



Making room for people to belong

Ian Pethick reflects on his first term as a Baptist intern at Buckland Road Baptist Church in Poole

There's a particular reality to being part of a small church. You can't hide. You can't drift in and out unnoticed. You are known by name, missed when absent, and tend to be gently (sometimes firmly) drawn into whatever is happening. Those were some of the very reasons I wanted to serve my internship this year in a small Baptist church in Poole.

At Buckland Road Baptist Church (BRBC), our mission is to be 'the loving centre at the heart of the community.' That's an inspiring statement but it also asks practical questions. Who are we making space for? And how do we become a church that doesn't simply welcome people in theory, but learns to welcome in ways that are tangible, thoughtful, and real?

Two new events from my first term stand out, very different in style, but surprisingly connected in what they taught me about welcome, belonging, and the shape of Baptist community life. One was hosting a high tea and a dementia-friendly carol service for the first time. The other was a day in Cambridge for young adults to meet, connect, and begin building a network of support.

At first glance, the two could not be more different. But both, I think, point to the same instinct:

making room for people to belong.

THE GIFT (AND CHALLENGE) OF SMALL CHURCH LIFE

One of the realities of a small church is that a small number of people often carry a wide range of responsibilities. There can be a strong desire to do more to serve more people, try new initiatives, and respond to needs in the community while also feeling constrained by the question of who will make it happen.

The biggest thing I've learned in this first term is this: people rarely say no when you invite them into something meaningful. In a small church, where everyone is already stretched you have to get creative.

BECOMING MORE DEMENTIA-FRIENDLY

Back last summer we hosted excellent dementia training from the Dorset-based charity Prama, and we began asking what the next step might be for BRBC if we wanted to grow as a dementia-friendly church. Out of that came a simple idea: offer a dementia-friendly carol service, paired with a high tea, designed especially to welcome people living with dementia and the families and carers who support them.

Planning the event did something important straight away and it forced us to make practical changes to our church building to make it more accessible. The actual service was deliberately shorter, had a clear printed order, and consisted of familiar carols sung in our church hall while still sitting at tables.

We also wanted the afternoon to feel genuinely special. So, we reached out to local businesses, and we were overwhelmed by generosity. We were given support in the form of mince pies made by the chef of a local care home, a beautiful Christmas cake from a local Christian retreat centre, china sets from a local tea room, and even two waitresses from a local restaurant listed in the Michelin Guide, who helped serve and make guests feel cared for.

What struck me most was how church members, carers, local organisations, and local businesses all contributed in different ways to create something welcoming. In a small church, you sometimes wonder whether you have enough capacity but then you see what happens when the wider community is invited into the vision too.

CONNECTING YOUNG ADULTS IN SMALL CHURCHES

Earlier in the year I attended a Small Church Connexion meeting, and it sparked something I've been carrying for a while: a desire to develop a network that supports young adults connected with small churches, especially those who may be one of only a few (or the only one) in their age group. Many young adults love their church deeply, but still find it hard to connect with other Christians in a similar life stage.

My first experiment in trying to respond to that was a day retreat in Cambridge, an opportunity for young adults to meet, connect, and simply enjoy time with peers. We called it Hub 22. I was able to host it thanks to the generosity of Westminster College and the Woolf Institute in providing a venue, catering and accommodation for our meet-up. It was a small start, but it felt like an important one: a reminder that community does not have to be limited to your local context, and that sometimes a change of setting helps people open up, talk honestly, and build friendships.

Following this first meet-up, the aim is to build on what we've begun using social media to create more opportunities for young Christians from small churches to meet and support one another.

If you are a young adult in a small church, or you know someone who might benefit from connecting, please get in touch by sending me an e-mail: intern@bucklandroadbaptist.church

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

If I had to sum up what I have learnt from my first term as an intern in a small church, it would be this: inviting people in, making space, and trusting the Spirit, can mean a small church with a big heart can be a real blessing to the wider community it is a part of.

Ian has 12 years' teaching experience and, alongside serving as a Baptist intern at Buckland Road Baptist Church (BRBC), is studying Theology, Mission and Ministry at Westminster College, Cambridge.

To see how Baptists Together is supporting 18-35 year olds nationally, visit baptist.org.uk/18-35s

Connect with Matt Ceaser, 18-35s Co-ordinator, [@baptistyoungleaders](https://www.instagram.com/baptistyoungleaders) on Instagram

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