

New Places for New People

Starting new Christian
communities:
A practical guide

Chapter 6

Case Studies of
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New People

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All across the Connexion, there are people beginning New Places for New People (NPNP). Here are a few case studies that illustrate the wide variety of leaders and contexts that can birth an NPNP. We have chosen these stories as they illustrate the five contexts and people groups that the Methodist Church is currently prioritising: new towns or new housing developments; student/young adult/university; families with children; replanting in an existing place or second site of a growing church; and Church at the Margins.

Example: New town

Overstone New Town, Northamptonshire

Melvina is employed full-time as a Pioneer Community Chaplain, but has only been in post eight months at the time of writing. Her story illustrates the importance of meeting people one-to-one and connecting with the community through prayer. The Pioneer Community Chaplain post demonstrates how effective joint working and funding between circuit, district, and Connexion can be.

Melvina started pioneering in November 2020, and even with lockdown has begun to connect with the first residents and build relationships with site developers. Her low-key Christian presence is helping to shape this fledgling community. As she begins to shape the NPNP, Melvina has focused on collaboration, prayer, and presence.

The blessing of collaboration has been seen through ecumenical relationships (sharing resources and jointly taking part in community activities), the continued support of the superintendents and local Methodist Churches, and of course working closely with the developers on site.

Prayer has been at the heart of the project from the start, including regular prayer walks around the outskirts of the site and the weekly online prayer meetings for the community. As Mel walked, she met someone who explained that she had been asking God to show her how to be involved in the new community. This person is now part of the early community starting to form in Overstone.

Being an active presence has meant many hours of knocking on doors to simply say hello and meet new residents, though Melvina has sometimes been greeted with a smile and other times with suspicion. As lockdown restrictions were eased, the team hosted a Big Lunch where the community gathered for a picnic on the green to get to know each other. The developer provided cupcakes and bunting, and shelter from the rain in their sales room!

Melvina is honest enough to acknowledge that she's not sure what form the sharing and growing of faith will take in a new community, but the intention to discover is at the centre of this project from the start. She shares, "It has been so far, and will continue to be, a journey of prayer, listening to the Holy Spirit and acting on what we hear: befriending and listening to the community, in order to find ways to respond to their needs."

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Example: Student/young adult/university

Starting Point, Bath

Karen is a local university chaplain, who is working with her husband Phil (a presbyter and local hospital chaplain) and James (a worship pastor at a local Anglican church) to create a New Place for students and young adults. Their story shows that perseverance is needed in the face of setbacks, and that digital engagement can be just as effective at reaching new people, and just as valued by those people, as 'real life' engagement.

Starting Point is a community that holds on to the essentials so that people will meet Jesus through the gospel, conversation, and prayer. At the heart of this new community, emerging from Karen's chaplaincy to the student community, is being real, being rooted, and being relevant.

Karen shares, "We'd thought about doing something like Starting Point for quite a while but one day, talking about it with our friend in a coffee shop, he said 'why don't you just ask this coffee shop right now if we could meet here? It would be perfect.'

"We prayed that this might be a way to help us discern our next steps and when I spoke to the manager I was overwhelmed by his welcome. Not only could we meet there, but we could meet there for free on a Sunday evening while he was restocking the shelves. In fact, he'd really like our company.

"That was the green light we needed. We invited some students that we knew to join us and began to make plans ahead of the new semester with the idea of launching our new community during university welcome weeks."

Shortly afterwards, Starting Point was disappointingly 'uninvited' from the coffee shop. "But we had moved forward enough in our hearts and our thinking to just look again and ask everywhere we could think of," explains Karen.

"So even though the venue has changed (including moving online due to the Covid-19 pandemic), Starting Point has grown in its identity. What was a friendly, open group has turned into a community that is willing to go the extra mile to show that they care for one another. Perhaps this is just because our relationships have had a chance to deepen or maybe the pandemic has forced us closer, but we have seen numerous examples of care, including fundraising, meal-sharing, dog-sitting, and gift-giving."

Of those who are part of Starting Point, one person said "Starting Point is important to me and it's a group where everyone is important. It's my church."

Another said "I'm surprised how well I got to know people over screen – even people I've never met, and I'm surprised how good the sharing is – even though I'm usually daunted by group discussions."

Another said "This has surpassed my expectations of what church could be."

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Example: Families with children

Horrabridge Love Your Neighbour, Devon

Ali is a part-time pioneer, whose story demonstrates the importance of deep and careful listening to the needs of the community.

When Ali started pioneering in the community where she was once a teacher, and is currently still a parent, at the local primary school, she noticed a mixed view of the church. And so, her first task was to watch and listen to the community in order to understand it better. In this time of reflection, she noticed the need for parent support, so gathered a small group of parents and local Christians to provide just that. From this moment, relationships were made, more parent courses run, leading to Alpha courses and small home groups and a platform from which pioneering has grown, changed and evolved.

A key moment for those involved in the project was when, after a time away for prayer and reflection, the realisation dawned that they no longer felt the need to fix people or make them believe, but to meet them where they were at, love them, and nurture them through the love of God. BLESS is now their core value, which stands for **Be** with them, **Listen** to them, **Eat** with them, **Serve** them, **Share** our story with them.

Now, three years on, wonderful relationships have been made with nearly all the community groups. Ali and the team are invited to chat on the local radio, lead Table Talk at the local pub, run youth outreach, and host community parties. A particular favourite with the community is the cupcake nominations where people who need to know they are loved, receive a cupcake on their doorstep with a simple message based on Ephesians 3:16 telling them that they are loved for no reason other than being who they are.

Praying, listening and building relationships has enabled Covid to be a turning point for the project, where the team has been a catalyst for support and community. When restrictions have allowed, they have set up a pop-up community café in the back of a pub. Lives are being changed through welcoming people into a safe and loving space, with flasks of hot drinks, homemade cakes, and free gifts on each table. Before the café opens, the team run a short time of reflection, which has been established for those who want to gather to share and pray without the churchy language. To encourage well-being further, they partner with two 'people of peace' (people who share their values and have a passion for the community) to run sessions to connect with a simple time of stillness spent in the pub garden.

The fruitfulness of BLESS is beginning to be seen: beginning with the moment the first new person joined the online worship. This was followed by others who felt they could reach out to Love Your Neighbour to know more of the love of God expressed in those who have served the Horrabridge community.

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Example: Replanting in an existing place

The Well, Darlington

Morvyn and Graham are a lay worker and a local preacher respectively. Morvyn spends some of her working hours helping to lead The Well, alongside Graham and other church members who volunteer their time. This story illustrates the importance of prayerful discernment in launching an NPNP.

The church family at Pierremont were very excited to gain funding for some very necessary and long overdue refurbishment of their building. However, it soon became very clear that God was asking them to do something different.

The community were very conscious that God was speaking to them about being 'called', a theme their small groups had been exploring. Together they were hearing about moving, trusting, and how, when Jesus called some fishers of people, he told them to cast their nets in another direction. So, they paused and prayed and waited on God. They discerned God was asking them to take a huge step of faith and leave their building and instead replant a new church in a building about a mile further north, where the congregation had ceased to meet three years earlier.

The Pierremont congregation were already using part of the car park at this new site to extend their community garden project and so they began by opening a little coffee shop and charity shop there too. On the last Sunday in September 2019, they had their final service, a Harvest festival, in their lovely old building and on the first Sunday in October the replant, called The Well, began in the new building.

The Well is a new church plant, committed to intergenerational worship and serving the local community. Sunday worship begins at 10.30am and from 10am there is breakfast available. Worship is very family focused, but there is something for everyone in every service. Worship leaders lead singing at the start of the service, and through the time together there is prayer, interactive storytelling, a short sermon and then time to respond in various ways, creatively, in discussion and reflectively.

During the week, The Well serves the community with its café, charity shop, and The Pantry, a cupboard with fresh garden produce, groceries and other family essentials from which anyone who needs them is welcome to help themselves. During holiday times they run Make Lunch which aims to tackle holiday hunger among families who rely heavily on their children having school meals during term time, but also simply feeds anyone who needs it.

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Example: Church at the Margins

The Gathering and Sunday Supper @ Bridgeway, Nottinghamshire

Dave and Pat are members of the same church who volunteer their time as pioneers. They have demonstrated how serving the needs of the community and being unafraid to test ideas leads to deep relationships in Christian community.

Dave has been involved in developing local ministry around the subject of food for several years, beginning with a foodbank and community café, which developed into Sunday Supper. Pat shares how the vision for Sunday Supper began...

“A few Christians were meeting every Sunday evening at my house for a shared meal, chat, worship, and prayers. I would open the door and welcome whoever arrived, and somehow, we always had enough food, and folk would stay to pray and sing. We used the Youth Alpha materials which prompted good discussion and we prayed for our friends and neighbours. A summer barbeque attracted fourteen people, who we had prayed for over the years.”

Dave and Pat decided to move Sunday Supper to the church building, as it allowed more people to join in. On the first Sunday, eighteen people came together to share a hot meal. Numbers grew to between 40 and 50 people as word spread. Many were living with food insecurity and many appreciated the opportunity to be part of a new community. From the beginning, it was decided that this was church, and they would say grace and share a Jesus story in between courses.

“Before Christmas 2018, one of the guests asked if we could sing carols, and of course we agreed,” explains Pat. “A full Christmas meal was served and we sang carols. We assumed, after Christmas, that this Christian input would come to an end, but the community asked for it to continue. So began The Gathering – a short interactive service before the meal is served, which has been shaped by the (formerly) unchurched individuals who have joined in. Attendees are often invited to light candles or write prayers on post-it notes and fix them to the frontal cross. Most of the guests keenly engage with these rituals. We then have Sunday Supper and eat and chat together over the food, getting to know each other by name and listening to each other’s stories. Working amongst the chaotic lifestyles of those who are materially poor can be incredibly challenging, but also joyous!”

“Sadly, the pandemic meant we had to close the doors temporarily. However, our understanding of the food insecurity situation left the volunteers keen to continue cooking and so Sunday Supper became Sunday Takeaway!”

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