

# Edgy Faith and Edgy Learning: investigating ordinary and everyday experience of learning as disciples on the edges of church and society

A theological action research project  
learning from, with and in the edges 2022-2025

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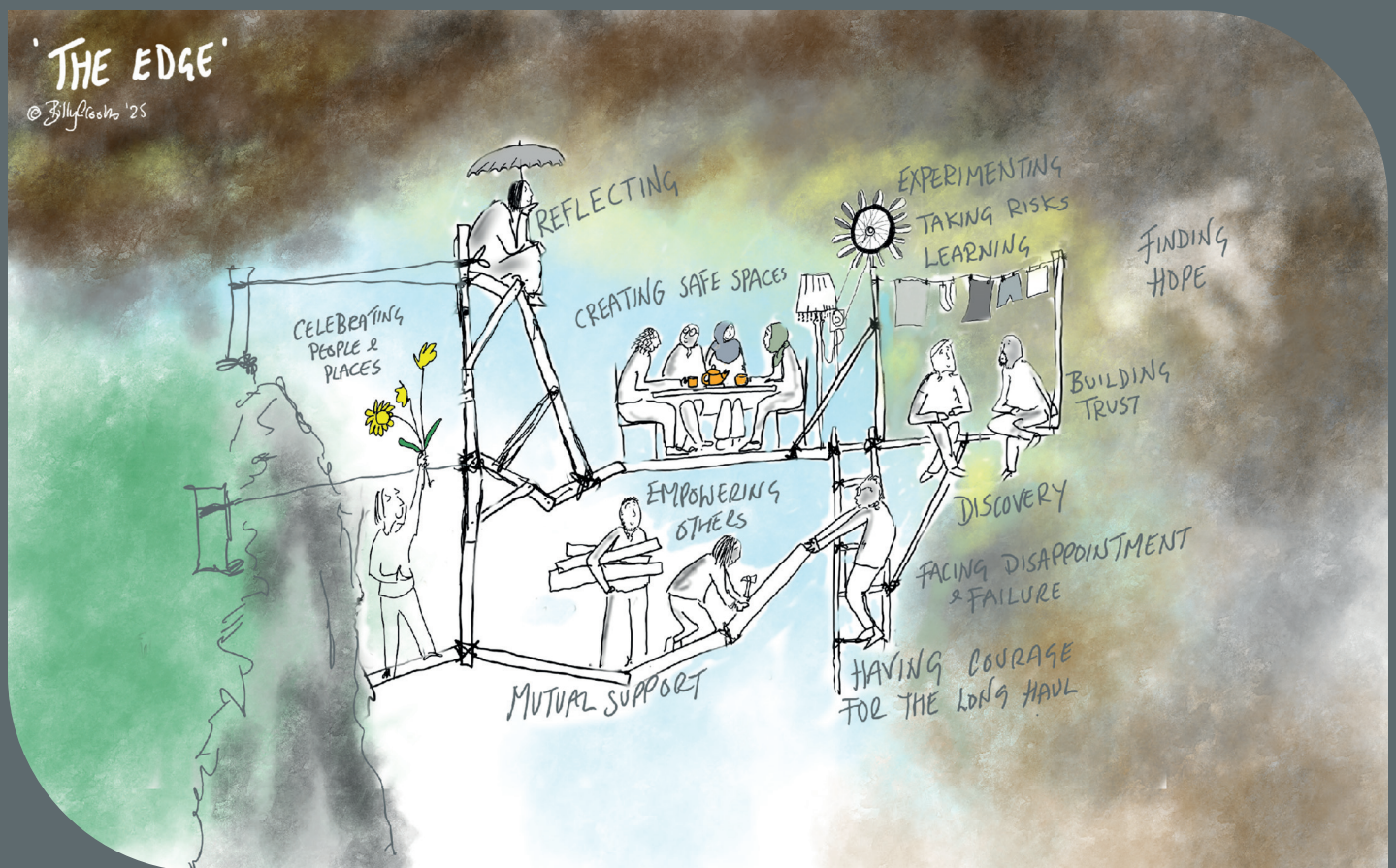


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Finally we express our deepest thanks to the groups that participated in this research project.



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## 1. Introduction

Perhaps you are living and working in an 'edgy' place; perhaps you have been sensing God's call to the so-called 'margins'; perhaps that sense of having been marginalised is one you live with; or perhaps you are seeking to support those following God 'at the edges'. In any of these cases, this report is written to you. It is an invitation to see through others' eyes what the Spirit is doing in these remarkable spaces of ordinary life. Our hope is that through the letters we have written to each research site in this report you will hear the stories of the learning there and be drawn to a new imagining of what it means to be 'at the edges', discovering faith there. Through these sites we think you will find resources and encouragement to notice in fresh ways how God is at work.

As many working in community development have been at pains to point out over many years, the 'edges' and 'margins' don't just need attention because there are many needs – in the language of asset-based community development, 'the things that are wrong' – but they need attention because here there is life; there are gifts, skills and brilliant people – 'things that are strong'. This project is a vibrant example of the

strength, life and indeed love, which is found in these 'edgy' places. All the sites in this project showed not just that there was good in these edgy places but also that God was present and at work. This project tells the story of what we found when we went looking for what could be learnt about faith from turning to the edges – the places research projects often miss. We didn't go looking for what was wrong, for the needs and struggles, although we did hear about many of those, but we went looking for the wisdom, the life, the things that churches and Christians needed to hear about church, the world, life and about faith. As you might expect from a project which explores 'edgy faith' and 'edgy learning' in a variety of 'edgy places' this report does not attempt to give a single story, or a series of simple insights. Rather, through letters written to each site, it attempts to surface the wisdom discovered and hear the reflective conversations which went on, as we, the researchers from the University of Roehampton and the St Peter's Sattley Trust, spent time in conversation with the sites, working as co-researchers, planning, listening, reflecting and learning together about 'edgy faith'.

“This project tells the story of what we found when we went looking for what could be learnt about faith from turning to the edges.”



Image by Bill Crooks,

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## 2. Project Summary

The project builds on two pieces of work. One is a theological action research project carried out by James and Clare looking at the grassroots experience of faith and learning in the Methodist Church in Britain, which has been written up as the book *Christian Faith and Christian Learning*.<sup>1</sup> The second is the work done by the Saltley Trust looking at *What Helps Disciples Grow?*<sup>2</sup> We noticed overlap in both the questions being asked and the kinds of findings being discovered around Christian learning, which we wanted to explore further. A project of partnership was developed between James and Clare, from the University of Roehampton, and Ian Jones from the Saltley Trust, to build on these insights.

What we had discovered in the earlier project published as *Christian Faith and Christian Learning* was that much of the learning for faith takes place in the peripheries of the formal patterns of the life of the church – in the incidental and informal conversations, in the life events and in moments of life, both big and small. Given that much of this research had been done with what might be considered typical church groups, we wondered what a more purposeful turn to the peripheries might reveal. *What Helps Disciples Grow?* had also tended to focus on the more traditional churches and congregations, and the Saltley Trust were also keen to broaden their understanding to take into account experiences in less traditional groups.

We decided that we wanted to focus in on different experiences of what we came to call 'edginess'. In a realisation that edges, marginality and peripheries can all be used pejoratively, and that something being at the centre or edges is a matter of perspective, we were keen to not label, or fall into a trap of seeing edges as somehow fixed or inevitable. Groups were asked to self-identify based on their experience of being marginalised or made to feel 'edgy', and we always had in mind that the project might challenge this language of edges and what it means to be edgy, rather than embed it.

Following the pattern of work on *Christian Faith and Christian Learning*, we followed a theological action research approach working with seven different sites which identified themselves as 'edgy'. This might be edgy in relation to church, such as pioneering and fresh expressions, socio-economically edgy, or edgy in other ways such as sexuality, race and ability/disability. Following theological action research's commitment to collaborative research, we worked with each site to co-design its own mini project with a research question or focus and a means for listening and reflecting around those themes. Some sites chose more traditional means around interviews and focus groups, and we engaged in a number of activities of participant observation. However, it also became clear that to hear the voices in these edgy spaces we would also need some more creative means of engaging. We turned to the use of workshops and open space conversations as one means of hearing these voices, with James and Ian spending time listening to and talking with people from the different research sites, often mediated by doing an activity together, such as producing a timeline or adding post-it notes to a sheet in response to a question. In a couple of sites it was the members of the local site team who did much of the listening, having informal conversations with people they were connecting with and reflecting back on those conversations with us in recorded

reflection meetings. Once all the planned listening was done we would gather together to reflect on what we had heard, firstly in individual teams – the local team from the site and the university reflector team – before meeting together as the university team and local site reflector teams to identify our joint learning.

“The typical report approach... assumes that knowledge is best communicated as generalised findings...but one of the key things we learnt from this edgy learning project was about particularity.”

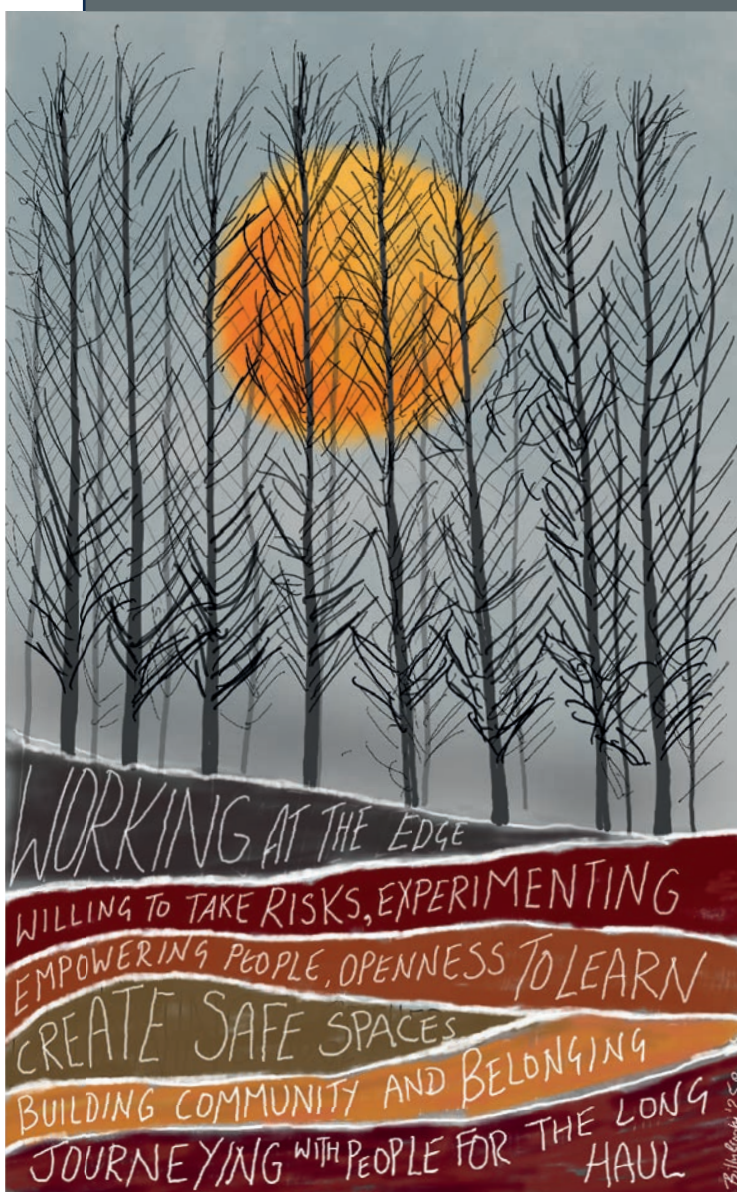


Image by Bill Crooks

### 3. The Edgy Letters

There is always a challenge in writing up a project like this around how it can be shared most helpfully and invitingly. A 'report' is what is expected of a research project, which can be boiled down to an executive summary and some key recommendations. These are helpful to an extent, and indeed we have done some of that in putting together this account of the project, but we were aware of the fact that such a typical write-up couldn't do justice to the experience of going on this journey of listening, learning and conversation with each site that we have worked with. The connections with the people in the teams and the participants we had met felt personal, and in sharing this project we wanted to find a way to offer that more personal connection.

Two key features of theological action research are that it is about collaboration with the site we are looking at, and that it is about a continuing conversation. In our collaboration, the

research 'results' are as much about the learning within the site as they are of making broader theological connections from the sites. It is also important that the any learning identified is never the final word, but always part of a bigger conversation of exploration and discernment, because, after all, that is what faith in God is about: a journey towards God and with God.

We have settled on a format of writing letters as a different mode of communicating our research and learning. By writing letters primarily to each site, but aware that others are going to be listening in, we hope there is a focus on the learning and experience of each site, whilst at the same time opening windows into the wider learning about faith in edgy places. The problem with the typical report approach is that it assumes that knowledge is best communicated as generalised findings and learning; but one of the key things we learnt from this edgy learning project was about particularity. Each site, working in a particular context, was the way it was because of these people, this place and the particular issues, challenges, gifts and joys that were present. By using letters to the sites, we hope we can portray this more situated and localised sense of knowledge and wisdom, which is made sense of in the actual lives of people as they live their lives together. We hope that this might be a more engaging way of relaying what we saw and heard, and therefore also act as an invitation for you, the reader, to continue the conversation – perhaps with us, with others around you, or perhaps going off to meet some people experiencing some sense of edginess and seeing what you can learn together.

As suggested in the previous paragraph, each letter is written primarily with the site in mind. They are written by James, one of the researchers on the project who spend time with each of the seven sites. All sites and participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. The only exception is Missio Africanus, who wanted to be named, and so in their site only focus group participants were given pseudonyms. Included alongside the letter are some extracts from the interviews, focus groups and other conversations, shown as sticky notes, to add to the insights within the letters and to make sure the voices from the sites are more vividly heard. After each letter we also offer a short summary of the key learning from each site. This learning is then pulled together in a section which offers a summary of the key theological insights emerging, which we will continue to build on through other writing and publication. The report concludes with Ian's and Clare's reflections on this learning.

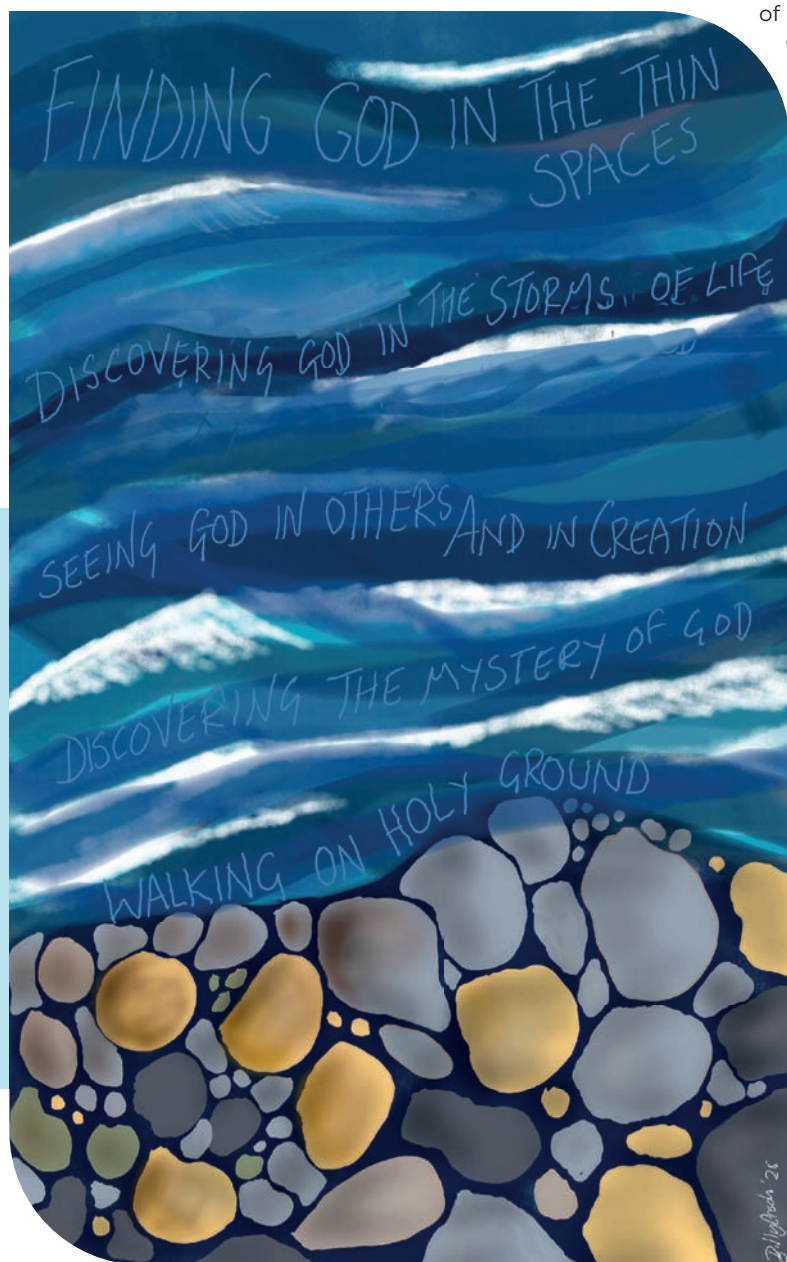


Image by Bill Crooks

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## 3.1 Next Steps

Next Steps is an organisation working with prison leavers, offering housing and support to help them to transition back into society after prison. It has a strong Christian basis and many, although not all, of the staff are committed Christians. They meet regularly for prayer and see that as at the heart of what they do. Connecting with local churches and involving

a number of staff and volunteers, they seek to provide a level of support and structure that helps prison leavers to find their way into better patterns and ways of life. There is a strong emphasis on the prison leavers finding opportunities to 'give back' through volunteering and getting involved in a variety of courses and activities.

Dear Next Steps Team,

I have two particularly clear memories of our work together. One is from our first meeting when we were struck that, as we walked through the door of the offices, it was not immediately clear who was a client and who was staff. This was telling of the way that the clients had a sense of belonging and ownership, and of the way staff and volunteers related to the clients. That first discussion around the big table in the middle of the office seemed full of energy and passion, and so many of the team spoke enthusiastically of the work and about the centrality of the Christian faith for the team and for a good number of clients.

My second clear memory is when Clare and I came to visit your newly taken-on, yet-to-be-completed premises right at the end of our research project with you. I wondered where on earth we were going as the four-by-four took the turning off the road, up the muddy track and started climbing the hill. This new building is in such a beautiful setting, and again my memory is of the passion of the team, which came through as we sat in that room together talking about what we had learned about Next Steps over the duration of the project and hearing your plans and ideas of the next stage of the work.

When we began the work one of the key questions you were asking concerned the way you were a discipling community. I think this tuned us in quite early on to how you saw the work you did, and how you were setting an environment where clients and volunteers were able to encounter God and to grow in their faith. The fact that in that first meeting you also emphasised the "ups-and-downs" of the recovery journey, as prison-leavers seek to be reintegrated with society, also pointed to something which was going to be important for the project. The conversations that Ian had with the clients and with other people connected to Next Steps brought this out more clearly. It was Anne, one of the church leaders, who talked about the 'revolving door' of the prison, where people come out of prison, make a fresh start, re-offend, return to prison, and the cycle seems to continue. For me, this emerging story of ups and downs, the revolving door, and the slow, gradual and cyclical journey that so many of the clients seemed to go on, revealed something important about the journey of faith and the disconnect with some of the ways we imagine faith and conversion. This story of 'going straight' but then falling back into old patterns and returning to prison might not immediately strike people as hopeful, and it is certainly more complex than some stories told around faith - of meeting Jesus and life being permanently turned around - that some churches point to. However, the more we listened, the more we heard how it **was** a hopeful story of people finding meaning, purpose, friends and, in some cases, Christian faith. It was a hopeful story because returning to prison was not seen simply as failure but another step on a long journey of people finding their way back into society and finding purpose.

One thing I think I will always remember about our work together was how important prayer was to you. Interestingly, this didn't come out so much in the interviews but in the conversation we had reflecting back on what we had heard from clients and others. In articulating what it was that was distinctive about Next Steps, prayer was a clear way you seemed to answer that. In our conversations you named prayer as your "primary work" and the "first and foremost act" you had. For us, exploring the place of faith in edgy spaces, this was one of the most important elements we learnt from you all at Next Steps. It was inspiring to hear how you felt the regular 9am prayer meetings set the tone for everything else you did, and it was clear you emphasised God at the heart of all your work. We were also fascinated by the way you linked your openness in, and passion for, your work to the time you spend in prayer and how prayer had helped you to become more open to the clients and to walk alongside them.

What we, as the Roehampton team, heard in your discussion of prayer was the ways in which you recognised God's agency and talked about how God was at work in the work of Next Steps. We felt that the way you talked about prayer, and how God was at work in that prayer, gave you a way of expressing how God was at work in the midst of your work with clients. For example, often when talking about prison-leavers, and addicts, you hear people say that they need to take responsibility to change themselves - 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps' - but what working with you all at Next Steps showed us was that this approach was deeply flawed. While you expected clients to show a desire and willingness to change, and to take some responsibility, you also showed us that no one can really do that by themselves. People can't simply go straight by willpower, particularly when they are struggling with addiction or have been victims of abuse. What we saw in Next Steps

"But we keep going and we keep going again, and there is this revolving door of into prison, into church, into the Next Steps homes, but we, we try not to completely reject. So, despite everything, we will make sure that there is some, some doorway open."  
[Anna, Church Leader]

was how, once people had made a decision to seek to change, the community within Next Steps – the staff and volunteer team, and the relationships in the particular houses – became one that helped people to discover the agency to change. It was powerful to hear this from the clients themselves, such as James who talked about the importance for him of “giving something back”, through the volunteering, and Danny who described how he had realised that “helping other people, that’s what keeps me strong in my recovery”. For us, we saw parallels with some of the ways in which Jesus responded to those written off by the rest of society: for example, when most of the crowd seemed to be telling Bartimaeus (Mark 10) to shut up, Jesus invited him over and asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” We saw you giving this agency in the ways in which everyone – staff, volunteers, and clients – was allowed to speak in the times of reading the Bible together, were encouraged to volunteer, and were given responsibility and choices.

What has also been great is discovering together the ways of authentically naming faith within the Next Steps. In the Roehampton team we had picked up the language of middleman used by one of the clients to describe Next Steps; but it was really helpful how you pushed back against that in our meeting feeling it didn’t quite work. I loved how through the conversation we had some new metaphors emerge around being a catalyst, an intercessor and an accompanier. For us, these words were a real gift, which seemed to be a way to name your distinctives – the ways in which you prayed, supported, advocated and brought change – and they could also be recognised as naming the Holy Spirit’s work amongst you as the catalyst of new things, as the one who intercedes for you and the clients, and the one who accompanies you and the clients. What I loved about this was the way it allowed faith to be named within Next Steps, rooted in the way in which you saw faith as fundamental to what you did rather merely having a sense that being Christian made Next Steps like any organisation but with ‘value added’.

These metaphors seemed to give ways to help name faith as part of the foundation of your work. For example, Joel, a client, talked about how the staff wouldn’t “let you off, but they’ll give you a second chance”. We saw deep resonances between a “place of second chances” and ideas of grace and forgiveness. As a team we discussed how the rules allowed you to create “unforced spaces of/for grace” where clients knew the limits but were able to find their own place in a way that they named as different from other organisations. Particularly significant here was the clients being allowed to come and spend time in the office. It was a “place to hang out” where love and care were experienced. We also saw how it was a place of being “raw, real and blunt”, where clients were encouraged to draw on the ancient wisdom of the Bible as they navigated the challenges they faced.

If I had to sum up the gift of this site to the project, it would be in those two insights:

- How agency doesn’t primarily come from within the individual but is discovered and exercised in the midst of a community which brings boundaries and offers grace and forgiveness;
- and how faith can be named through the ways in which it is lived out and in which God is experienced, rather than as values which we try to enact.

As we carried on to work with other sites, the insights about naming faith, and the ways you lived out the recognition of God’s agency and human agency working together, helped us to tune into similar things in those places too. We were really encouraged by the way you have picked up the three words we named – catalyst, intercessor, accompanier – and begun to think how that can help others from the faith sector to engage with prisoners and prison-leavers.

We are keen to help and support if we can. The questions I think we are left with are about how you share what you have more widely. The rich understanding of prayer as foundational to what you do, the ways you continue to help churches to engage with those who are vulnerable in deep, meaningful and safe ways – all this and the language you are shaping for your experiences are great gifts for the wider church and society.

Thank you for the love, work and time you put into doing this with us. It was a privilege to work with you and to meet colleagues and clients.

James

“I come here about a year ago, I was here for a year. I left, basically, for a couple of months, I moved with my family, ended up reusing again, end up ringing Marcus on a Sunday saying, basically, I need to come back and sort myself out.”

[Reece]



### 3.1.1 Key Insights and Questions:

- Individual agency for personal change is discovered and exercised in the middle of a community of boundaries, graces, and forgiveness.
- There are ‘ordinary’ and powerful practice of faith being named through the grounded day-to-day experience, linked to prayer and scripture.
- The activity of Christian work depends on the foundations of the Holy Spirit’s agency, encountered and participated in through making prayer the central work.
- How can these distinctive practices and insights be shared more widely?

## 3.2 The Community Hub

The Community Hub is a hub of different projects and activities around youth work, community café/drop-in, food pantry and other local, community-focused activities. It is based in an urban estate on the edges of Birmingham. The leader, Graham, and his wife Hannah moved to the area over twenty years ago. They moved with a team seeking to be church in the local area but later the team withdrew, leaving only Graham and Hannah and their family. Since then Graham has been ordained as a Baptist minister. Many of those now working and volunteering within the Community Hub were at one point part of the

youth group. We worked with a small team made up of staff and a trustee to carry out the research, which involved a series of interviews and a focus group with key people, along with a wider open space conversation engaging with those connected with the Community Hub and based around developing a timeline of the work.

Dear Graham and the Community Hub Team,

As I look back on our time working with you all at the Community Hub, there are things I'm pleased with and really enjoyed, and some things I think we could have done better together, in light of what we learnt together and the wider experience of the project. I really enjoyed coming to visit and felt very at home at the Community Hub. There were things which felt really familiar to me having been involved in some similar things myself. There was a warm welcoming atmosphere, and it was clear to me that it was a place used to welcoming strangers into its midst. We joined you at a time of transition I think, as the food pantry moved from the building we visited in the residential street at the heart of the estate to a different premises. It was fun to see the transformation take place to the main room downstairs over a few visits as it developed into a hospitable and flexible café space. I guess my regrets come from the ways in which we struggled to find ways to listen and learn from those who attend the Community Hub. We talked quite a lot about this when we did the planning, and we had some good ideas about how to gather people and how to have the conversations. In fact, it was because of those conversations that we came up with what we called "open space conversations", which were opportunities to talk around some sort of activity. Despite all of this, I think there were probably ways that we could have designed the process of listening and reflecting to be more in keeping with the Community Hub and draw more people into those reflections. We've learnt quite a lot about adapting the process of research over the course of this project, and I think had we come to you later in the project we would have probably had more ideas of how we could have designed something different.

It was great to have opportunities to get to meet and talk with a variety of people from the Community Hub. The open space conversations day when we all gathered to eat pizzas from the pizza oven and then added to the Community Hub Timeline was a particular highlight. It was really fun to see the ways in which people had connected and grown with the Community Hub over the time - noting how many times, for example, people who started out as part of the youth group, were now involved helping run it, or coming along to the activities for parents.

"[E]ven last week, Ruth came up to me after somebody who they thought shouldn't be allowed in The Community Hub. She said, 'Is he allowed in The Community Hub, you let him back in?' And I said, 'Well, yeah, I said that. That's fine. We want to be a space for all.' And about half an hour later, she came to me and said, 'Yeah, you're right,

Graham. You're right. We need to be accepting all people we need to be much more gracious and forgiving.' She said, 'We're getting there!'"

[Graham]

"You'd be at home, and you'll be stressing about things. You come here and it's, like, every, everybody's a big family, so you've got that support. You don't feel like you're burdening somebody..."

[Amanda]

"Well, I think this job found me. I didn't find it. Like, I wanna say a vocation but... Because it doesn't feel like work, I absolutely love it."

[Ruth]

The main question that you asked as a team at the beginning of the project was: "What happens at the Community Hub?" and the response we landed on together, I think, was that **life** happens at the Community Hub. I remember how we had a laugh in the reflector meeting about the fact that one of the transcripts from the focus group was interrupted by a voice asking who wanted paninis for lunch. It quickly became clear that the Community Hub was a gift to so many people; a place where they had grown in confidence, made deep friendship, received support when they needed it, and found opportunities for developing their skills and getting into work. It felt like real life because the good and encouraging stories were naturally interwoven with the ones that were about struggles, difficult times, fractured friendships and fallings out.

In light of this, I think it was really powerful how the Community Hub always held open space for reconciliation and forgiveness. The witness that Graham offered of how to be patient, loving and forgiving in the midst of some very challenging situations was really something, and this rubbed off on others. For me this was most

clearly seen in Ruth, who recognised that a different way of relating to one another was being offered at the Community Hub. I guess some people might talk about this as being about Christian 'values', but I think you saw it as something deeper. In our reflector meeting, you, Graham, talked about the "intentionality of God" working in a place. From my perspective you didn't see this as working out some good moral and ethical ways of being that were valuable to all but rather as signs that God loved and cared for this particular place. You pointed to 'the miraculous' things that you could only put down to God being at work. These were things like the police allowing you all to gather young people on certain nights despite there being a curfew in the area, and people getting issues around eviction sorted in twenty minutes when it normally takes weeks and weeks. In similar ways to what we saw in the Next Steps site, which worked with prison-leavers, we saw that you understood what you did as Christian because it was about being in a place where you saw God working and named that through the stories and experiences you had.

"[T]hey respect you, all of your religions, your food, your everything. If you wear a, wear a hijab, they respect you. If you don't wear it, they respect you. So if the person respects you, you, your heart wants to go there. It's okay, yeah, it's, it's good for me, I'm happy there."

[Karima]

was seen as being synonymous with you was powerful, but it also raised some questions for us. These were around why it was that others hadn't found the kind of faith you had and why conversations about this had proved so difficult for you and others.

When we talked about faith with some people who attended, they saw faith as aligned with identity. People saw themselves as Christians or Muslims at least in part because they had grown up in Christian or Muslim families, with all that this suggested about ethnic identity. This meant that when we talked about faith to people, the first reaction was that faith didn't matter at the Community Hub because everyone was welcome. This reading of faith, which came up in other sites too, primarily saw faith in private ways and was worried about the potentially divisive nature of faith. But then faith was also seen as important too in that people wanted Graham to dedicate their child, marry them or lead funerals of loved ones. I guess our question was what it might mean for faith conversations to

happen meaningfully beyond immediate connection to Graham? It has clearly been a hard environment for you, where faith has often been a difficult and unwelcome thing to talk about, and the fact that these conversations still seemed to occur in certain ways is definitely something to celebrate. As a team we saw resonances with the stories of missionaries from centuries past who were faithfully present in communities with little sign of Christian faith taking root, and wondered if there were things that could be an encouragement and wisdom to draw on. For example, one of the things that the missionaries did was to have a regular service, which - while it might only be them present - was itself a witness. We wondered if anything like that was happening or might helpfully happen, at the Community Hub?

We wondered, too, about the key role of leadership in understanding how things were passed on. It was really striking just how many people in key paid and volunteer roles around the Community Hub had come to the Community Hub as teenagers or as young parents in need of help with young children. It was clear that you had been really successful in passing on leadership roles around the community in running the café, doing the youthwork etc. and we reflected on whether there might be things here which would help with thinking about faith being passed on. With your plans to move on, Graham, it was clear that there were people stepping into leadership roles and taking over the mantle from you, and we wondered whether there might be someone to do this in a faith capacity too. When we talked together in the joint reflector meeting, it was striking to us how much Joshua took an interest in the conversation about faith and the presence of faith in the Community Hub, and we wondered whether there were ways that conversation might develop.

For me, there were some really important things I learnt from the Community Hub, and I'm very grateful to you all for the opportunity to spend time with and get to know some of you. One of the things I learnt was around the struggles to have faith conversations and the ways in which God may or may not be glimpsed in the place. It was clear that the faithfulness of Graham and Hannah in being present, consistent, sacrificial and forgiving had played a huge role. I think we learnt a lot about how to listen in 'edgy' places, and what we experienced from things not going as smoothly as they might have at the Community Hub benefited other, later sites in the project. Working with you also raised questions that we carried through the project at other sites, in particular the questions of how faith reaches articulation and how it is passed on. It was great to see a number of you at our conversation day and I'm grateful for how you brought a different voice and opened up different conversations. We'd still like to find ways to work more together, and it would be great to stay in touch. Thank you for everything you brought to the project.

James

I think this was why it was so interesting to hear the wider reflection on faith in the Community Hub. There were rich accounts of God at work coming from your stories, Graham: you had plenty of accounts of how you had had conversations with people about God, about things transcendent and beyond ourselves, but it seemed less common for those stories of faith and God to happen more widely in the community. I think this was something you lamented in some ways, as you told us about the struggles to get those conversations going at various times over the life of the Community Hub. It was clear to us that when the question of faith was brought up, people's minds went to Graham and the work you have done. It was nice to hear Anton's reflections of how your persistence and willingness to stick around had been noticed, particularly in light of some of the things the young people did to you to try and get rid of you, like kicking down your door for fun. The fact that faith

"I think it's very important because, um, I think it gives, um, Graham the strength [laughs], the strength and the commitment to stick with us [laughs]. Like, 'cos you can imagine, oh, you can imagine it's been hard. He's been here for like... [.] So, I think if he weren't so compassionate and didn't believe... I don't know. He

probably wouldn't still be here. So, I think it's very important. And then, in the way he wants us to be with each other and he's very... I don't know how to describe it though. I wanna say calm."

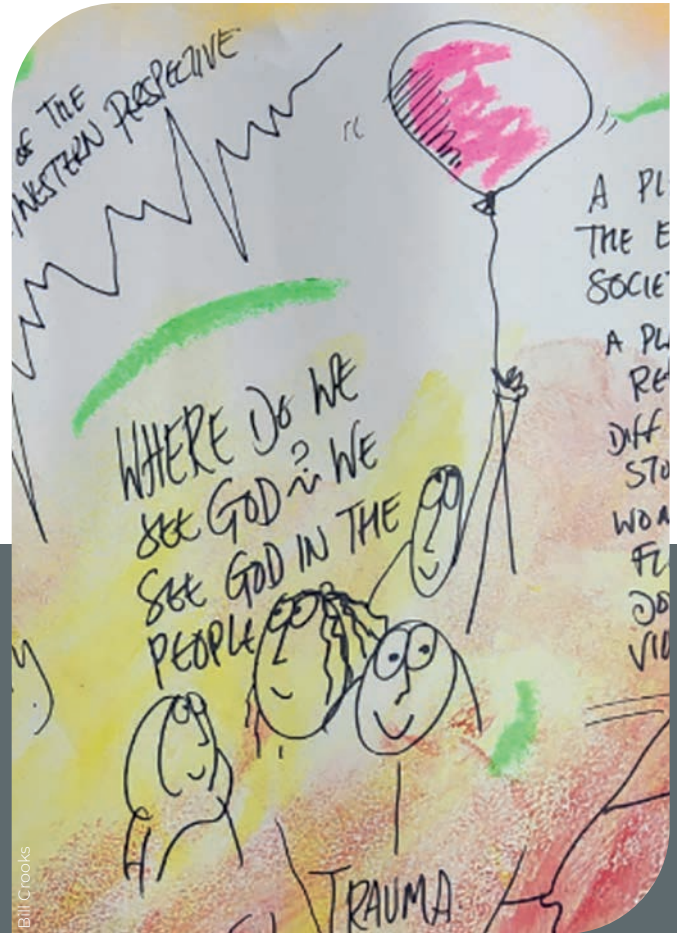
[Ruth]

"Well, he stuck at it, brother. He stuck at it, rather than go nowhere, so fair play to him. But, um, yeah, he went through his trials and tribulations, man."

[Anton]

### 3.2.1 Key Insights and Questions:

- Listening and reflecting in edgy places requires bespoke and distinctive practices and methods.
- The ability to be inclusive in ways that transcend or diminish the experiences of separation along lines of religion and ethnicity is a powerful gift and witness.
- Growth in confidence, and experiences of friendship and support have key places in the effective growing of community at the Community Hub.
- Is it important to enable a wider, more participative naming and passing on of faith in the community? And, if so, how might this be done?
- When a founding Christian leader moves on from a project like the Community Hub, how is the specifically faith leadership of the project to be maintained?



### 3.3 Connect

Based in a post-industrial town where much of the industry that had previously provided jobs for many of the population had closed down, Connect is a community centre/drop-in, connecting with and supporting a wide range of people locally. Based on the High Street, it was originally set up by a church who had had to move out of their church building because it was unsafe. Run by Ed, who during the time of the research was training to be ordained a Deacon in the Church of England, Connect has an entrepreneurial feel. Ed's background was as a business entrepreneur, and he brought those gifts and skills together to develop a community centre that is highly valued by those who attend. A variety of activities take place,

including a café, hosting drop-ins with Citizens Advice, a food bank, school uniform exchange, women's and men's groups and other activities including cycling trips. They also run a Wednesday Worship involving a worshipping community of around 20 people.

Dear Connect Team,

I remember the first day walking up to visit you with Ian and the town not being what I expected at all. I don't really know what I had in mind, perhaps something slightly more like a shopping street in the middle of Birmingham. We walked onto the High Street and there was a strange mix of a butchers and bakers, which seemed to be doing quite well, along with betting shops, pound shops and closed-up shop fronts. Ian and I walked straight past Connect, not even noticing it, even though we were looking for signs. Once we were inside, I just remember the busyness - people, and piles of items being sorted. That day there seemed to be quite a few people in the café area, and meetings going on next door. Of course, during the research you moved to the new premises across the road, which I'm sure is harder to miss as you walk down the High Street and has a much more spacious feel when you walk in. It is really great to see how things have developed even over the time we have been working with you and the ways in which people who have come have got more involved, taking on responsibility and becoming part of the life of Connect. In fact, as I think back over the things we have learned together, I think the way people become part of the life and work of Connect is probably one of the most significant things which came out of our listening and reflecting together.

It has been a huge privilege to work with you and to spend some time together. The Wednesday worship group were particularly welcoming to me as I came to listen and talk to people. As has been the case with a number of the 'edgy' groups we have worked with in this project, there was always an element of unpredictability in our work together, with focus groups, interviews and activities being pulled together at the last minute. Similarly, in our reflector meeting we had people coming and going at various moments to deal with different things. It was striking that in the last meeting we had, as we sat around the table together in the middle of Connect, I was thinking it was never going to work because everyone was going to be constantly asking questions of you all and particularly of Ed and Carl. However, the reality was that people seemed to just get on with things around us. I guess that also says something about how things have developed and people have taken responsibility. In reality, things didn't just revolve round Ed and Carl!

"I stopped to write a few notes at which point David came over. He said "I don't want to interrupt you but I just wanted to say, have a look around, this is what it is about." Around the table were lots of different conversations and everyone chatting away, laughing and enjoying themselves. He told

me that this is what it is all about. Everyone who comes is able to meet with people and develop friendships - to find people to talk to and enjoy themselves. He felt this was the real value of Connect."

[James' field notes]

"To have Ed come up to me, when I was serving soup kitchen, said 'come down Connect get to know us and come to prayer'. You know, put a loving arm over my shoulder and saying 'come on brother, come and do some work for us as well'. And that's the journey. I was blessed to be on that journey, to be alive today. So it's a beautiful."

[Liam]

One of the phrases which arose out of our reflector team meeting was that Connect was "the place where 'they' become 'us'". It was so powerful to hear the ways in which people who had come along to Connect not only found meaning and purpose but found a sense of belonging and friendship. It was really interesting to hear Ed's reflections that each person who came changed Connect a bit. They were enabled to express their own interests and to use their gifts and skills in ways that shaped the life of Connect. Ed really highlighted this point for me: he commented that so many church people come to Connect to visit and think about whether they could do something similar, but he knew they were going to run into problems if they weren't willing to be changed themselves. This seemed to identify a key element, that groups that really foster belonging and collaboration need to be able to adapt and change themselves in order to include and work with the people who are there.

The ethos of Connect was, then, actually changed by each new person, so I found it interesting how the conversation opened up to discussing how this ethos might be passed on. What you all suggested, as a team, has been such an important insight for the project about faith in edgy places: you said that the only way you could imagine Connect being replicated was if someone came and spent time with you, and their DNA became interwoven with the DNA of Connect. In reaching for ways to describe this change in the conversation, I remember we found ourselves using the language of 'marinading' to describe how people were changed by spending time in Connect. In terms of passing on the gifts of Connect, this was imagined as people being changed by **being in** Connect and then going and experiencing being changed by the people they came into contact with in the new place.

There were powerful accounts of change at Connect, and I was really impacted by some of the stories I heard. For example we heard from Ryan:

Yeah. August, so what's that four, five, six, seven months now. I never see myself as being off drugs for seven months. I mean, I haven't smoked, I haven't smoked cannabis since I've been in this area. I never really, really thought that I'd be anything other than a petty criminal really. But yeah, I've left all that behind. Now embracing the good things that are on offer. Probably before the only time I'd have come in a place like this was to rob it. But as I say it is a really good place and there's a lot of places that do help people. Through God, which is good.

It was great to hear the way Ryan had found a sense of belonging and had been able to help and serve in that community. Will's story was also powerful, and it reminded us of some of the stories we had heard working with the group of prison-leavers earlier in the project, about how Connect was a place where people found agency. Will told us about "giving something back" and how that gave a sense of "responsibility and purpose". I think what struck us all was when Will articulated that, "it was quite a natural thing to kind of go from coming along on a Wednesday afternoon to then volunteering and getting more involved". This is what was meant by "they become us"; people come along, find a sense of belonging and purpose, and are able to contribute not just into the patterns that are set but in a way their ideas, gifts,

skills and willingness are embraced. In fact, I don't think it is just positive gifts, skills and ideas, the kinds of things you would want to welcome and embrace into such a project, but also people's foibles and peculiarities. It was really striking to me how the Wednesday worship group were able to be present with someone who was reflecting on their brother's death many years ago and the way it was expressed with care and love, but also, it felt to me, in keeping with the joking and banter which was so often present in the life of Connect.

Another thing which struck me was the natural way in which faith was explicit in the life of Connect. I know that some thought had gone into this, with images and words on the walls such as a question on the coffee bar which said, "If you were having a coffee with Jesus today, what would he say to you?" and Bibles and crosses around the place. I saw this powerfully expressed by Lina, a Muslim, who used the space to offer support for families connected to Citizens Advice. Lina commented:



it's not just on Wednesdays, when they talk about faith, Christianity, Bible, this is basically every single day. And wherever you turn in the community you're going to find the Bible, you're going to find a cross, you're going to find a big wall, like you can put names and you can pray for this person. So basically, those people, I love them because they love their religion.

As a team, the ease at which Christian faith was part of the environment and conversation seemed to be related to the ease and openness of Connect as a whole. Again, we heard this from Ryan in particular.

I've never really been a strong believer. But I'm not... No... I'm not a non-believer, either. And Ed, he lets me know that there is a Christian element there if you want to seek it, but it's not, it's not shoved down your throat.

I guess for me this ease of talking about faith at Connect is something we have found inspiring and something that other groups we have worked with would benefit from. It seems to be a question many groups have and something that you have found a way into quite naturally.

It seems one of the big challenges for you is beginning to navigate life in Connect with Ed being ordained and being moved elsewhere by the Church of England. I realise this is not a small thing, and it was very clear how significant Ed was, and his entrepreneurial skills, to the life and success of Connect. I hope that some of the things we've talked about together in our journey can be of some help in your navigation of that: a confidence in being able to embrace new people and be changed by them while keeping an ethos of welcome, love and care; the ability to live on the edge of chaos without feeling the need to organise or formalise things too much, but trusting that people will come and get involved; the everyday ease in including faith in conversations and the surrounding space.

We've very much enjoyed working with you and look forward to seeing how things develop.

James

### 3.3.1 Key Insights and questions

- Being an inclusive and truly welcoming community means being one which changes with each new person who gets involved, leading to their full belonging and participation: 'they' become 'us'.
- The only authentic way of replicating Connect is through being changed by being part of the life of Connect, 'marinated' in its ethos, sharing its DNA.
- Including faith in our conversations is a matter of being ordinary and at ease about it, a space equally at home with human tragedy, and the banter and laughter of easy friendship.
- How dependent is the community at Connect on its founding, entrepreneurial leader? And what will be needed to ensure effective and continuing leadership that will support the distinctiveness of Connect?

### 3.4 Marketbury Methodist Church

In some senses, Marketbury Methodist Church is quite typical of many Methodist Churches in medium-sized towns: it has a small committed community, and is actively involved in its local community, hosting things like Welcome Spaces, English Classes, activities for children, and meals for those who are retired. In another sense, it has developed its edginess because it moved from its traditional Victorian building into space which

is more like a shopfront just off the High Street. We were interested in working with them to see how this move of building had made a difference to them in ministry and faith.

*Dear Marketbury Methodist Church Team,*

Despite the occasional unreliability of trains to get to you and the occasional need to finish the journey in a taxi or asking for a lift, I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed my visits to Marketbury. Sure, the beautiful surroundings and fun market town added to the experience, but it was the generous welcome I've received as I've turned up to visit at various points through the project that really stands out. This has included you putting me up for a night, and including me in various meals and gatherings - so, first of all, thank you. I always enjoyed my walk through town from the station to get to you, passing the old Victorian building that you moved out of and arriving into your new, more shop-front like building, just off the main road in the centre of town. When I shared some pictures of the new building with our Roehampton team before any of them had come to visit, they remarked how appealing it looked, all freshly fitted-out. One other comment that came from one member of our team was how many chairs there were facing each other, encouraging people to engage with one another. I felt this really captured something of your ethos as a church.

I was really struck how, when designing the building, you had thought through what it meant for it to be hospitable. In renting out the offices, and in allowing people to hire space for clubs and activities, you had thought about making people feel welcome and encouraging conversation and interactions. The fact that you supply tea, coffee and milk seemed to be one important expression of this but not the only one. When I spoke to someone who rented one of the office spaces, it was clear that she had experienced it as more than simply hiring space and felt part of the day-to-day life of the building in a more expansive way. I guess, given some of the intentions in setting up the space, it is not surprising that two of the key themes which came through were the particular welcome people had experienced and the ways friendships had developed.

I'm really grateful for the ways in which you engaged with this project, even though I know that at times it was challenging for you as a team. I know there were differences of opinion within the team regarding the value and purpose of the work together, so thank you for sticking with it and for engaging in the way you did. There certainly felt like some tricky moments to navigate in the conversations that happened and I know for some of you there was a feeling that it could have been more fruitful with everyone pulling in the same direction; but I guess that is the nature of working together on these things, and I hope what has come from the project might offer some helpful things as you seek to move forward as a church.

It was really striking to me as I started to have conversations with people who were coming to various different groups and activities in the building how so many of them recognised the same experience of welcome I had experienced in coming to visit. I don't feel like it is unusual for a church to describe itself as welcoming, and I think that might be particularly true of Methodist churches, but what was particularly striking was the stories people shared of being made welcome. I guess the person who most clearly stands out to me was Mary, who was in a wheelchair. It was powerful how she described that in much of the town she is known as 'the lady in the wheel chair', but at the church, and to people from the church, she is simply Mary. I saw the way in which people naturally moved and adjusted around her in the tight space as she came through, which to me spoke really clearly of the way she was very much part of the life of the church, and the space seemed to almost flex around her to include her. You may also remember one of the times I visited I set up a little table with a large piece of paper for people to note down the things they treasure about the church. When Mary came over to see what I was doing, her immediate reaction to seeing the question was to point around the room and say, "Look around, it's the people".

I guess that the fact that people felt welcomed means that it shouldn't have been a surprise that friendship was named so much through the workshop exercise, and in the interviews and focus groups. Perhaps the reason it was surprising was because it is quite common to hear about churches as 'friendly places', but it seemed to me, and indeed to the rest of the team, that what people had found at the church was genuine **friendship**. This was especially true for many whose more common experiences were of being isolated in the wider community, in one way or another.

"I love the 'welcome', the friendship and togetherness. It always makes a Monday morning seem 'sunny'. This is some of what Christianity is about."

[Anonymous contribution in workshop]

I found it fascinating that when we met together at the end of the project one of the things you wanted to talk about as a team was whether the church community was "too comfortable". As I've already mentioned, you have a lovely building, a warm welcome and good friendships, and so it was interesting to hear you reflecting on the ways in which that might also hinder you in what you are doing. I guess we particularly drew on the bit in one of the focus groups where Kirsty talked about needing "a comfortable place to be able to be uncomfortable". I've reflected since on the ways in which you saw challenge as an important part of church and being a Christian, how you helpfully identified that comfort might facilitate that in helpful ways and didn't just see it as a problem. It was not the only time that the importance of challenge and even discomfort in the Christian faith was talked about in the project. At a time when there is so much anxiety around about the need to stop church decline, this raises important questions as to whether the desire to be comforting and friendly potentially comes at the expense of losing the more challenging, discomforting elements of faith.

"I think you need a comfortable place to be able to be uncomfortable. Because if, if that makes sense, you need to know that you can question things, you need to know that you can disagree with things, you need to know that you can go on a journey with your thoughts, and be

comfortable that that's not going to leave you being sort of booted out the door or something like that."

[Kirsty]

I wonder whether questions of challenge and discomfort are also connected to another thing we spoke about together – how much faith conversations happened. I got the impression that you as the Marketbury team were quite negative about this, feeling that faith was often sadly absent in the conversation and activities, but we felt as a team this was not the whole picture. The term we landed on in the joint reflector meeting was about faith being "quietly present". It was great to hear stories of people coming to faith within the church. It probably shouldn't be a surprise that it was those people who had come to faith or returned to faith who were most happy to talk about faith. However, as we talked, we also began to notice the way faith was present in more subtle ways. We borrowed the term 'glimmers' from another site – AllTogether – to begin to talk about these "graced moments" together, and it was helpful to hear you as a team talk about the ways in which you saw very ordinary conversations in the midweek groups and activities

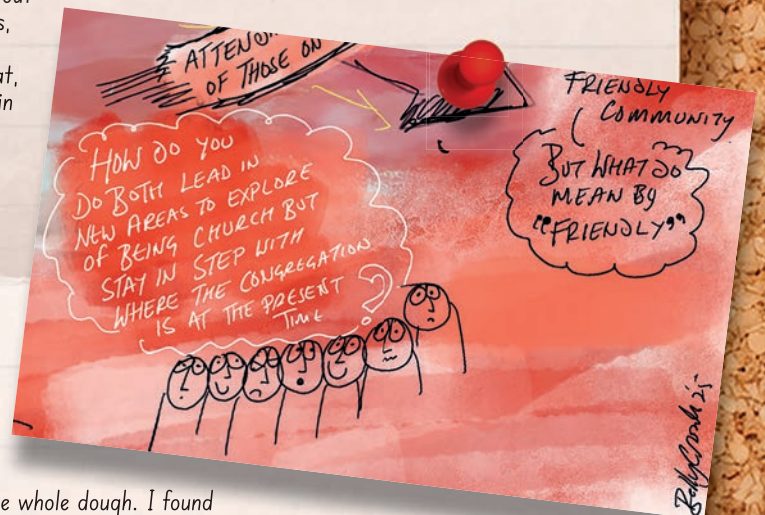
being opened up by a word or phrase, and opportunities for faith conversations emerging. I think for me this was one of the really interesting things which seemed to come out of the research as a whole: that in these 'edgy' places, away from the more formal church spaces, faith is 'quietly present' in subtle and surprising ways, and that, given time and attentiveness, these presences can begin to emerge and grow.

One of the stories which particularly touched me was talking to Kate who had come to connect with the church through her community development role across the local area. She had clearly been impacted by the way you as a church had engaged with your local community and helped the town as a whole to be, in her words, "bolder" in its community engagement. You could see that Christian faith has also been quietly present for her as she talked about going on her "own little journey" around faith. What she said and the other stories of faith reminded me of Jesus' parable in Matthew 13.33 about the kingdom of God being like yeast, which slowly works its way through the whole dough. I found it inspiring to see the ways in which faith was making a difference, even if it was not happening in the ways we might expect, or perhaps even have been led to believe it happens.

We know there are challenges ahead, as there were for all the sites. In some ways, the fact that you have almost outgrown the building in terms of the number of people coming to activities and the numbers coming to a Sunday service, is a clear blessing; but I know that the work also feels fragile, particularly in the ways you anticipate a change in minister in next year or two, and the questions that brings. I guess this is always the way in 'edgy' places, and in light of this I am encouraged by the way in which you also articulated a trust in God and what he was doing in you and through you.

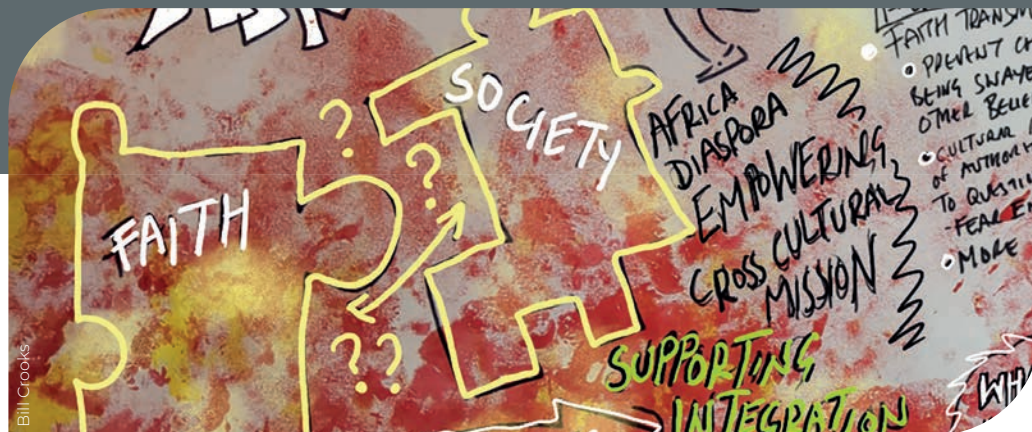
Thanks so much for all you have brought to the project. We look forward to seeing how things develop and hopefully connecting again soon.

James



### 3.4.1 Key themes and Questions

- Whilst societally and in our churches we are often tuned in primarily to noticing the big things, it is crucial, in matters of Christian life and conversation, to attend to the ways in which faith is 'quietly present.'
- 'Being friendly' is something all church communities aspire to be, but this is not the same as being places of real friendships, forged and nurtured.
- There are ways in which we need to balance – and integrate – both the comfort and the challenge of Christian life, especially in the forming of new communities.
- How do we better discern the hidden presence of being the yeast in the dough?
- How do we move from being friendly to enabling friendships?



### 3.5 Missio Africanus

Missio Africanus is a network to support African Diaspora churches in the UK as they seek to engage in mission and evangelism.<sup>3</sup> Through their website, social media, online roundtable events, journal and other media, they seek to support pastors and missionaries from diaspora communities. While our original intention was to work with a particular diaspora church in the research, as is explored in the letter, this was not possible. Instead the research focused around

the passing on of faith from first- to second-generation diaspora Christians working with Missio Africanus. The research was based on two focus groups, one with second-generation African diaspora Christians and one with first-generation African Diaspora Christians.

Dear Missio Africanus team,

Thank you for working with us on this project. In preparing to write to you, I've realised there have been quite a few twists and turns in getting to a project working with African Diaspora experience. You'll remember that initially we had imagined working with some sort of diaspora church, looking at the ways in which they were navigating questions of faith in the edgy spaces of migration and race, and how being a diaspora community in the UK shaped faith, both within and outside of that community. You helpfully tried to put us in touch with a few church leaders who might be able to help us, and we found a few through other contacts. You'll be more aware than me that the 'edges' in which most of these churches and groups are operating, are fragile and, if not precarious, then at least unpredictable. Some of my conversations with church leaders had to happen at 9pm or later because they had rushed from their shift work to the church prayer meeting and had only just got home. For all their generosity and willingness to try, I just realised that with all the will in the world, they just weren't going to fit another project into their lives. It was also clear that while they trusted Missio Africanus, some were unsure about engaging in a research project because of bad experiences in the past. We were beginning to wonder whether it was going to be possible to include an African diaspora voice so when you said you were willing to develop a project with us we were delighted.

Initially as the Roehampton team we had assumed that the work with an African Diaspora voice would focus on the precariousity of living that diasporic life, with shift work, second jobs, family pressures and the tensions of living in a different dominant culture from one's own. Our first conversation with you all took us in a slightly different direction to ask about the experience of faith for the first- and second-generation migrants and how faith was passed on intergenerationally. As you'll remember there was quite a bit of energy in the conversation around this topic, and the focus on faith transmission between generations clearly fitted within the overall aims of the wider project. It was also great that Paul and Sheila took on some of the work of recruitment and running the two focus groups - thank you both. Given a history of distrust between diaspora groups and formal research, it was good to have you put people at ease and lead them in ways that felt familiar to them, and naturally share in their stories.

It's interesting how much the norm it has become for us to do these things online over Zoom, and I think increasingly people are becoming used to have open and reflective conversations in this way. I don't know how you all felt, but I don't think the richness of the conversation suffered from our reflecting together on Zoom, although it was funny to meet Paul in person halfway through the process and see his double-take as he didn't clock who I was at first! Anyway, that is all to say, I was delighted how our reflective conversation went looking at the data. We seemed to tune in, in those conversations, to the differences we saw between the first- and second-generation African diaspora Christians and particularly the differences they saw between one another. Things like the second generation describing how their faith was "softer" than their parents, and the first generation's shock at the way their children were being encouraged to question and explore things for themselves in their UK education and socialising. The differences were striking but I remember that we also noticed how much they had in common, particularly in the ways in which they articulated faith through Bible references and through an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit.

One thing that stayed with me from that first reflection we did together looking just at the second-generation accounts was Paul's and Sheila's surprise at the way the young people they knew expressed their faith. I remember how Sheila commented, "I was surprised by some of the thoughts that were shared from people that I knew [...] it showed their desire to share. And I think that comes from the aspect of making their faith their own." These seemed to the Roehampton team to be significant and important insights. Sheila's comments that "maybe we are not really paying the kind of attention that we should do to our young people" and her reflection that although the youth are often referred to as the future leaders, "they are ready to lead now" seem to guide our conversation from that point.

One of my questions, which I asked a number of times in various conversations we had, was about which of the second generation were seen as 'faithful'. There was a lot of discussion in the first-generation focus group about how it was difficult to guide young people in the faith, because the culture they were growing up in was so different from the culture of the parents' own formative years. As I'm saying this, I'm thinking of the stories shared of first-generation

parents not liking the fact that schools encouraged their children to look adults in the eye as a sign of respect, and to learn through asking questions. It was fascinating to explore these cultural differences together and notice the tensions they brought. It was interesting then to hold together the concern from the first generation that they were not doing their job of passing on the faith to the second generation with Sheila's and Paul's surprise that the second-generation diaspora Christians had a vibrant faith which they had "made their own." It seems to me these mismatches in understanding and difference in perspective were some of the really rich places where we discovered insights together.

One such insight concerned what counted as 'faithful' for the second generation. The Roehampton team's initial assumption was that, by and large, the second-generation focus group we spoke to would be seen as the faithful among the youth. However, we learned in our conversations that it was not as straightforward as we thought. We were grateful for the insights you brought that helped us understand that this was a complex

"I mean, if we have children who are more... we see how children who are really well disciplined these days, but a lot of times, you can agree with me that technology and the school has done a lot of brainwashing. They teach them confidence, they teach them to be outspoken,

they teach them to look in their eye. They tell them to reason for themselves. So they are coming out with points and saying, Why do you want me to do that? You have to explain everything these days."  
[Folsade]

"Yeah, for me, I would say yes, my faith is my own. I think like from the minute I decided to make that decision to get baptized everything was like on me. So that was like the first step to me becoming independent and seeking my own personal relationship with God, because at the end of the day, your salvation is your salvation, yours alone."  
[Adjoa]

"For me I had like a loop of giving my life to Christ. I gave my life to Christ almost like seven times because I didn't really understand what it meant. I would say, thinking about it, it was like a fear-engineered surrender. It was like, okay, if you don't give your life to Christ, you go to hell."

[Nathan]

matter. This led the conversation in the joint reflector meeting to an interesting point of insight, which for us felt like one of the key contributions to this project: that faithfulness looks different to different people. The first-generation parents were not always able to recognise the faith of the second generation. Where the first generation saw faithfulness in obedience, regular practice of prayer, church attendance and serving in church, the second generation seemed to emphasise spiritual encounter, personal decision, questioning and making sense of faith. One way this was expressed in the second-generation focus group was that their concept of faith was 'softer' than their parents' articulation, which they saw as harsh and often based in fear. Perhaps for these reasons, many were attending different churches from their parents. For us as the Roehampton team, we wanted to ask some theological questions about how faith can be recognised across these kinds of generational gaps. We would be interested to hear more from you as the *Missio Africanus* team, and those involved in African diaspora churches, as to how this is being navigated in the day-to-day life of diaspora churches.

Another aspect that seemed important to us was the theme of how conversations between generations might take place in ways that helped them to recognise each other's faithfulness. We wondered how they could explore their different perspectives, and draw on each other's wisdom to reflect on how the second generation could be better integrated into the life and leadership of the church. What we feel we heard from you all was that this was a challenge in churches, where a typical set up would be the leadership speaking on a topic, with questions being able to be asked. Paul responded to our questions about this by talking about family life, leading me to think he had misunderstood that we were interested in where shared theological conversations take place in the churches. However, there was no such misunderstanding; Paul's insight was that actually where these kinds of theological conversations are happening is in families and in homes. In the domestic life of family relationships, real questioning and responses around faith were happening. Helpful here was Joseph's identification of the need for a 'holy curiosity', which wanted to explore faith questions but through the language of holiness. At the heart of the questions is a desire to discover faithfulness. It would be interesting to explore your instinct that it is in the 'family devotions', where families are already reading the Bible and praying together, that a forum might be found for such conversations.

For us the questions we were left with were quite practical. How might these kinds of conversation take place in the life of the church? How might conversations take place which talk about the softer and harsher understandings of faith? Are there things which the second generation has lost which they need to value from the first generation? Is there wisdom from the second generation that might help the first generation navigating some of the challenges they face in terms of faith transmission and mission? We're interested to explore these further with you and look forward to some of those opportunities.

Thanks again for being part of the project. It was definitely these questions of what faithfulness looks like, and the question of facilitating cross-generational conversation, that most struck us from the data, but there were many more things that came out of the listening, reflection and conversation that have contributed to the project. Thank you.

James



### 3.5.1 Key themes

- Identifying and recognising faithfulness in others.
- A holy curiosity in exploring faith different from one's own.
- The possibilities of faith conversations in the domestic and family spaces.

### 3.6 The City Centre Chaplaincy

The City Centre Chaplaincy team is based in a West Midlands City and focused on developing chaplaincy provision across various different sectors including Further Education, Shopping Centre, LGBTQI+ community and the bus station. While unsure whether participating in the research was right for them because of the early stages of their work, the research particularly reflected on their work within the FE college, the developing inclusive church work with the LGBTQI+ community, giving most attention to the weekly coffee morning

which took place at a local café. The research took the shape of a reflective journey, meeting monthly with two members of the team to reflect with them. Later in the journey we also interviewed two people involved in the coffee morning.

Dear Cynthia and Tanya,

It has been really interesting to reflect back on our journey together through this project. I remember clearly that first conversation we had where our desire to explore faith in 'edgy places' resonated with your own desires as a chaplaincy team to connect with those across your city and to see how faith was emerging in those places, and yet it was not clear what the listening and research would focus on. As you put it in that first meeting, "we haven't really got a project for you to look at". I think at the time your instinct was that it would probably be better for something like this to happen a few years down the line when there would be something more concrete to talk about and a wider group of people to engage with. Yet there was something about what you were doing and about your outlook that meant we felt you would make an important and distinctive contribution to the project precisely at the stage you were at. As we had already said to the Missio Africanus team, it would have been ridiculous to exclude you from the project because you were 'too edgy'! I'm so glad we found a way to work together that was mutually beneficial because the perspective that working with you brought to the wider exploration of 'edgy faith' and 'edgy learning' has been really significant. In fact, I think one of the key things we learnt from you was that seeing things only as 'projects' limits our view of what is going on and what God is doing.

I'm glad we chose the approach to meet every month or so to reflect on what you were doing. These meetings where the four of us - you both, myself and Clare - met together were really stimulating times and I've enjoyed being able to reflect back on them through the transcripts. For me it has been interesting to look back at the start, where the coffee morning you run in the local café was just one element of what we talked about, because over the course of the project it really moved to being a big focus of our reflections together. I guess this is partly because of how it grew and developed over the course of our conversations, with people joining and the need to navigate questions and issues that were arising. I was also interested in some of the language we settled on early on to talk about what we were seeing, like what was "bubbling up", the "stepping stones" emerging, and "God-instances". For us as a Roehampton team these indicated the way you were noticing and discerning the work of the Spirit, or the graced moments, in the midst of life. I think that is why the theme of "holding space" surfaced so strongly for us as a foundational description for the various strands of work you were doing. As the different possibilities for city centre chaplaincy emerged, your work seemed shaped by this holding-open of space for attention to the Spirit's work. It was interesting to discuss that with you when we met, and I really liked the way that Cynthia described the slow and patient work of developing the coffee morning. I felt like what you expressed was a fine balance between planning and responding, where you both shaped a space and also responded to the things 'bubbling up' in that space. I suppose that is why we turned to the language of spirituality to describe what was going on; a spirituality of holding space and attending.

In terms of the coffee morning, as you said at the time, the choice of the space had something to do with it - you'd chosen a really warm, welcoming, homely café to host this. In fact, I was quite surprised when I arrived to visit how different it was from what I'd imagined when you had talked about the café. I guess I'd imagined something a bit cramped, a jumble of tables and chairs, and something a bit more commercial, but what I found was something that felt more like a smart guest house or a well-kept front room. Big spacious chairs, nicely laid tables, a quiet and spacious feel and the most amazing and delicious array of cakes. It had little nooks and crannies where people could have different conversations and chats, and I could see why you'd felt it was such a good fit. I also found it interesting to hear your reflections on not being the host, and therefore not having to worry about serving people or tidying away, but rather to have the freedom just to sit and chat with others. And from those chats there seemed to be significant conversations 'bubbling up' in different places. The most formal of those was 'Saint of the Day', which both Clare and I loved as an idea. What was particularly great about it was that no one could quite remember how it had started. Also striking was that the person who brought the Saint of the Day and talked about it was not one of the leaders but someone who had got involved, finding it a good place to come and have company.

"And this morning. So, you know, because we've seen, you know, we're not there to sort of study the Bible. But we had three conversations this morning, particularly, that just stood out. One was on forgiveness, one was on grief, and one was on is God testing us about something or other. And that's just what popped up out of out of the conversations."  
[Cynthia]

"This is the end of our second year of that where we've having, you know, inviting people to a coffee morning within a café. So we don't have to provide the refreshments. That's all done for us. We're just there creating the space and offering that listening ear."

[Cynthia]

One of the things that the work you are doing and the questions you were asking led us to reflect on as a Roehampton team was on the idea of "project". I don't know if you remember, but there was a really interesting moment in our conversation where you were thinking about how you could get other people involved in the work you were doing. Tanya in particular was thinking about how it was a particular set of skills and an approach, which would sort of need training, but she remarked: "I'm loathed to use the word programme, but I can't think of another way of doing it." These kinds of reflections led us to see that it wasn't just that you didn't have a project for us to look at, but there was something about the idea of a project or programme that didn't quite fit what you were doing. Again, the place we seemed to land was on the theme of spirituality - about how you were in your work, and with others rather than the nature of projects. That has really stayed with me, and I've continued to think about it. It reminds me of our work with Connect, where they felt they couldn't replicate their work by doing the exact same

things somewhere else; what they felt was that you would somehow need to allow the DNA of the work to become your DNA and then let that DNA be merged with the DNA of the place where you are looking to work. I guess your experience gives me another way to view that - a kind of spirituality of space making/holding and of pilgrimage with others.

For you both it seems the 'project' was never the goal. Rather, the goal was always to connect with people and see what emerged. This looked like the coffee morning, the work with the Further Education college, the growing connections with the LGBTQ community, and the chaplaincy in the bus station and shopping centre. Cathy Ross, who was part of our reflector team and who researches and writes about mission, pointed to a quote from a key mission thinker, Andrew Walls: "The missionary has to learn to live on terms set by other people." As you go about your chaplaincy work, there is a spirituality which is about holding a space where the opportunities, conversations and graced moments can emerge. The work is about having the awareness and confidence to gently take those opportunities, to engage with those people, to listen to their stories and to show that love and care. I think this spirituality was also visible in the way in which you helped others into chaplaincy, not through some specific training, but through going out in pairs and reflecting back together on what had happened.

"It's an art and a skill. And a relationship. It comes out of two things, out of relationship with God and it's also born out of relationship, in my context, with people having gained trust."

[Tanya]

The other little gem from our time together came from our conversation with Diana, who has been part of that work with Cynthia in the café from early on. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, is often quoted as saying that the church is renewed from the edges. Diana's experiences seemed to be a really clear example of that and how her own faith had been re-energised by being involved in the work in the café and other chaplaincy-type places, meeting non-Christians and spending time with them. It's so easy in churches for it to feel scary to step into different environments, and perhaps feel a pressure to somehow share faith. Yet what was so lovely about Diana's story was that it was her faith that had been enlivened.

"The fact that you're talking to people who don't know God instead of people who already know him, or think they do. I know you have to feed the people that are already there, else you won't have to have a church to continue with, but it's just a bit more exciting."

[Diana]

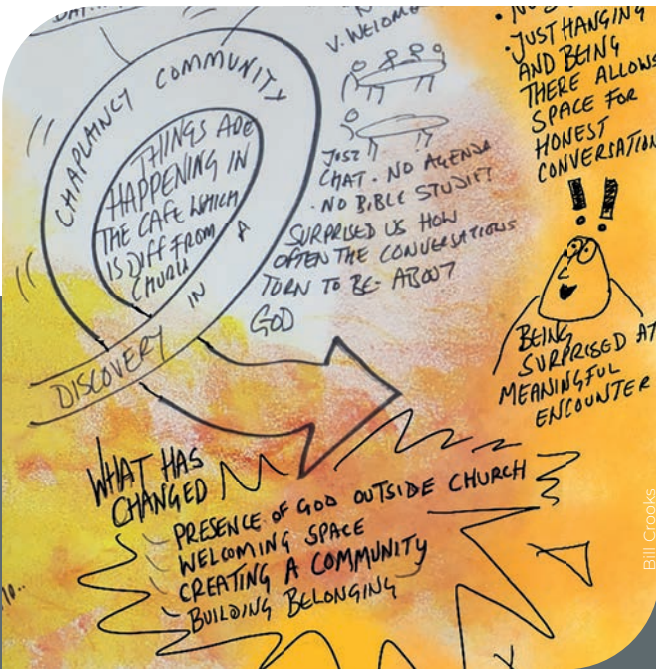
I know for you there are still many questions, and that things feel very fragile in these edgy spaces, but I think your instinct to avoid turning things into 'projects' feels a really helpful one. It has been encouraging to see and reflect together on the spirituality of space-making and pilgrimage which you seem to naturally embody, and to see the ways in which that spirituality has opened up opportunities. I think the other thing that has really shone out of our time together is something about trusting God. There were a number of points through the conversations we had where there was some thinking and perhaps even a little anxiety about how things were going to unfold - What happens when we need more than one table in the café? How do we find and prepare others to be involved? How is it going to work when we start the discussion groups with the LGBTQ groups? - and yet when it came to it, these things happened and you were able to hold the space and step into them in ways which felt natural. The stepping stones emerging one step ahead was the image that arose in the conversation to describe that which seems helpful too. For me this seems to really align with the idea of avoiding becoming a 'project'; there's not a destination to reach as such, but a continuing journey, a pilgrimage, where the next steps become gradually apparent.

Thanks again for all the time and energy you put into this. I know from previous conversations that this had also been fruitful for you, and I'm glad about that. I hope these conversation and reflections can continue to be helpful to you as you continue in your work. We certainly will continue to draw on them as we reflect further on faith in edgy places.

James

### 3.6.1 Key Themes and Questions

- Perhaps we might be freed up in our Christian outreach and mission if, instead of focussing on developing 'projects' to plan and manage, we learned how to be in places where others are, and attend to what bubbles up.
- If we are not burdened by an expectation to be developing and managing projects, perhaps we can be rooted more clearly in spirituality – a way of living, praying and acting that is Spirit-led and attentive to the Spirit's work. This is a spirituality of making and holding spaces for others.
- 'The edges' are not simply places for Christian or church outreach. In fact, they are the very places where faith and church is renewed.
- Are there challenges in communicating this vision of a space-holding, attentive spirituality to church communities who more easily recognise 'projects'? How can these be worked through?
- How can projects and the management that comes with them find their proper place within the Christian community, recognising the priority of the work of the Spirit and the spirituality that enables that to be recognised and attended to?
- Are there ways in which the spiritual way embodied in this chaplaincy team can be more clearly expressed, and shared with others?



### 3.7 AllTogether

Started by Kate as a Facebook group and Zoom gathering, AllTogether seeks to gather those with mental and physical disability and/or chronic health impairment, particularly those who are not able to get to church or those for whom church has become a difficult place to be. The group has grown significantly, numbering around 70 people connecting at the time of the research and now run by Bridget and Mike after Kate had to step down due to ill health. The research took the shape of a reflective journey with the leadership team, who did their own listening and reflecting with the wider community.



Dear AllTogether team,

I want to start by saying thank you for the way you trusted us and opened yourselves up to engage with us and our exploring of faith in edgy places. I was aware in approaching you that there is suspicion of research and academia within the wider community of those with disabilities due to the way research has been done and used in the past. As we spoke it also became clear how, as a community of those with mental and physical disability and chronic illness, many of you had negative experiences of churches, institutions and indeed research projects where, having shared things and offered yourselves, those things had been rejected or turned against you. Not only that but, as you all expressed, to take on being involved in a project like this took precious time and energy. With all this in the background, we were pleased to be able to design something together which you felt would fit your needs. We were delighted to have the opportunity to work with you and learn from you and your experiences. Your insights, experience and listening have been a huge gift to the project as a whole.

As we met over those few months to listen and reflect together, I was quite shocked to hear some of your experiences of how you had been treated by churches and other groups. Given these quite negative experiences, it was really powerful for me that one of your desires was still to help churches to get better at inclusion. For me that is why your question and the things you wanted to focus on were so important. You had an instinct that there was something about what you experienced as a group that wasn't just something precious to you but actually something which could be a real blessing to other churches.

One of those things that spoke powerfully to me, and which I think is something many churches need to hear, is what you reflected on around inclusion. Right from the start you talked about how it wasn't a one-size-fits-all but something you were learning about every day, and I could really see that in the way you talked about it. I could see that at AllTogether inclusion wasn't primarily a policy, procedure or set of guidelines but a genuine care for each person who was part of the group. It was all done in very ordinary and normal ways - as you said, not labelling it as 'pastoral care' but just caring. What was striking to me was that AllTogether seemed like a place where people felt seen and known. As Charlotte said powerfully, "We hear you, we see you, we love you, you are part of us." Given these experiences it was also really interesting to hear you challenging theologies you had experienced in the churches you had been part of, such as God not being able to look at you because of your sin and needing to look at Jesus instead. In contrast, the experience of change which had happened in people at AllTogether was as a result of feeling loved, accepted and welcomed.

Another really important aspect of AllTogether that shone through was about participation and energy levels. Joanna's reflection that because you can't participate as fully and don't have the same energy or reliability as others you end up feeling less, and end up on the fringe, was also a powerful challenge to churches. I really liked the way there seemed to be an understanding within AllTogether that people would give what they were able to give, and that included people in leadership roles. I heard that challenge you gave to churches loudly and clearly: that there needed to be the means for people to go at different speeds, and be able to participate at different levels and still be able to feel like they mattered and were part of it, and were not left on the fringe. That seemed to us as a Roehampton team something that was hard to think through in the abstract; but your approaches of honesty, care and careful listening to each person in their particular situation felt like important clues to a way forward. Connected to that, I loved the rhythms of community life that were developing around AllTogether: your Monday glimmers, where people could say something that had been meaningful or precious to them but also could be interpreted as glimpses

of God at work; thankful Thursdays; the prayers that were shared on Facebook. It was lovely to see the ways in which a rhythm of community life seemed to be emerging within the group.

I think in all you told us and reflected on with us we got a glimpse of a different way of leading and understanding leaders from what we had often seen elsewhere. Bridget's reflection that AllTogether 'is not ours' but everybody's, was a really striking example. Leadership seemed to be held in a very different way. Those who were 'leaders' shared prayer requests in the same way as everyone else. It can be quite trendy these days to talk about vulnerability in leadership, but we felt this was more than that. It was a different approach, one which was much more ordinary, natural, springing up from the relationships in the group. In one way it was nothing special - it is the normal ways humans interact and love and care for each other - which is exactly what made it special and stand out. Your suggestion that this was because of how the leading of the group had been shared, and how the person who founded the group had stepped back due to health reasons, was especially helpful. Again, this was leading in honest and ordinary ways, aware of limitations and abilities, and responding to health, to struggles and to life.

These were all powerful stories and beautiful insights that will live long in the memory and have certainly impacted the way in which I will approach many of these things in my own church experience. But I think the thing that had the

"But I got prayed for absolutely ferociously, for healing almost every time I was there. And then, when I wasn't healed, there was almost a judgement on me. Not from all the people, but from some people, and eventually it became too uncomfortable. I felt I couldn't really stick around."

[Charlotte]

"We're broken, and we're all fully whole, all at the same time. We can understand, hear from each other, and share with each other without any judgment or expectation, but without any dumbing down, either."

[Bridget]

"you've reminded us of how many conversations we have in our community about people's experiences of being prayed for to be healed, yet again without being asked. We pray for each other all the time. But we ask what prayers we would

like, and how. So many of us have been hurt or damaged or traumatized by being prayed for in inappropriate ways."

[Bridget]

"it's easy to pick up the idea that you are less than in church circles. This is because of several things, the way it's structured like you have to be full of energy. You have to be quite physically fit. You have to be able to participate and join in, to not end up on the fringe."

[Joanna]

biggest impact on me was the insight of seeking the "more excellent way". It was Bridget who brought the passage from 1 Corinthians 12 to one of our reflector meetings, and we thought about the image of the body as having many parts. What the conversations that followed from that reflection made me realise was that if we think about the body of Christ as a real body, which lives and moves, which ages, and which hurts, rather than as some organisational account, we get a quite distinctive vision of church. As our reflections continued, the thing that really struck me, and others on the team, was that we never heard the body of Christ as described in 1 Corinthians 12 talked about in relation to the famous verses on love in 1 Corinthians 13. The Apostle Paul says all these things about the church and how the parts of the body relate, but then he says there is a more excellent way, a way based in love. I feel like in AllTogether we got a bit of a glimpse of that more excellent way and how these things can be rooted, not in some understanding or practice of organisational patterns, but in genuine love and care. I think from now on I will often find myself asking, when faced with challenges around church and the Christian life, "What is the more excellent way?"

I'm so grateful for the conversations we had and the journey we went on together. It has been really precious to me, and it has offered crucial insights and wisdom into the questions of edgy faith and edgy learning.

We look forward to seeing how things develop, and we're happy to connect further over ways of sharing some of the wisdom you have developed with others when you're ready and able.

James

### 3.7.1 Key themes and questions

- Our churches need to move from thinking about being 'welcoming' to people living with disabilities and difficult health conditions, to reflecting seriously on what needs to change for them to be authentically inclusive of all.
- Such inclusion requires that we change our attitude to time, and recognise the importance of enabling life being lived at different speeds, and in different seasons of life.
- AllTogether gives us clues towards a different community shape for our church communities, where leadership, and regular practices emerge from the realities and apparent limitations of people's real lives.
- What difference would it make if, instead of responding to challenges in church life with ideas for new practices, structures, or ministries, we asked what 'the more excellent way' might call us in to?
- How do our churches prioritise **love** as **the** work of Christian life?



## 4. Edgy Faith and Edgy Learning – Key Insights

### Listening and reflecting in edgy places

Our experience of the research both questions the validity of talking about edges and highlights the need for better ways to listen to those 'edges'. While in some ways participants recognised ways they were marginalised, many did not experience themselves 'on the edge' in any meaningful way. In each project it became clear that centres and edges were more a question of perspective than a fixed reality.

When it comes to listening in those spaces, we found ways to be more creative in our listening through workshops and activities, but there is more to be done to hear those voices in 'edgy' places.

### Passing on faith

There was an anxiety about passing on faith in many of the sites, and yet what we found was that faith was "quietly present" in meaningful ways. Whether it was the objects and images around, the approach and care of the people, the space and encouragement to notice the "glimmers", what was 'bubbling up', or the conversations which occurred in the midst of life – all these things were signs that faith was present, a yeast working through the dough of these edgy spaces.

### Holy Curiosity and recognising faithfulness

Missio Africanus, in particular, tuned us into the ways in which faithfulness looks different to different people in different places. We wondered what it would look like to have conversations about faithfulness across these differences, learning from one another's faithfulness, and seeking the ways in which faith might be enriched by such encounters. The need for a "holy curiosity" was a helpful framing of the way this might happen, emphasising the importance of a loving interest in the other which contributes to growing in holiness.

### Discovering language for faith in the middle of things

Through our conversations ways emerged to name faith in its concrete expression – places of second chances, the glimmers of God, the everyday miracles, the "God instances" – and as we talked with the seven sites we found ways to name faith from the grounded experience within the organisation, church or group. This was particularly clear in Next Steps, where together we co-forged a language of catalyst, intercessor and accompanier, which expressed the work of God in ways authentic to the language and experience of participants.

### Where "they" become "us"

One thing which was common to many of the sites was seeing people grow in confidence. We recognised a way in which agency wasn't something that could be drawn up from inside oneself, but was actually a result of being in a community that gave agency. These communities brought opportunities to help and participate, to make decisions, to take responsibility in small ways. They recognised that each person had something to offer. As Connect in particular revealed, these were spaces where the community changes as a result of what people brought – "they" became "us".

### Leadership

There are rich points of reflection about leadership. It was clear that many of these sites were led by motivated, high-achieving, entrepreneurial leaders, and that their presence was critical to the project. This often felt at odds with some of the emphasis in community development work around collaboration and finding the gifts in the community. There is something important to be explored around the role of the charismatic leader – its strengths and weaknesses. In the midst of this there were still ways to learn about how leadership is passed on, and how leaders are raised up. Everyone pointed to this, and there were clear examples of this happening, especially with leaders being developed from the community rather than being imposed 'from above'. However, it was interesting to contrast these examples with the kind of leadership modelled at AllTogether, where there was an emphasis on shared approaches, the humanity and frailty of leaders, and the ways in which the community was able to function even when leaders were at capacity and had to step back.



## Replication

Successful projects and ministries in edgy places attract people who have heard about the work, and visit with a desire to replicate it in their own setting. What our focus on edgy places revealed was that, rather than the particular activity, what seemed most important was each community's or group's openness and responsiveness to the local community. The insight from Connect, that the reason others struggle to do the same is that they are not willing to be changed by those who come, was a powerful one. Replication was not a plan or strategy, but more like a virus or DNA - something which had to be caught, that changed the very way we are. Any replication must be like a combining of DNAs, creating something which was as much shaped by the people coming and participating, bringing their own interests, gifts and desires, as it was by the leaders who started the groups.

## An edgy spirituality

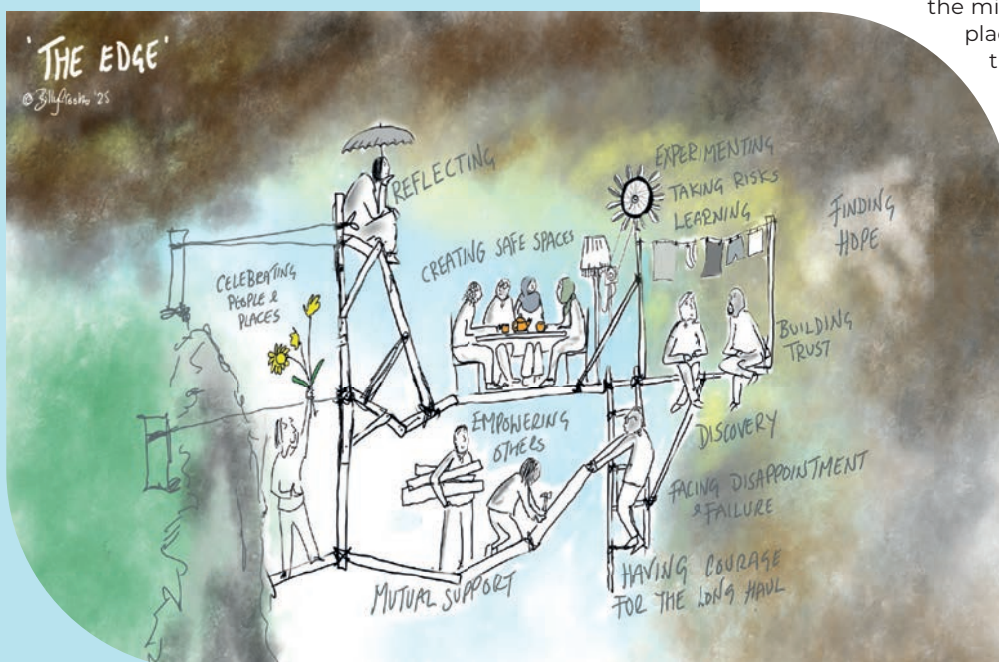
In the research project we found ourselves using the (admittedly complex and often ill-defined) language of spirituality quite a bit. This was because much of the work we saw, and the reason that people were effective in what they were doing, was not because they had a grand plan or a vision that others bought into, but rather because they were able to notice and respond to the little things, the 'bubbings up' and the 'glimmers'. The ways in which they made space for others to be, and in that way of 'being' discovered opportunities for the natural sharing of faith in conversation, was less a skill that could be taught and more a posture, a demeanour, a set of virtues. For many of those leading the project it was in prayer where they identified the root of what they were doing. In Wolverhampton particularly, we heard Tanya and Cynthia pondering how to find people who would join in with what they were doing; they felt that it was through accompaniment, not through some formal training programme, that they could pass on what it meant to be a chaplain.

## Projectization and the bubbling up of grace

Working with the city centre chaplaincy team revealed just how much this edgy work tends to focus around 'projects', particularly when it comes to funding and denominations. There is an implicit push towards having a project, a thing to point to that shows something is happening. In resisting the formalisation of their work, the City Centre team pointed towards a way of operating that emphasised responsiveness to what was bubbling up, and a more relational and networked understanding of ministry. It was a shift in missiology, not thinking about mission in terms of building projects, but in responding to the gift and grace of God, and discovering the next steps without some grand plan.

## Discovering the "more excellent way"

Working with AllTogether the Apostle Paul's phrase, "a more excellent way" became key to our asking what needs to happen. So often the focus of mission, ministry, and church life gets drawn into projects, programmes and keeping the show on the road. What AllTogether offered was a glimpse of the more excellent way, the way of faith, hope and – above all – love. So many of the stories we heard were of people who had felt lost finding belonging, meaning, purpose and hope. People found confidence and purpose, and began to glimpse faith, going on their "own little journeys". When we began this research our question was about how people learn, grow and develop in faith in edgy places. It is easy to assume that such a question might result in approaches to learning and 'discipleship', strategies and programmes – and these have their place – but what was most striking was that in so many of these stories, it was people walking alongside, forgiving, caring, spending time, welcoming and helping people feel they truly belonged and were loved that really made the difference. Faith was quietly present in so many ways across these groups. For some it was more explicit than others – but it was invariably discovered in the midst of friendship and in finding a place to belong. What we found was that these groups were embracing the more excellent way, the way of love, and though it was hard and challenging at times, the fruit was also present.



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## 5. Reflections from Ian and Clare

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### 5.1 Reflections from Ian Jones

We started out on this research journey with a hunch that the 'edges' (however defined) were important in the renewal of the whole church; that at the edges there is a range of lived experience, insight and practice that confronts more stereotypically 'mainstream' church with things which we have forgotten, or the depths of which we have not fully grasped. Here the sites taught me a lot about the importance of honesty; of not hiding behind masks; of not pretending we have life sorted. In many of these sites, journeys of healing, recovery or sometimes deep trust in God occurred only with an acknowledgement of our weakness, interdependence and, perhaps, need to change. All of us have problems and challenges; these 'edgy' sites suggest to me that the bigger difference is whether we choose to acknowledge those challenges out loud, to dare to become a community of people who genuinely 'bear one another's burdens'. In this respect, I have been struck by the importance of costly commitment to the well-being of the Other. So often in (allegedly) 'respectable' church we only make ourselves available at designated meeting times, in ways which suit our own agenda, or with conditions attached. Instead, here, there were stories of friends and mentors dropping everything at any time of day or night to sit with or stand alongside someone in need; of groups willing to adapt to and work at the pace of others, even be completely changed by their newest members; and many stories of simple, unconditional welcome to those in need. In my field notes for one site I wrote: 'here there is a clear valuing of the person above the process'. Perhaps I need to relinquish control of my own agendas and timescales a little more.

Over several projects exploring how faith grows and develops, I've become increasingly interested in how people conceptualise 'faith' itself; the working assumptions they hold concerning what it means to be 'religious' (or spiritual, or a 'person of faith'), the kinds of difference they expect it to make to their own life or someone else's, and the ways in which this may or may not change when their 'orbit' and that of a church, Christian organisation or community begin to coincide. In the seven sites, I particularly noticed the way in which religiosity or faith was something that people often quantified or compared with others ('they are a person of strong faith'; 'I am not very religious'). Comparison was not always negative; sometimes the evident faith of a respected other gave people cause to hope that there might be something in this religion business after all. I noticed a wariness about institutional religion, and a particular dislike of forms of faith that were coercive or adopted a 'hard sell' approach. In contrast, many characterised the sites as places where you did not 'have religion rammed down your throat'. I would have loved to have asked more about what people meant by that: was this based on their own contrasting experiences elsewhere? Or were they simply picking up on a common characterisation of organised religion in popular culture? Yet I was also intrigued by how often people's assessments of their own religiosity included a qualifier: 'I'm not religious, but...'. Were people distancing themselves from unhelpful aspects of organised religion whilst wanting to acknowledge the continued pull of God or the spiritual in their lives? Were they resisting the dominant secular or non-religious culture of the day yet expressing caution in doing so? Or were they simply expressing a sense that with personal worldviews, things are invariably more complex than a simple religious/not religious binary would have it? How do we take the 'I'm not religious' parts of many people's experiences seriously whilst also exploring the depths behind the 'but'?

Time and again during the research, and in these letters, I am struck by the importance of community, connection and relationship. When asked what these places meant to them, why they stayed involved and how they had changed as a result, so many people we heard talked about the people they had encountered, the sense of friendship, family or community they experienced. One particularly unexpected aspect of this, for me, was the way in which these 'edgy' communities were experienced in stark contrast to (even a vital defence mechanism against) prevailing patterns of life in wider society. Sometimes, the people we spoke to named the 'powers' they were up against: big retailers that had sucked the life out of high streets; social services that were inflexible and impersonal; a criminal justice system lacking hope and compassion; churches that weren't set up for people like them; a pattern of everyday life in which it was so easy simply to disappear from view. Yet here in these sites – in a community café, online group, recovery project, place of welcome, and so on – the bereaved found connection, the isolated found community, the forgotten felt seen and known, the 'done to' became people who gave out to others. As one person put it to us: 'when you step through that door, you're back to where you're safe'. All this was a powerful reminder to me of the importance of connection, relationship and community to growth in anything we name as 'faith'. St Peter's Sattley Trust's earlier research project, *What Helps Disciples Grow?* (2016), particularly highlighted the importance for regular churchgoers of personal spiritual practices and the outworking of faith beyond congregational life. But people we met across the 'edgy' sites also reminded me of other findings in that original research; for example, the frequency with which people felt 'most alive as a Christian' as a result of interaction with others: an experience of fellowship or an opportunity to show love to another in a practical way.<sup>4</sup> In the seven 'edgy' sites, connection, relationship and community seemed so often to me to be the bedrock. I continue to be very grateful for all the ways in which I have been enriched by conversation and encounter with so many people in these seven communities.

"In these sites – in a community café, online group, recovery project, place of welcome, and so on – the bereaved found connection, the isolated found community, the forgotten felt seen and known, the 'done to' became people who gave out to others."

**Ian Jones**

## 5.2 Reflections from Clare Watkins

I have so much enjoyed reading these letters to the different co-researching groups composed by James. I am filled with gratitude for those who worked with us, and reminded powerfully of all that I learned through this 'edgy' project. I end this report with a very brief reflection on this personal learning, especially its impact on my work as a theologian concerned with church and Christian life.

As an ecclesialogist I have increasingly developed an understanding of 'church' which is certainly porously bounded, and most likely not truly bounded at all. Rather 'church' is becoming, for me, something of a place-holder for the wide, often largely hidden participation of women, children and men in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. The organised churches have an essential role in this, of course; but it is one of a specific service to the wider work of mission and reconciliation. From this perspective it is hard to see what could count as edgy or peripheral to the Church of God, even whilst we know that our practices and institutions do, indeed, create fractures which are experienced as marginalising. This project has given me greater confidence in this position, as it has repeatedly demonstrated what powerful things happen when we 'simply' move to attend to the Spirit in particular, and especially less attended to, places.

However, if this is true, then it is equally the case that the learning reflected in this report has taught me that such an ecclesiological position opens up new and urgent questions: about what leadership for such work might look like; about how such work is to be supported, nurtured and sustained; about (above all) how the work of the Holy Spirit in the world is to be consistently and authentically discerned and appropriately participated in. This way of 'being church' is both 'simple', and not at all simple!

The theme – and realities – of 'spirituality' have been highlighted in the letters and our summary of learning. This has been centrally important for me, as for other members of the teams. Yet it runs the risk of remaining vague, 'merely' affective, or of simply reasserting that prayer must always attend such work (which is, indeed, worth reasserting!) At the end of the project, reflecting on what has been learned, I find myself with a need to add greater detail, practical precision and concreteness to what is spoken of in the various sites as spirituality. Are there particular spiritual, prayerful, devotional and community practices which we can elucidate and so share as effective aids in growing this life of participation in God's mission? I would relish the opportunity to go back to these co-researchers to explore what, in fact, their lived spiritualities consist of to help in this concretisation of a key theme.

It is in a similar way that I find myself both having a sense of fulfilment in the way the project learning culminates in love, and a certain sense of unease – even frustration. Once again love presents itself too quickly as a 'simple' naming of what lies at the heart of these works; and, in the best sense, it *is* simple, being at the single, integrated heart of Trinitarian life. I wonder, though, about the many ways in which appeals to 'love' have masked wrong-doing, abuse and harm, and I find myself faced with a theological question about the very nature of love. What the sites we have worked with in this project tell me, though, is that 'the nature of love' cannot be articulated without attention to real-life *practices* of love – practices shaped by the Gospel, and inextricably linked with real, lived hope and faith. Theologians, philosophers, psychologists and the rest cannot become wise about love without attending to and being humbly overwhelmed by the work of all who practice love in places seen as marginal, on the edges.

There is more to say – always! Learning to have conversations in different, and sometimes for me quite alienating contexts has been central to my own learning and researcher development, as well as contributing to my more 'academic' understanding of human conversing. My prejudices and assumptions about the place of leadership in Christian groups have also been helpfully challenged, and I am being pushed to fresh thinking here. But, in the end, it is the call to discern spiritual practices and practices of love that transform the world Godward that I am left with. For that nagging call on my too-often-fragmented attention I am deeply grateful to those from whom I have learned so much in this project.

"Theologians, philosophers, psychologists and the rest cannot become wise about love without attending to and being humbly overwhelmed by the work of all who practice love in places seen as marginal, on the edges."

**Clare Watkins**

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## 6. Endnotes

1. Clare Watkins and James Butler, *Christian Faith and Christian Learning. A theological action research account.* (Routledge, 2026).
2. Simon Foster, *What Helps Disciples Grow?* (St Peter's Saltley Trust, Birmingham, 2016). <https://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/whdg/>.
3. As noted in the text, whilst most of the sites listed here have been given a pseudonym to anonymise their identity, Missio Africanus, as a group, waived their right to anonymity for this work.
4. Foster (2016), 8-10, 15.







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