately after my daughter was born. Up until then, there had been a lot of noise. A few seconds later, the baby would start crying, but in between there was hush, as if everything just stopped. Something (the labour) was finally over; a new life had begun with all that that would mean and achieve. In between, everyone drew breath. Something unbelievably wonderful had happened and we needed a moment of silence and calm. The activity would very quickly resume.

SILENCE AND CALM

Was the stable in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, like that? Very shortly, the angels would begin to sing, the family would ask “what happens now?”, and the swaddling bands would be brought into use. But, just for a moment, was there silence and calm?

“That moment of peace and quiet can seem all too brief.”

One of my favourite times at Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, is the immediate aftermath of the midnight Communion church service on Christmas Eve. The service itself will have been a joyful occasion, rich in music and words, but at home afterwards everything seems very quiet.

For many people, 24 December is the last day of a very busy period. For those working in retail, for example, 25 December may be the only day of peace they have between the pre-Christmas busy-ness and the Boxing Day sales.

DRAW BREATH

That moment of peace and quiet can seem all too brief. We're used to living with a calendar that dates our years from the (notional) date of the birth of Jesus, but I'm struck by the fact that there is no year zero. We move from 1BC to 1AD, from the last year 'Before Christ' to the first 'Year of Our Lord'. But, however short, that moment can be a much-needed moment of peace and quiet, a moment to draw breath, to give thanks for what has been and to move into the future.

**“In that moment
there can be reassurance
that we are still held by God.”**

In the Bible, the first chapter of Luke's Gospel includes two passages that have been taken over in the Church as hymns that are frequently used. The first is Mary's song, the Magnificat, which begins "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord". The other, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, is the song of Zechariah on the occasion of his son's birth. Both of these passages thank God for what God has done, and both anticipate a future in which God will do great things.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD

If we want it to, Christmas can include a time of quiet contemplation, however brief, to join Zechariah and Mary (who lived under occupation in Palestine) in that moment and to share their expression of confidence in God.



The Revd Dr
Jonathan Hustler
is the Secretary
of the Methodist
Conference.

American minister and author Edmund Sears wrote the poem (which became the Christmas carol) 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear' in 1849, at a time of unrest in Europe and the aftermath of war in North America. There's a verse of the hymn that's rarely sung in English churches:

**And ye, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow,
Look now! for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
Oh, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing!**

I find this image helpful. The traveller stops on the journey for a moment of rest and refreshment. The 'weary road' is still there to be trodden, but for now they can sit down, draw breath and gather strength for whatever the next stage is. In that moment there can be reassurance that we are still held by God and that God's purposes are being fulfilled. Things might have been tough, and might still be tough, but wonderful things have happened and the future's potential is unfolding before us.

Let's just be quiet for a moment and take it in.



*Hush the Noise
Join the Love Song
this Christmas*



This Christmas, the Methodist Church is inviting everyone to hush the noise. To listen for the love song that the angels bring, this and every year. They sang it for the first time more than 2,000 years ago, on the midnight clear when Jesus was born. They're just waiting for us to join in.

Find out how you can 'hush the noise' by visiting: methodist.org.uk/HushTheNoise

Television show highlights chapel's impact



The Revd Kevin Johnson is interviewed by presenter Sean Fletcher

A Methodist woodworking ministry has been connecting with people across the UK as the result of featuring on BBC One's *Songs of Praise* television programme. Vicky Tyrrell explains more.

I don't think anyone was quite expecting the huge response that we've had since the programme aired in the summer. We've had messages from people all over the UK, and even one from overseas.

Viewers were moved by learning about the impact that our woodworking ministry here at the Chapel in the Fields, Cheshire, is having on its members' lives. They're also in awe of the beauty of the simple objects that we make from the quality wood that's donated to us.

"Woodworking means that we can get to know God the creator in a practical way."

Our woodworking group meets at the chapel, which incorporates a workshop and shed, on Tuesdays. It was set up eight years ago by the Revd Kevin Johnson, who, as a woodworker himself, transformed the building into a beautiful place for people to come and explore their spirituality through creativity or to simply enjoy its solitude.

INTERVIEWING

The *Songs of Praise* crew spent a full day with us, filming woodwork group members at work and interviewing Kevin, who had just a few days to go until his retirement.

Kevin, a minister for 31 years, explained to presenter Sean Fletcher that he'd applied to work at the chapel after feeling, nine years ago, that God was calling him into a different type of ministry.

"For me, bringing the woodworker and the minister together, and exercising a ministry of who I really am has been, I think, quite powerful to me in the sense of 'that's God's call'," said Kevin.



TV presenter Sean Fletcher

He admitted to Sean that, when he first arrived at the chapel, he could never have imagined how fruitful his time here would turn out to be in terms of the number of lives impacted.

NEW FRIENDS

One of the members of the woodworking group, which aims to reduce loneliness and mild depression among local adults, is Paul. As a pensioner trying to come to terms with the death of his wife, Sue, two years ago, he told Sean about the initiative's impact on his life.

"It's somewhere where you can just come and talk, and talk about things like Sue. I've shown them [group members] some pictures. It's just something that's been hard. I struggle," he said, adding that the most important thing he had made during his woodworking was a new group of friends.

Kevin went on to explain that the chapel's role was to be a safe and welcoming place. "People's stories gradually unfold around the workbench or over a coffee, and people begin to share what's happening in their lives," he said.

As someone who has experienced mild depression himself, Kevin has an insight into how other people with depression may be feeling, and his personal experience has been that creating and making is good for the soul.

GOD THE CREATOR

"Woodworking means that we can get to know God the creator in a practical way," said Kevin.

The cameras filmed the group hand-finishing a batch of wooden 'leaves' carved with crosses for the leaving class of a local primary school, and we've since had lots of enquiries from people who would like to buy similar items. This means that we're now thinking about opening an online shop.

I started work at the chapel shortly before the day of the filming, so I mainly kept out of the way and helped by supplying mugs of tea.

"People's stories gradually unfold around the workbench or over a coffee."

It was then just a few weeks until we were, sadly, saying goodbye to Kevin at his retirement party, and looking ahead to the next chapter of the chapel's life and ministry.

The woodwork group continues to thrive, and the members are sharing many of the skills Kevin taught them with me!

NATURE

My background as a community arts teacher and Methodist school chaplain means that I'm developing the chapel's ministry into additional areas of arts and crafts with a view to engaging with even more community members.

We've already got our first artist-in-residence, who is working alongside us, observing the chapel's life through the seasons and helping us to see where we could incorporate more of nature into our activities.

I want everyone who comes here to feel that they can enjoy the process of making art and have the opportunity to unlock something in their spirituality.

The chapel's special, peaceful, location – just a few minutes' drive from suburbia while feeling completely rural – means that we're well placed to welcome people to arts workshops while continuing to host our popular quiet days.



Vicky Tyrrell is the lay worker for the Chapel in the Fields, Dunham Massey, Altrincham, which is supported by the Manchester and Stockport Methodist District, and partners with other churches in the region.

Prayer is in cottage's history

A warm welcome extended to two strangers who knocked on the door of a rural cottage over 280 years ago is inspiring schoolchildren to consider how they could show kindness to people in need of refuge.

"I firmly believe that prayer has brought us to this point," Helen Pearce says, as she reflects on the history of the modest home-turned-museum that was pivotal in the spread of Methodism across Cornwall.

The building, known as Wesley's Cottage, has recently welcomed its first groups of schoolchildren to take part in workshops informing them about Methodism and encouraging them to apply Methodist values in thinking about contemporary issues.

ACTIVITIES

Helen explains that while it's been a long journey to get to this point, she and other volunteers never doubted that the stone cottage, in the hamlet of Trewint, east Cornwall, would one day be used for the sharing of Methodist values with young people.

"For some time, the management committee felt a strong desire for the property to host activities beyond its annual Wesley Day commemorations, and there has definitely been a link between our prayers and the project coming to fruition," she says.

"Prayer has brought us to this point."

As Social Justice Coordinator for the South West Peninsula Methodist District, Helen was keen to see children's educational activities being staged at the site because its story links so well to the Methodist values of inclusion and the outliving of personal faith.

The building's story began in 1743, when John Nelson and John Downes, associates of Methodism founder John Wesley, knocked on its door to ask for refreshment and rest from their travels. Elizabeth Isbell, living in the house with her husband, Digory, helped the strangers. Before leaving, the men insisted on paying for their refreshments and they knelt and prayed "without a book" – an unconventional practice previously not experienced by the Isbells.

After this initial visit, Digory read the Old Testament Bible story of 'the Shunammite woman', who built a small room so that Elisha, a regular visitor to her home for refreshment, had a place to rest.

"The woman said to her husband, 'I know that this is a holy man of God who passes by our house all the time. Let's make a small room on the roof and put a bed in the room for him. We can put a table, a chair, and a lampstand there. Then when he comes by, he can stay there.'"

(2 Kings 4:9-10, NRSVA).

This passage seemed to Digory, a stonemason, to contain a direct command from God, so he set about building an extension to his home that could be used by Wesley and his preachers when they were in the area.

Records show that Wesley lodged six times at the cottage's 'Prophet's Chamber' extension, named after the space created by the Shunammite woman. His visits, during which he preached in the house to locals, are credited as being essential to the spread of Methodism in Cornwall.

Helen explains that in the 1700s, Methodism, with its emphasis on living out personal faith, social justice and care for the poor, found fertile ground among the workers of Cornwall's deprived mining communities.

As a result, Trewint became home to a flourishing Methodist society. However, as Methodist chapels opened in the area, the small cottage rooms became neglected and eventually fell into ruin.

RESTORATION

Treasuring the building's role in the spread of Methodism across Cornwall, the late prominent Methodist Stanley Sowton spearheaded work to restore the property and open it as a museum in the 1950s.

Today, Wesley's Cottage offers an educational programme that brings the building's history to life for young visitors and encourages them to draw parallels between the Isbells' welcoming of strangers and contemporary issues.

Groups of pupils from nearby St Catherine's Church of England School and Coads Green Primary School, both in Launceston, were among the first children to experience the new workshops. As part of their visit, which included time in the 'Prophet's Chamber', the children looked at period artefacts and learnt about Wesley's life and faith.

A painting of John Wesley preaching to locals from the cottage, which is displayed in the museum



An important part of their workshop was to consider how the warm welcome embodied by Elizabeth and Digory Isbell can be applied in today's world.

"It may be that the children have Ukrainian refugees attending their school, for example", says Helen. "We want to encourage children to think about how they welcome them."

Caring for people around us, as Elizabeth and Digory did by welcoming strangers into their home, is one of the 12 practices that Methodists believe help us to encounter God. We call these practices, which are stations along the journey where we meet God and grow in faith, A Methodist Way of Life. To find out more, visit:

methodist.org.uk/MWOL



Pupils from Coads Green Primary School, Launceston, role-play at Wesley's Cottage



Today, Wesley's Cottage offers an educational programme that brings the building's history to life.



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An award-winning garden that's been moved into the grounds of a Methodist church is opening up conversations about faith with community members. Reporter Mike Ivatt explains.

It's a gorgeous sunny day as I step into the garden at Mobberley Methodist Church in Cheshire. Among the brightly coloured flowers are magnificent cardoons, with their purple thistle-like tops, cerise-pink *Rosa glauca* and both yellow and pink coneflowers.

With its thoughtful layout, which is accessible to wheelchair users, and use of symbolism around love, diversity and inclusivity, it's clear that this isn't just any garden. This is a Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) award-winning garden that scooped three awards, including a gold, at the society's Flower Show Tatton Park down the road earlier this year.

Designed by Yorkshire-based landscape architect and garden designer Ollie Pike, the Methodist Church-sponsored garden was named 'This Garden Isn't Finished Without You', with the aim of encouraging people from all walks of life to enjoy it.

SUSTAINABILITY

One important aspect of the garden's environmental sustainability was to find it a permanent home once the RHS show was over, so it has been carefully moved and replanted from its exhibition location.

"Mobberley was a good place for the relocation," says Ollie. "It's rural but close to Manchester and only a few miles from Tatton Park. Almost 80 per cent of the carbon generated in the garden's build was due

"It's clear that this isn't just any garden."



New home for RHS gold medal garden

The garden
takes shape
at Moberley
Methodist
Church



The garden's impact was felt even before its relocation was complete, according to the Revd Sincere Makunde, a probationer minister in the Alderley Edge and Knutsford Circuit. Sincere, who lives opposite the church, revealed: "I've had more conversations with people while the garden was being planted than I've had in the year I've lived here! Neighbours, dog walkers and the cyclists stop by and want to know what's happening. This gives me an opportunity to talk."

VISITOR EXPERIENCES

The Revd Alan Bradley, the Superintendent Minister of the Alderley Edge and Knutsford Methodist Circuit, was among those who accompanied the garden at Tatton Park and is keen to explain its importance. "Many of the Tatton visitors talked about the garden's fig trees, and it was great to be able to say, 'well, the fig tree represents the nearness of God.'

"I had a conversation with one family where the husband had died just days before the show. I took them into the garden and we stood under the shade of the fig tree. In that moment there was a real sense of God's Spirit comforting the family. Many of us were moved to tears through the conversations that we had in the garden."

The layout represents that of the inside of a Methodist church, and it features a communion table (in the

to transport, so moving it locally has helped towards our net zero goals. By 2030, the plants will have reclaimed the equivalent amount of carbon it took to create the garden.

"The design has remained more or less the same as it was at Tatton, so we haven't wasted any materials."

TIMELY RESPONSE

The garden's arrival at the church is a timely response to its members' quest to find new ways to reach their community, says the church's minister, the Revd Nick Thompson. "We've been praying for the past two years to see how we can make a 'church without walls' a real thing. And then, lo and behold, God gave us the gift of this garden. Our members are up for the challenge and are now working out how we can use the garden to engage with local people."

"This garden gives us so many ways of talking about the church's mission."



“In that moment there was a real sense of God’s Spirit comforting the family.”



style of a picnic table) at its heart. The table is placed on a colourful paved area, made from recycled materials, that depicts the LGBTQ+ flag.

Visitors were pleased that they were put at the heart of the Church and the garden, rather than being seen as on the periphery.

The plants include cat mint, which has a beautiful smell, seaholly which is prickly but soft to touch, and artichokes. Mexican Fleabane, with its small daisy-like flowers, is another favourite.

LOW MAINTENANCE

Circuit pastoral worker Liz McGrath, who worships at Mobberley Church, tells me: “Ollie assures us that it’s a low maintenance garden. We have some very keen gardeners within our congregation and we’ve had plenty of people from the village showing interest in getting involved.

“We’re hoping to develop some kind of gardening club. At Tatton Park, we met a lot of people from other churches and

community organisations who were interested in having away-days to our garden, so we’re looking at running some kind of retreat.

INFORMAL MEDITATION

“We’re also working alongside a local charity to create a space every Saturday morning where people can take time out of their busy lives for informal meditation.”

Alan adds: “As a congregation, we’ve moved from thinking that spreading the good news of the Bible was something we couldn’t do to something that we now have the confidence to try.

“This garden gives us so many ways of talking about the church’s mission, whether we are talking about the environmental aspects, the fig trees or the woven basket sculptures. People ask me, ‘oh, what are the baskets about?’ And I say, ‘well, what do you think they’re about?’, and that opens up conversations. Above all, this garden is giving us the space to stand alongside people.”

This Garden Isn’t Finished Without You was the first garden to be sponsored by the Methodist Church in Britain, with the aim of sharing the Church’s messages of love, social justice and environmental sustainability with the 80,000 visitors to the RHS Flower Show Tatton Park.

The garden won a Gold medal, Best in Show and the RHS Environmental Innovation Award.

Garden designer Ollie Pike says key elements, such as a communion table or other communal area, a quiet space for prayer and contemplation, sensory planting and landscaping, and wheelchair access could, subject to space, be incorporated into any church grounds.

“Winter is a great time for churches to be planning improvements to enhance outdoor attractiveness, wildlife diversity and environmental sustainability.”





Pictured in the garden are (left to right) Liz McGrath, the Revd Sincere Makunde, the Revd Alan Bradley and Ollie Pike



Ollie Pike recreates the RHS show garden's design



The Revd Alan Bradley moves the top soil

OLLIE'S TOP 10 TIPS FOR CHURCH GARDEN PLANNING

- ✿ Improve accessibility by creating smooth, level paths that are 1.2m wide where possible. Use permeable materials, such as a self-binding gravel, to allow for drainage.
- ✿ Provide seating places, with wheelchair spaces alongside, at key resting places.
- ✿ Install water tanks to collect rainwater for watering your garden.
- ✿ Avoid chemical pesticides and fertilisers, opting instead for organic gardening methods.
- ✿ Plant-up any spaces you can, even if that means using containers. Diversity is important, so the more species you plant, the more wildlife you'll attract. Plant species that will thrive in the types of spaces you have. Mexican Fleabane will grow almost anywhere and is great on the edges of paths.
- ✿ Organise a group of volunteers from your congregation and local community for the upkeep of your grounds and the nurturing of wildlife.
- ✿ Create wildlife habitats such as bird boxes, bug hotels, and (where it is safe to do so) a small pond. Creating wildlife corridors is really important, too, especially in urban areas. If every church had space for wildlife the whole country's wildlife could be connected!
- ✿ Think about having a more relaxed mowing regime for areas of grass in order to attract more wild flowers and wildlife. Choose key spaces for this and put up a sign to tell visitors that your lack of mowing is intentional.
- ✿ Set up a composting area for organic waste from your church grounds. Dig the resulting compost into the soil around your plants.
- ✿ Host community workshops on gardening, sustainability, and wildlife conservation to engage your congregation and local community. How about some outdoor worship sessions?





Islands aren't everyone's paradise

The Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in Britain, Carolyn Godfrey, writes about her visit to The Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands District of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas.

"Whose baby is this?" I asked, innocently. I had literally been left holding the baby for a considerable time and was looking around for their mum.

Earlier, when I'd arrived at the children's project, based at the Quakoo Street Youth and Community Centre in Nassau, around 60 children aged 4 to 15 were sitting in orderly rows, singing songs and listening to stories about Jesus. I was able to introduce myself and speak a little about where I came from and what life was like in Britain.

But now, the children were all milling around, excitedly choosing from donated clothes laid out on tables. It looked like a disorganised scrummage at first, but, as older children passed items to the younger ones, it quickly became clear that the children were used to sharing and looking out for each other. Eventually, everyone had something to take home.

"The children were used to sharing and looking out for each other."

Somehow, in the confusion, I'd been given a two-month-old baby to hold, and I felt it was probably time to give him back! But who was the mother? Eventually I was told that she was a 16-year-old girl who had been visiting the Methodist Church-run project, which cares for children from the community, since she was a young child. Besides her baby, the girl also has a four-year-old daughter.

JOY AND FAITH

The project's volunteers, some of whom have been involved for 25 years or more, are deeply embedded in the community. With their joy and faith, even during the most challenging of times, they journey with this young mother, and many others like her, providing emotional, spiritual and practical support.

Doing their work on a shoestring budget in a tough part of town, the volunteers explained to me that they felt they were sharing God's love through their work.



Later that evening, as my husband and I travelled along the coast road towards our accommodation, we paused to admire the Caribbean sunset over the ocean. Nearby there were luxury hotels, built to accommodate wealthy international tourists lured by the promise of a watersports paradise. It was hard to see how this ostentatious wealth could trickle out into areas like Quakoo Street.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Later that week, I visited the Ministry of Social Services, Department of Gender and Family Affairs, where I met the Deputy Permanent Secretary. We discussed legislation differences between Britain and The Bahamas, and issues around the use and misuse of power. We also spoke about the positive ways in which faith groups can help with work to address domestic abuse.

“We all face many of the same challenges.”

I went on to meet government officials leading on gender issues on Providenciales Island, in the Turks and Caicos, and heard about some of the initiatives being implemented to support community members. I was pleased to be able to share some experiences from my professional safeguarding work.

The Church’s high profile in public life in this district means that representatives can consult with, and be taken seriously by, high level government officials in this way.

The sharing of experience and mission through the Methodist Church in Britain’s global relationships is made possible through the Church’s World Mission Fund. To learn more and to contribute to this fund, please visit: methodist.org.uk/WorldMissionFund



Carolyn Godfrey is the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in Britain. She is the District Safeguarding Officer for both the Darlington and Newcastle Methodist Districts and is a local preacher.

Methodist worship on the islands would be familiar, in many ways, to Methodist worshippers in Britain, with enthusiastic singing of hymns and some excellent preaching.

GREETINGS

While in Nassau, I exchanged greetings at several services. The first, at Rhodes Memorial Church, was organised by women at the church and marked Mothers’ Day (a huge celebration in The Bahamas). There were songs from the children, reflections on motherhood, and some awards were presented, including one for ‘mother of the year’.

By the end of my trip, shortly before I was inducted as Vice-President of the Methodist Conference in Britain, I’d seen that there were many similarities between our Churches. We all face many of the same challenges as we seek to share the good news of Jesus (in words and in our actions) in an unjust world. It is encouraging to know that we are linked by a desire to learn how to do what is right, to seek justice and to defend people who are oppressed.



Carolyn contributes to the Mothers’ Day service at Rhodes Memorial Church



Carolyn talks with children at the Quakoo Street Youth and Community Centre

Signing the Cross

How can church communities become places of equality for people with less obvious disabilities?

The UN's International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) is, for many, an annual day of hope that awareness-raising will move society a step closer to providing full equality for people with disabilities. The Revd Anne Richardson outlines the role that the Church can play in journeying more closely with the Deaf community.

Every year, on and around 3 December, we see social media posts and news items, triggered by the IDPD, highlighting the needs of people with disabilities. It frustrates me to think that, while some progress has been made in improving equality for disabled people in Britain since the first IDPD in 1992, our society – over 30 years later – still has such a long way to go.

In our churches, IDPD provides an opportunity for all members and leaders, including our disabled community members, to take stock of how inclusive our services and activities are. We can then begin, together, to make changes.

Of course, there are many physical changes that can make church premises more accessible for wheelchair users. But how can church communities become places of equality for people with less obvious disabilities?

ACTIVE COMMUNITY

When I arrived in the East Anglia Methodist District in 2014, it was clear there was a large, active Deaf community but that the Church as a whole was not really catering to their needs.

People who describe themselves as Deaf (with a capital 'D') identify as Deaf culturally



and linguistically, using British Sign Language (BSL) as a preferred language. This means that conventional spoken and written language, such as English, is often seen by Deaf people as their second language.

“The only thing that disables them is the attitude of the hearing majority.”

Many Deaf people do not regard themselves as disabled, and don't identify with this label. They state that the only thing that disables them is the attitude of the hearing majority. Their deafness is part of their identity, and not a disabling feature.

Traditionally within the Church, services rely heavily on spoken and written language, such as English. Many of the words of hymns and liturgy can be theologically complicated, and people don't always understand them.

BARRIERS

Of course, the barriers around language extend beyond Sunday services. For example, educational opportunities within the Church, such as becoming a local preacher, may seem inaccessible to Deaf people unless they have a high level of English.

Results can be mixed when churches attempt to make their services more inclusive to Deaf people. Sometimes people who can't sign very well are asked to 'look after' the Deaf people. Can you imagine going to church and not being able to communicate? You might think they're trying their best to sign. They are trying, but would you want to go there every week?

While I was working as a BSL/English Interpreter, I met Deaf people who expressed a desire to be part of the Church. Working together, we identified a Methodist church in Downham Market where we could have interpreted services, and, within Norwich, we restarted Norwich Deaf Church, which had become dormant. Over the years, we have developed our form of worship into a Deaf space, where BSL is the priority language.



SPIRITUAL HOME

Meeting at the fully-accessible Chantry Hall in Norwich on the first Saturday of each month, the church has become a vital spiritual home for many. When new people come along, we check-in with them to ensure we are providing what they want and need, rather than us making assumptions.

In the autumn, Norwich Deaf Church joined with other Deaf Christians from Norwich, Cambridge, and Ipswich for a joyous harvest festival. This event – a vibrant occasion of worship, fellowship and thanksgiving – exemplified the strong sense of community among the region's Deaf Christians.

“The goal, across Britain, should be to create truly inclusive faith communities.”

I'm now praying about how we may journey more closely with East Anglia's Deaf community in the future. For example, could we tailor, as part of our social justice work, some of the support services offered in Methodist churches to Deaf people's needs?

Ultimately, I feel the goal, across Britain, should be to create truly inclusive faith communities for everyone, including people with all types of disabilities. Places where people with differences aren't just accommodated, but feel they can fully integrate and be equally valued.



The Revd Anne Richardson is a minister in the Central Norfolk Methodist Circuit and is the minister working with the Deaf community in the East Anglia District. She previously worked as a British Sign Language interpreter.



without limits

With the number of children in care in the UK at an all time high, an additional 6,500 foster families are urgently needed. Long-term foster parents Nick and Angela explain to reporter Mike Ivatt how their faith in God helps them in their work.

"A lot of children who come into the foster system have issues around what love means," explains Nick, who, with his partner, Angela, has been foster parenting for 18 years.

"If you can't feel that you are loved, if you can't feel that you are wanted, everything else becomes a struggle. Just because you're not with mum or dad, or your siblings, doesn't mean people stop loving you. There's always more love. Our faith background helps our understanding of these things."

INSPIRATIONAL

Nick, a Pioneer Minister in the Sheffield Methodist Circuit, and Angela, who is also a Methodist, were recently

presented with an Inspirational Caregiver award at the Action for Children Stephenson Awards. The accolade commends the couple for their work as foster parents.

"We've faced some challenging situations," says Angela, "and at those times it was our faith in God and the support of our local church family that kept us going. A good church provides the absolute, complete wrap-around love that holds you so firmly that you can almost deal with anything that comes along."

**"There's
always
more
love."**

OWN IDENTITY

Nick emphasises that, as a foster parent, it's vital not to 'push' religion onto children in their care, but rather to support them in finding their own identity.

"But faith does come into it, because our faith is who we are," he says. "When we have conversations with children about life's big questions, our faith inevitably comes into those. Our foster



Action for Children protects and supports vulnerable children and young people by providing practical and emotional care, and support. It ensures their voices are heard, and campaigns to bring lasting improvements to their lives. With 426 services across the UK, in schools and online, the charity, which was founded by a Methodist minister, helped around 766,00 children, young people and families in 2022-2023.

More information about becoming a fosterer with Action for Children can be found at actionforchildren.org.uk/fostering

children are very well aware that we are both people of faith, that we're both Christians, and that we're both Methodists."

"Fostering changes your life completely" reveals Angela. What advice would she give to prospective foster families? "The decision to have additional children in your life is a huge one. Whatever your family structure is, you need to ask yourself what you, as a family, can offer a child? Can you offer them a new family to be part of, or can you offer them a short-term home that will provide a place of safety?"

The approval process for new fosterers can take around a year. "It's quite an intensive process," says Nick. "Angela and I were asked about how we'd been brought up, how we would respond to discipline, how we set discipline, and what we think love is about. We were also asked questions about our relationship with each other to check that we were strong as a couple."



Foster parents
Nick and Angela

RELATIONSHIPS

Since becoming registered fosterers through Action for Children, the national charity with Methodist roots that protects and supports vulnerable children and young people, Nick and Angela have provided two long-term therapeutic placements. The first was for a child who was aged 12 when they arrived, and stayed until they were 21. They are still part of the couple's family. The second was for a child who has been with them since he was five and is now a teenager.

Nick and Angela have three girls of their own, and managing relationships between all of the children can sometimes be challenging.

"Christmases can be particularly difficult," says Angela. "There have been some really high-stress situations at this time of year, and learning – and relearning – how to handle them in a way that you haven't necessarily handled them in the past with another child is difficult.

"Fostering is about serving. It's about sacrifice, love and care."

These are all of those things we talk about as Methodists. Fostering has so enriched our lives that, despite all the struggles, it has been a wonderful experience. It's 100 per cent job satisfaction. It's what we feel God is asking us to do."

Still serving after 200 years

A church that was founded two centuries ago is regularly connecting with 1,000 community members. The Revd Dr Vincent Jambawo reflects on how it has stayed relevant.

In 1824, a Methodist society of 52 members opened a 300-seat “Regency style church with a fine Regency front” in Norton, County Durham. Anecdotal records suggest that its total capacity was regularly achieved, implying service to a broader community.

In 2024, as Norton Methodist Church has been marking its 200th year, we’ve been celebrating the fact that our 100-strong congregation regularly serves around 1,000 members of our wider community.

How has the church navigated the sometimes choppy waters of the past 200 years? Not by clinging fastidiously to the known, but by evolving and adapting, making it a source of inspiration and connection for the community.



The Revd Dr Vincent Jambawo is the Superintendent Minister for the Stockton Methodist Circuit in County Durham.

CENTRAL ROLE

Throughout its history, Norton Methodist Church has strived to play a central role in the life of the town, serving as a place of worship, education and social gathering. Straddling the High Street, the premises are a natural pulse-taker and pulse-giver of the Norton central business area of shops, pubs, hairdressers, restaurants, the library and other community places, serving a diverse population of more than 20,000 people.

As the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, the Secretary of the Methodist Conference, reminded us when he visited earlier in the year, the early church in Jerusalem is described as being devoted to prayer, fellowship, breaking bread, and the disciples’ teaching. They shared everything they had, cared for those in need, and met daily in the temple courts and their homes. This exemplifies a community where the church is not just a place of worship but a central part of the people’s daily lives.

COMPASSION

In the Bible, Acts 2 is a story of unity in diversity. All can hear the good news and listen to it with immediacy, reflecting something of the variety of human society and the diverse global church that was before that day. Norton Methodist Church has always been committed to living out this story, building a healthy and inclusive community of faith where love, grace, and compassion abound.

By taking note of, and responding to, local people’s needs, the church has stayed at the heart of the community and the community has stayed at its heart. This is a powerful, transformative



Choosing from the food on offer at the pantry

and fundamental aspect of Christian teaching, carefully recorded in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

In recent years, Norton Methodist Church has emphasised inclusivity, compassion and support for all members of society, regardless of their background or beliefs. It has increasingly sought to engage with and address the needs of our communities, whether through social outreach programs, pastoral support, or advocacy efforts on behalf of marginalised groups.

PANTRY

Perhaps the most visible current outworking of our commitment to our neighbours is our Community Pantry, where food is shared (not given out) to all who need it. Set up in 2021 on the back of the Covid pandemic lockdown, the Pantry is a lifeline for many families in our community while tackling food waste. Every Sunday, over 100 people receive food collected from local supermarkets by church and community volunteers as part of the national Fareshare network.

This is only one example of Norton Methodist Church evolving in response to the needs of its community. We also run, among many other things, breakfast clubs, bereavement support sessions, coffee mornings, toddler and

“Over 100 people receive food.”

“A community where the church is not just a place of worship but a central part of the people’s daily lives.”



Serving visitors to the pantry

children’s groups, and activities that enable us to journey with recovering addicts.

“Our community ethos, proclaiming and enabling good news to all people, has remained unchanged.”

Our community ethos, proclaiming and enabling good news to all people, has remained unchanged for two centuries. In any decision taken by the church, it has sought to be a vital resource and source of support for many.

Have the past 200 years been plain sailing? Of course not! But trusting our hearts, community, and God has made, and will continue to make, the internal and external tensions less insurmountable.



Displaying some of the pantry’s produce



Kent College Canterbury students learn from Peruvian schoolchildren



Gabriella goes shopping to buy food from Cassandra's list

Gabriella is a sixth form student at Kent College Canterbury, part of the Methodist Independent Schools Trust.



British students with local pupils and their teachers. Kneeling in the foreground is Bishop Samuel Aguilar of the Methodist Church of Peru

Students bridge

6,000-mile gap

a

A group of Methodist school students has been in Peru, spending time with children they'd previously learnt about and had supported through fundraising activities. Group member Gabriella explains what the trip meant to her.

On our second day in the river port town of Imacita, Peru, I was offered an opportunity to visit the home of Cassandra (18), one of the pupils we'd met earlier.

As Cassandra and I walked to her house, we chatted a bit about our lives, hopes and dreams. I thought to myself that her life couldn't be much different to mine. She's the same age as me and we both want to attend university.

The moment we arrived at her home, I realised I'd been wrong to make those assumptions. I learnt that Cassandra is a single mother and that the only adult who lives with her is her grandmother who is, unfortunately, very sick.

STRUGGLE

Their circumstances mean that neither of them is able to work, so they live in very difficult conditions. They don't have much money to buy food, so it's a struggle for the family to eat nutritious meals.

Previously at school in Kent, our group had learnt, through a global citizenship programme run by the charity, Edukid, about life for some of the poorer people in Imacita. We had raised money to help ten children, including Cassandra, in the charity's Amazon, Peru, programme. The scheme pays towards nutritious food, clothing and a local support worker.

The charity had offered us, along with students from two other schools, the opportunity to travel the almost 6,000 miles to Peru to meet some of the children we had supported.

HUMBLING

Cassandra and her grandmother made me very welcome in their home, and they told me about the huge difference that our year of

school fundraising had made to their, and other Imacita families' lives.

Edukid had worked with the families to find out what they most needed, and, as a result, besides food, Cassandra's family had also received a mattress and some blankets. Seeing the difference that our efforts had made to the family was very humbling.

During our two-week trip, we spent time talking and playing with children at a local primary school, who taught us Spanish and about their everyday lives. Their traditional clothes were unique and beautiful, and the necklaces and beads they wore were stunning.

One of my most amazing experiences was seeing the children perform a traditional dance as we were walking to school together. I will always cherish the necklace that I received from a little girl who danced me into the school.

TRADITIONAL FOODS

We also learned about some of the traditional foods eaten by Peru's indigenous people, and local women offered us samples of dishes that included cooked insects. Obviously, this was quite a culture shock for me and my friends.

Another amazing experience was meeting Bishop Samuel Aguilar of the Methodist Church of Peru. He thanked us for journeying with people in the Imacita community.

While going on a trip so far away from home, into such a different culture, was scary at first, I will treasure the experience and the connections I made in Peru.

Gabriella and her friends took part in Edukid's Global Citizenship scheme, which provides educational resources for students in Britain to learn more about pupils in poorer countries. The charity, which has a Christian ethos, also provides opportunities for students and teachers to visit communities they have helped through fundraising.

Edukid CEO Chris Turner said: "Our aim is to connect citizens in different parts of the world, help them to understand one another, and support them in being the people God made them to be". Through schools' fundraising activities, Edukid is able to support around 3,500 children in the poorest communities in Uganda, Cambodia and Peru. Each year, the charity facilitates overseas visits to its projects for around 130 British students.

More information about Edukid is available at: edukid.org.uk

Crafting the Crib

The weeks leading up to Christian holy days are a great time for people of all ages to join together to express their thoughts, feelings and inspirations around faith through arts and crafts. Editor Rachel Dalby asked handicrafts enthusiast Karen Pattison how craft sessions were connecting people in her community.

“People’s comments came from their hearts.”

“The great thing is that strangers can join with others who have a similar hobby, so there’s an instant connection”, said Karen. “And being with others while doing a craft activity means people can chat if they want to, or just sit quietly and get on with their own thing. There’s absolutely no pressure.

“There’s also the opportunity to share skills as, in my experience, craft groups are lovely supportive environments.”

Karen is busy planning a church-based pre-Christmas craft session, called Crafting the Crib, in Pickering, North Yorkshire. The idea is to bring together crafters from different church denominations, as well as anyone who doesn’t normally attend church but enjoys crafting.

SUCCESS

This follows on from the success of a Lent course, Crafting the Cross, that she facilitated through her local Churches Together network earlier in the year.

“It had been my experience that the more we look at representations of the Cross upon which Jesus was crucified, the more we see,” explains Karen, who is Lay Worker at Pickering Methodist Church.

“This really got me thinking and so, a while ago, I decided to stitch a small embroidered cross on a large piece of fabric each day during Lent. I did this for a couple of years and found it to be a truly meditative experience.

“
Craft groups are lovely supportive environments.”



Ruth Hall (left) and Karen Pattison stitch crosses onto fabric

"I realised that this sort of activity could be a great way to bring people together to socialise, share and explore faith issues, and produce meaningful crafted items that could be publicly displayed to provoke further reflection and discussion.

AGREEMENT

"With the agreement of leaders at my church, I approached Pickering Churches Together, which encourages churches from a range of traditions to work together, about running a series of craft events. That's when Crafting the Cross was born."

We had a chance to grow closer together in understanding.

Each Saturday during Lent, the period when Christians reflect and pray to commemorate the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert, a small group of craft enthusiasts from different church denominations met in one of the five Pickering-area churches taking part.

"Each building's different architecture and atmosphere, and their faith traditions, gave us inspiration. For example, in Middleton Anglican Church we were enthralled by its well-preserved Viking crosses. We loved the peaceful garden at the historic Pickering Quaker meeting house, and we were fascinated by the medieval wall paintings at St Peter and St Paul's Anglican Church.

BEAUTY AND DRAMA

"The beauty and the drama of the Cross were brought to life in St Joseph's Catholic Church and, of course, we held a session in Pickering Methodist Church, too. Our building houses relatively simple representations of the Cross, so here we were able to draw more on our own feelings about what the Cross meant for each of us."

Each church planned and led their session, keeping the work for each church to a minimum. "This became one of the strengths of the course," added Karen, "because as each church told crafters about the Cross or about their church's traditions, we felt that we had a chance to grow closer together in understanding.

"It was moving to hear what different representations of the Cross meant to people. We experienced something special in different ways in each church and had a chance to chat with each other while doing the crafts. There was no pressure to be knowledgeable about Christianity, and people's comments came from their hearts."

As well as sharing in fellowship, the crafters experienced individual poignant moments. "One person got very excited when they considered how a cross made from newspaper could bring the news to the Cross and provide inspiration for prayers about current affairs."

PRAYER TABLE

The crafted items made during the Lent sessions were, on the sixth Saturday, exhibited in Pickering Memorial Hall alongside a prayer table display, which had been taken to each venue.

"Over the weeks, we had some thought-provoking conversations and we made new friendships, which we're hoping will be built on during our Christmas craft session. After that, we're hoping to start planning our second Lent series.

"These sorts of sessions are quite straightforward to run, and other churches could target them at any age group, including children and young people – especially by holding sessions at weekends. If a series of sessions seems too daunting, churches could host a one-off session."

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*'What I liked was the choice of activity...it was spiritually uplifting too'
2024 Participant*

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