

There is no beginning too small: Grange Park Open Door Project, Blackpool

Blackpool Methodist Circuit with members of local Churches Together and local residents.

In 2004, the Blackpool Methodist Circuit created a new Diaconal appointment. The Diaconal Order sent me! Amongst other things, the remit included developing some form of outreach on Grange Park, where links had been formed with the local anglican church. About £2000 had been set aside for work on Grange Park following the closure of one of the Methodist churches two years previously. A substantial grant from the Methodist Connexion towards my appointment had been obtained on the basis of 'new work' on the estate, though this condition wasn't spelled out to me at the outset. Everyone seemed very hopeful and excited.

A year later, I was at my wits end. It had taken this time to unravel the background and expectations behind the appointment. Unfortunately, it transpired that I was supposed to do something single-handed, without a management group and without companions on the journey. 'You're paid to do it, so you do it!' and, 'You were sold to us as someone who could do this,' etc. These kinds of comments strike like blows, leaving you reeling.

I had got to know the estate as best I could through visiting the various groups and organisations. Living away from the estate seemed to me to be a huge barrier. An original idea that we could maybe work from the Anglican premises proved to be out of the question. Trust me, it's a fact. One bright spot during this first year was discovering the National Estate Churches Network, and attending the annual conference in Birmingham. It was such a relief to meet other people in similar situations.

During the year I had become increasingly confused, bemused, despairing and finally decided that it was an impossible situation. I presented a reasoned argument to the Circuit. There was a furore; the Chair of District was called in, and the Warden of the Order came up. I cried a lot. I couldn't help it.

Only at this point was it revealed that the grant towards my appointment depended on something – anything – happening on the estate! The Circuit was panic-stricken that if we didn't go forward, then the money might be withdrawn. Such were the motives and machinations under the surface.

In the black hole of a complete impasse, one morning soon after the 'furore', I was unexpectedly free from commitments. *One last time*, I thought. *I'll go up to Grange Park just once more, and then that's it. Finished.* I sat down with God and prayed a prayer, which I wrote down.

Thursday 13 October 2005.

... confused, disappointed, isolated, bewildered – and all to do with Grange Park... Lord, please help me to listen with an open and willing mind and heart... When I think of Grange Park I think of greyness, blankness, closed doors. Lord. I have no enthusiasm whatsoever for this project. That's the truth. If this is something I/we – whoever 'we' is – are really to pour our energies into, then change me, Lord.

In this frame of mind I drove the two and a half miles to the estate and called in on various people and places. Finally, I thought I would go and look at a community building that had always been locked and the curtains closed, though I knew it was used occasionally.

This time, the door was wide open, the curtains drawn back. I walked in. There was one person there, who turned out to be the warden of the local sheltered housing. Ray was setting up an office. He had a desk and an empty cupboard and a few papers. He was as surprised to see me as I was to see him. We introduced ourselves; he showed me the premises - extremely attractive, warm and well maintained.

Ray told me that the Council had decided that the centres like this one dotted around Blackpool needed to be opened up and used more fully by the community. They thought that if the wardens based themselves in the buildings rather than working from a central point, there was more likelihood of promoting their use. To my astonishment, use of the premises would be free of charge.

'Do you think we could use the centre for a weekly drop-in?' I asked. 'And could we do carols at Christmas?' 'I don't see why not,' said Ray. And there it was. The Open Door project was born. I call this my 'Narnia moment'. Walking through the door of Horsebridge Community Centre took me into a new world, the wonderful world of Grange Park.

I prepared a leaflet for circulation around our Methodist churches and the local Churches Together, asking if there was anyone out there who would like to join me. Almost immediately Sheila, an elder with the United Reformed Church, telephoned full of enthusiasm. I asked Susan, a member of the Anglican church, if she would be interested in joining us. Her response was immediate and positive. Both Sheila and Susan lived on the estate. It reminded me of the way the first disciples responded to the call of Jesus.

We opened up on Monday 14th November 2005. My birthday seemed an appropriate date to start. Gradually, over the weeks, people trickled in for tea and biscuits. We jumped through the hoops of fire safety training, first aid training, and then food hygiene training. We were ready to broaden our horizons. May 2006: we started a similar drop-in at Argosy Community Centre on the other side of the estate. July 2006: we began to serve cooked breakfasts at Horsebridge on Mondays. The £2000 waiting in the Circuit accounts covered all the equipment we needed, with some to spare.

Four years on, the Open Door team has more than doubled in size. It now includes Methodists! It also includes a local resident, who first pressed her nose against the window of the centre in January 2006. Haleema has written her story of what the Project means to her. Many people have passed through. Some have moved on to other places. Some have sadly died. We have made many friends; we have become part of their lives and they of ours. We have been involved with funerals, baptisms and a wedding.

We have had lots of ideas, many of which have become a reality thanks to the support and enthusiasm of people such as a local councillor, the police and community support officers, the community engagement officer, housing officers and all sorts. We put on an arts and crafts show featuring local talent; Christmas dinner on Christmas Day is now an annual event; charity events and celebration of Christian festivals. Haleema, with her background as a coach driver and tour operator, arranges trips. With the help of a young art graduate, one week in summer '08 a mural was created by local children and young people which is now displayed on the front of the community centre. A Grange Park calendar was produced in '08 and another is being prepared for 2010. Local schools came on board to help produce a Passion Play at Easter '09.

So much has happened. There is no doubt in my mind that it is God's work. It isn't all plain sailing. We have some fairly dramatic ups and downs. Not everyone is always happy with what we are doing. We are aware that any moment something could happen to put a spoke in the wheel. Yet we are highly motivated; we continue to pray together, reflect together, laugh and cry together, try new things together, attend NECN conferences together!

It has been a steep learning curve. I have learned that God answers prayer from the heart and I have learned that there is no beginning too small.

Judith Wray
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