

Village Church - a vision for rural Aberdeenshire

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During October, I was thrilled to be able to visit one of the newest, and most northerly churches in our network - Village Church, Oldmeldrum. It was a beautiful sunny morning as I drove through the Aberdeenshire countryside arriving for a 10am Gathering at the Pavilion in Oldmeldrum Park. Initially I thought I'd



arrived at the wrong venue; things were due to begin in five minutes and the door was still locked. Who was setting up? Where were the welcome team? Immediately my perceptions of how we do 'normal' church were challenged as everyone arrived at 10am, everyone helped set out the tables and chairs and everyone provided food and drinks for the brunch. The family feel reflecting Village's value of Open Hospitality was immediately felt.

Village began in 2019 with a vision to see rural church flourish in the villages of Aberdeenshire and beyond. Bridget Sunderland (lead pastor) and her husband Tom who lead Village Church commented

'... we believe that God's heart for the rural community to thrive has not changed. As such, our specific vision is to see church planting into the communities that have seen decline, and witness God bring new life to these important communities in our nation of Scotland. Village Church has a wider vision to see a network of rural churches planted across our country, of which Village Church Oldmeldrum is the first.'

Their vision to see rural towns, villages and hamlets changed and renewed comes specifically from Isaiah 58:12 *'Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.'* Bridget mentioned that they seek not to simply grow in number, but to multiply out into other local towns and villages. Could it be that a network of small, contextual church groups in various locations can be more fruitful in the rural context, than one larger commuter church?



The values of Family Together, Mission Minded, Big Generosity and Open Hospitality build on this vision and inform all of Village's activities based around a monthly rhythm of meetings. On the first Sunday evening of the month they meet together for Encounter, a reflective space for worship and prayer. The second Sunday of the month is a bring and share brunch which I attended. It included food, great conversations around the tables, a relevant discursive Bible study and communion. The third Sunday of the month is VC Kids, an opportunity for all the family to explore faith through games, activities, music, arts & crafts and food. The fourth Sunday is all about a social gathering, and also can involve listening to and serving the local community. Coupled to this, a Mainly Music group has begun for little ones and their carers, and finally there are regular midweek small groups.



'Open the doors and love people'

Sutton St James Baptist Church

Sue Hensby, Pastor

'Open the doors and love people' – this was the call that God laid on the hearts of Sue and Arnie Hensby as He called them to pick up the baton of leadership in a rural chapel at the heart of a village near Spalding in Lincolnshire in the Autumn of 2017.

Sutton St James village has much to offer its community of approximately 1,100 people, including a village shop, butcher, baker, hairdresser and pub. It is also blessed with a village hall and a church hall which offer numerous venues for special functions. So, in many ways, the village is well served. However, Sue and Arnie were struck by the lack of a gathering place to meet other than the pub. As a tiny baptist church in the heart of this Fenland village, their vision has been to provide a hub for the community, where people can meet for a cuppa and a chat, with the openness to allow folk to just sit and read the paper in comfortable, relaxed surroundings, access support and advice from visiting professionals, or find a place of peace, prayer and healing. Equipped with this vision they set about a plan for delivering it applying for over £100,000 worth of grants and seizing every opportunity for funds. Rural Ministries was pleased to be able to contribute in a small way towards the vision.

Project Refresh was launched and slowly things have come together first tackling the necessary repairs so that dampness and draughts were no longer an issue and installing a new state-of-the-art heating system.

Even minor works were important, like the simple addition of an internal porch allowing the external door to be left open as a sign of welcome. Although the building did have to close due to the various lockdowns, this time was used to embark on the next phase of Project Refresh which was the creation of a kitchen/café space at the front of the building to help in their outreach. The building had become a 'silent witness' to our community that we were still planning for the future.



This drive to be open to the community was timely and paid dividends during the first covid lockdown when the Sue had discussions with the Parish Council, which resulted in them asking if the church would coordinate the Covid-19 response for the whole village. The outcome was that 500 leaflets with the Sue and Arnie's contact details were printed by the council and delivered to every household. The response also involved Sue leading a team of 20 volunteers helping people with shopping, prescription collection etc., most

of whom have not had any regular contact with church but witnessed church with its sleeves rolled up!

Another example of God's perfect timing for the church was their association with the Renew Wellbeing movement. This focusses on supporting mental health based around shared hobbies, skills and interests making it much easier for people to join in with the activities rather than a more traditional style coffee morning. All of this is underpinned by a rhythm of prayer. Renew SSJ initially opened in October 2019 on a Friday morning and proved very popular, but this outreach along with everything else sadly had to close during the first lockdown – however the time of guided prayer was moved to a weekly Zoom meeting. In January 2021 they received an investment from the Lincolnshire Managed Care Network for Mental Health to enable the relaunch of Renew SSJ from April 2021 - not just once a week, but for two hours every weekday. The NHS recognised the importance of this outreach in the alleviation of loneliness, isolation & depression in our rural location and saw that SSJBC were so perfectly placed to respond to the increase in concern about mental health during the pandemic – SSJBC and are now a supplier to the NHS!



This status also helped the church revisiting partnerships with their local Social Prescribers, GPs and Mental Health teams so they are fully aware of SSJBC and what it can offer with regards to being present, prayerful and in partnership.

In the past four years this small baptist church has gone from being almost invisible to its community to being a core part of it; an open and welcoming place following God's call "to open the doors and love people".

Missional listening

Ben Lucas, Missional Listener, Charlton Down, Dorset

It was April 2017 when Ben and Emma Lucas and their four children moved to Dorset to begin a project listening to its rural communities. The project, initiated and funded by Rural Ministries and the Southern Counties Baptist Association, involved Ez and Ben immersing themselves in their community and undertaking a kind of dual listening – one ear to God, being reminded of His unchanging promises and coming kingdom and the other to the community. Several years on, Ben looks back on their story of listening.

As we listened, three questions were formed:

1 What is the cry of the community?

2 What does the biblical imagination have to say to it?

3 What does it look like for Christians to live together as if the Kingdom of God has already come?

The cry of the community became clear quite clearly – division. Everywhere was broken. Every activity begun and celebrated soon became broken, split, and ended in pain. Factions were everywhere you looked and social media community pages were riddled with conflict. Two churches that previously attempted to church plant in the community had become broken, split, divided. As a result, Christianity was ‘banned’ from the village. The biblical imagination led us to renewed emphasis of trinitarian theology – we wanted to answer Jesus’ prayer – ‘*may they be one as we are one*’. We saw the village covered in oil, the very presence of God coming as we, as a community, began to love each other. We heard God’s calling that as the Christians in the village, we were to demonstrate this coming kingdom by loving the other, disagreeing well and celebrating difference.

The invitations began to come as we listened. Too many to discuss here. But for this story, I will tell you about the toddler group. The group was down to very few families, tired and weary leaders, and it began to look like this club would go the way of so many others – closure. Emma was handed the keys and, with other leaders she gathered, began to revive the group. Pre-lockdown, the group had 80-100 attendees, all in a positive atmosphere where all are celebrated, all is safe, all is welcoming. It was here that we would first meet Sadie (back to that in a minute).

Through many other invitations, a few of us started to gather for dinner to learn from one another and cheer each other on our Christian journey. Then lockdown. Early on, we sensed God telling us not to rush in and be the saviours of the village but to cheer on and join in the community’s efforts. A few months into lockdown, we began a village ‘church’ Facebook page to discuss all things spiritual as we journeyed through such strange times. Some of us began to meet online for the first time, to pray, to laugh and to support. We all decided to commit to praying and studying and that our online meetings would be sharing what God has said and He is doing. It’s a wonderful place to be. It’s growing. It’s beautiful. All participate. One of the members described the ‘church’ as “a people from every different background, different places, different theologies, but somehow as we journey together the Holy Spirit helps us fall in love one another”. I call

it 'Glee church' – all the ones who don't fit anywhere else! Somehow, without trying, we were a group of 'others', loving one another, a sign to the community who were inviting us to bring the wider community together. Marvellous!

As we continued to listen, a lady came to buy a pushchair from us. It was Sadie from the toddler group. She said something in her conversation about God – and we felt it right to go back to her and ask if she was a Christian. She wasn't sure but was keen to find out more. She joined our Glee church and joined in! We ran an Alpha Course at her request, and she was filled with the Spirit as we watched the videos meant for the big celebratory Alpha weekend that usually is part of the course. Then, one Sunday in early July, we had the privilege of baptising her.

The baptism was the first time we had physically met as a group. The first time Glee church had gathered, I was anxious, but there was no need to be. We shared dinner, we heard Sadie's testimony and then, one after another, members of the group stepped forward to give a prophecy, a word, and pray for her. We baptised her in the pool before all the kids jumped in to join us. It was a wonderful occasion. One member on their return home stated, "it was church, how it should be!"



As I reflect, I can see that God has done so much, and it has all been done through the posture of listening and joining in with God. The community are being heard, God's kingdom is coming, and it is being expressed by a community of saints who live counter to the world. There is only one person who deserves all the credit – that is God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All we have done is tried to listen and join in!

Learning to listen

Sam & Suzie Abramian, Inglethorpe, Norfolk

Sam and Suzie Abramian have lived on the North West Norfolk coast for the last seven years. They initially moved to the area for Sam to serve as minister in an established church in Hunstanton. About 18 months ago, they felt God begin to prompt them to move on from the post but it juxtaposed to a clear call to stay and explore a different kind of ministry. They started their new role as missional listeners in January last year, moving into a rental property in a nearby village, just one week before lockdown began. We caught up with them to hear how things are going.

We have been engaging with 'missional listening' for some years before formally starting last year. We often had dedicated times for praying around our communities, taking time to hear what God was saying and looking where God was already working. However, the busyness of ministry in a medium-sized church and issues of project management meant we were unable to give missional listening the time it fully deserved until now.



As we began our new roles, the initial ideas we had focused on creating missional communities; however, these had to be suspended as lockdown was announced. We soon discovered that lockdown was a great time to start listening in our new village.

We feel blessed that our new home is on a working arable farm, meaning we have people passing our house throughout the day, even during lockdown. As we have become familiar with their different rhythms of daily life, our months have been filled with plenty of conversations, connecting to whoever passes by.

Lockdown was a combination of strange and yet wonderful opportunities to spend prayer walking in our village and getting to know our neighbours as everybody was at home. Our son had been attending the village nursery and school for the last two years, so we assumed we knew the whole village... only to discover that we didn't! Walking around the village with no agenda or time pressure had a very different feel; we now had time to look up the history of the village and ask neighbours for local knowledge, all of which helped us know how to pray and hear where God is, or isn't, moving in the area.

We're both active people who like to do things and pioneer new projects, so the restrictions around social contact prevented us from running ahead with too many ideas. At the same time, our offers of help to various community groups, projects and people were rejected! We believe God didn't want us to be busy with action but to be

engaged with listening and prayer, something we have learnt to accept is an action in itself!

As we engaged with this kind of intentional listening, God has given us plenty of surprises, particularly with unexpected conversations. Some of these have been because of people sharing their anxiety relating to COVID-19, others have been because of our previous roles, and others have just been flat out miraculous! One example is a planned 20-minute prayer walk around our village, which Suzie began with reasonably low expectations. Three different people came out of their homes to ask the same question about what kind of church work we're starting. Some one and a half hours later, we realised the need to be flexible with time when missional listening!

Over the past year, with the ebbs and flows of lockdown, there have been wider opportunities, some of which have been the result of listening in the past, but others are pointing to something new. We restarted a weekly discipleship group for local 'church-less' Christians, initially meeting outside in gardens around fire pits and now gathering in different homes. With the suspension of a large baby & toddler group we lead, we have started a temporary baby café for parents with babies, something we have prayed and listened over for many years but the time never seemed right until now.



We've had the joy of baptising two people in the sea last summer and, just when we thought God didn't want us to help in community groups, Sam was asked to help coach a children's football team!

We have been learning more than ever of the need to continue to listen, especially with the continual change that COVID-19 has caused. This means being rooted in spiritual activity and disciplines, spending extended seasons in prayer, meditation of scripture and fasting. It also means being available to the people we meet and open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, rather than rushing onto the next activity or event. We have the joy over the past year of seeing God clearly shape our steps, guide us and even surprise us along the way as we continue to listen.