

## The Project – nuts and bolts

The aim of this project was to talk to other churches who have also felt called to do church differently. I was particularly interested in those churches that have made changes to the frequency of their traditional Sunday morning services. And I was keen to find churches that have looked to make a transition, rather than doing something differently through a church planting or pioneering approach.

### *The people I spoke to were...*

1. Chrissy Salmon, Team Leader at Shiloh church on at Guernsey. Shiloh is a Baptist church with about 130 members and is part of the Southern Baptist Association.
2. Elizabeth Stoner, Minister at Light & Life at Ormesby St Margaret, near Caister-on-Sea in Norfolk. Light & Life has about 35 members and is in Eastern Baptist Association.
3. Louise Gilbertson, Missional Leader at Seer Green Baptist Church in South Bucks. Seer Green has about 40 members and is in the Central Baptist Association.
4. Josh Raybould, from the staff team at All Nations Church in Wolverhampton. Josh has responsibility for Home Churches and discipleship training at All Nations, a Pentecostal church with a total congregation of about 300.
5. Dave Criddle, Minister at Pathway Church, Sheffield. Pathway is effectively a rebooted Baptist church of about 20 adults.
6. Mark Warner from the leadership team at Harbour Church, Purbeck. This was previously Stoborough Baptist Church and has about 25 members.
7. Simon Harris, Minister at Burlington Baptist Church, Ipswich, with 200-ish members.
8. Andy Thomas, Minister at Stoke Gifford Baptist Church, near Bristol.
9. Andrew McCausland, Minister at Croyde Baptist Church, previously at Seer Green.

### *The conversation was based around 7 questions:*

1. How does church operate – in terms of what kind of gathering, where & how often?
2. What has changed?
3. What prompted your new approach?
4. How was change received by your established congregation?
5. What obstacles have you had to navigate along the way?
6. What have been your successes?
7. Where do you hope to be in 5 years (or longer)?

### *Key books:*

- 'The Church of Tomorrow' by John McGinley
- 'Letters to the Church' by Francis Chan
- 'Scattered, Not Small' by Chrissy Remsberg and Alex Harris

### *Additional books:*

- 'Changing Shape' by Ruth H Perrin
- 'Church on the Other Side' by Brian McLaren
- 'Imagine Church' by Neil Hudson
- 'Rewilding the Church' by Steve Aisthorp
- 'Christianity Rediscovered' by Vincent Donovan
- 'Defeating Pharisaism' by Gary Tyra

## Reflecting on the August Project

Across the country, big and small churches are hearing God's voice. The Holy Spirit has been nudging and prompting with individual congregations getting to grips with change. In just a few weeks at the start of August, I spoke to churches from little (25+ congregation) to very big (400+) who have made the transition from a traditional model to something different. Put simply, Watchet Baptist Church is not alone. Something important is happening.

From Guernsey to Sheffield and Ipswich to Wolverhampton, God is calling his church to put aside long-established patterns and priorities, for the sake of discipleship and mission. Without any collaboration, these churches have taken difficult steps from a recognition that the traditional format was not working. Some have been setting out in a new direction for years, others for months. But in each case, there are substantial similarities in both thinking and process.

There have been various prompts – including the Coronavirus pandemic – but in each case, the outcome has been a move to something much more embedded in the community and based around smaller gatherings. The focus that comes through is one of missional discipleship based on the idea that the church exists to “draw people to Christ” and that a growing maturity is essential for disciples. Neither of these priorities can wait for the other to happen.

In every case, the journey has been demanding and not everyone has found it easy to get on board. Despite this, church leaders have stayed the course, determined to be faithful to what God is asking. There have been tears and departures, but the churches taking these steps are seeing God move and enjoying his blessing as they stay courageous.

1. In Guernsey, the once-a-month Sunday morning service is now well attended by folks from a midweek community café who have made the church building their own.
2. In Norfolk, people are getting more involved in their community than church-based events and one Sunday a month, there's nothing in the diary.
3. In Sheffield, the emphasis shifted from traditional shape to scattered communities.
4. In Dorset, the priority is groups that often meet midweek for a meal, with only one Sunday a month for gathered worship and teaching.
5. In Buckinghamshire, the church is all gathered twice a month, with smaller groups meeting one Sunday for discipleship and another for mission.
6. Near Bristol, the energy previously given to Sunday mornings now goes into a midweek café, which is becoming something of a faith community.
7. In Wolverhampton, a multi-campus church with hundreds attending has dropped two services a month and launched almost 30 'Home Church' groups.
8. In Ipswich, communities have been launched from the church and now function autonomously, with no expectation to attend Sunday morning services.

Andrew McCausland, former pastor at Minehead, helped lay the groundwork in Buckinghamshire and now serves in North Devon. He said, “Jesus is not in the business of keeping churches alive. He does allow them to die. And transition is not about whether



we can; we must. We've got to do something different. We are dying because we're not changing."

Doing things differently, as the stories show, brings challenges as well as reasons to be excited. In each setting, there are common experiences and priorities. At the same time, there are noticeable differences, as each local church looks to be an expression of Jesus for its own time and situations. In one of the books I've read during sabbatical, John McGinley writes: "There are no well-worn paths into the future."

Each of the churches I've spoken to reports the challenge of moving away from a model that is no longer working. Dave Criddle (Sheffield) said: "What came before was a one-size-fits-all and all-roads-lead-to-Sunday, so there was only one way for people to connect. The change means more potential entry points to the community of faith. The environment is better for equipping Christians for mission."

Each church has reported that the existing model is no longer fit for purpose. People outside the church know very little of what goes on inside and generally don't care and several leaders said the Sunday service as an event was not the highest priority. As Elizabeth Stoner (Norfolk) said, "Sunday worship is part of us but it's not the 'all and everything'. While Mark Ashton Warner (Dorset) said: "The way we were doing things didn't communicate in the way that is needed." Simon Harris (Ipswich) put it this way: "We said to the church that we're acting like a yacht club. But we need to launch lifeboat to help save people." Andy Thomas (Bristol) said: "I remember it vividly when, on a Sunday, I'd preached my socks off and I had this moment of realisation that this was like going to a show; something just died in me." And Louise Gilbertson (Buckinghamshire) is aware of an age-related perspective: "The church is an older congregation that has been preached to for a lot of years – but this has not necessarily led to practical, whole-life discipleship with a confidence to share faith. Our Sunday gatherings have become more interactive with lots of encouragement to apply what we are learning." Change is difficult but essential.

As Francis Chan puts it in 'Letters to the Church': "If we are not careful, we end up with people who have been sitting in churches for years and complaining they aren't being fed to their liking. This is the same kind of dysfunction as a 30-year-old complaining about his mum's cooking"

Most church leaders I spoke to also talked about the challenge of those who resisted change and the need to hold course. Chrissy Salmon (Guernsey) said it was about "standing firm on where God wants us to go". For Josh Raybould (Wolverhampton) it was more of a stark choice between doing or not doing what God is calling the church to do. Having heard God say that the traditional model of church was not fit for purpose, this Pentecostal church faced dramatic change. He said: "There's a bit of a Westernised approach – knowledge-based discipleship instead of obedience-based discipleship. God says it, so let's do it."



Weighing up the stories and reading, it seems clear that something is happening across the country, and Watchet Baptist Church is part of it. A movement into something new has begun.

In Revelation 21:5, God says he is making everything new. The Greek word for this conjures up a sense of overhaul or refurbishment. McGinley compares it to the MTV show ‘Pimp My Ride’, where worn out cars are stripped back, repainted and fitted with gadgets. The result is still the same car but is “unrecognisable when compared with the old”. God renews everything he touches. This is always wonderful but less meaningful for us if we don’t make space for the work God is doing.

I have been hugely encouraged by the leaders of these churches, hearing their stories of faithful communities who have grasped the nettle of the Spirit’s call. Hearing what Watchet is doing, Simon Harris said: “You’re on the money. Church is broken. Change is right and we can’t just keep doing what we’re doing.” And Andrew McCausland said: “I know we need courageous uncertainty to help reimagine local church. We have domesticated the church so well. We have lost our imagination so much.”

This courageous next step comes with a cost. While that cost isn’t theological – and certainly isn’t biblical – it is emotional and significantly pastoral. Most churches have experienced a need to care for those who are courageously staying in a situation they find strange and difficult.

What does all this mean for Watchet Baptist Church? It means that the way we are seeking to obey Jesus is part of something bigger.

- We have set out to make our Big Church gatherings as accessible as possible to anyone and everyone who doesn’t yet know Jesus.
- We want to put aside the idea that one size fits all when it comes to church.
- We are following the Spirit’s guidance in becoming a new creature.
- Our Little Church gatherings are designed to reach out to those we know, welcoming them to a place where they can build friendships with those who know Jesus.
- We are leaving behind a model that put prayer, mission, learning and pastoral care in the hands of leaders and instead share these responsibilities.
- We are leaving behind patterns of church that made sense to previous generations but don’t make sense to most people in 21st century Britain.

I am inspired by this project, by discovering what others are doing, and I look forward to fresh momentum as we chose to make Watchet Baptist Church a community of maturing, missional disciples that goes out of its way to make space for all those who are loved by Jesus.

● ..... *end of section* ..... ●



**What does it mean to be a church in transition? A reflection on churches doing different.**

The journey from traditional format to the pattern of big church/little church at Watchet has been challenging and exciting in almost equal measure. From fairly early on, I had wondered about writing down what happened and why. As I started looking ahead to my sabbatical (after 7 years at Watchet), I began wondering whether other churches had similar stories to tell.

In the end, the chance to find out about other churches' experience felt like to big a chance to miss. I was sure we were not alone. At the same time, I wondered whether transition in other churches would look anything like Watchet. And I had questions about whether the same principles were in play. I asked around, including at Spring Harvest and through contacts in the Baptist Union, and found eight. I am confident there are others, but after a while I decided that I could easily end up with too many.

As well as talking to other churches, I wanted to find out what the wider church community was saying about church in the second quarter of the 21st century. So I turned to some books: 'The Church of Tomorrow' by John McGinley, 'Letters to the Church' by Francis Chan, 'Scattered, Not Small' by Chrissy Remsberg and Alex Harris and 'Changing Shape' by Ruth H Perrin. I also revisited 'Church on the Other Side' by Brian McLaren and 'Imagine Church' by Neil Hudson.

**Phone Booth Church**

In the Superman stories, there is a moment when Clark Kent goes into a phone booth, takes off his glasses and transforms. He is still the same man, but you would barely think so. In that phone booth, there is a moment of transition when he goes from hiding to reaching full potential.

In Ephesians 4:1, Paul urges disciples to live a life worthy of their calling. Our calling is to be radical, faithful and obedient to the Lord of our lives. This leads to a question about whether our church is the best structure to encourage a life worthy of our calling. Answering that questions is not straightforward. Not least because it reflects and depends on our understanding of the relationship between the culture of the local church and the culture that surrounds it. Also, crucially, it demands that we look again at what the local church is for and the role played by Jesus himself.

In Letters to the Church, Francis Chan reflects on church life and notes that in his church, a few people were using their gifts. Many came into the space for an hour and a half and then went home. "The way we had structured church was stunting people's growth and the whole body was weaker for it," he added.

And in 'The Church of Tomorrow', John McGinley writes: "Jesus becomes the great disruptor of his people. It was Karl Barth [20th century Swiss theologian] who popularised the Latin slogan *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, est secundum verbum Dei*, 'The church reformed ought always to be reforming, according to the word of God.'"





Andrew McCausland said, “Jesus is not in the business of keeping churches alive. He does allow them to die. And transition is not about whether we can; we must. We’ve got to do something different. We are dying because we’re not changing.”<sup>1</sup>

For the church to achieve all she might, a moment of transition is needed. This will not be easy but it seems that it is essential and expected.

### ***The Point of the Church***

When it comes to seeing how Jesus tackled the institution of the church in Matthew 21, here his clearing of the temple is both strong and radical. The established pattern of temple life needed violent impetus to bring about necessary change. This chimes with CS Lewis who, in *A Grief Observed*, recognises that God himself shatters our ideas of him. In fact, the shattering of ideas of him might be seen as a mark of his presence.

There is an important point to note here – that there is an overlap between how we see God and what we expect the church to do or be. If God’s character has, as a central feature, love for those who don’t yet know him, this will influence the central function of the local church. If God’s character is less concerned with those outside and more with those within the local church, then a settled and familiar pattern of reassurance is key. It was CS Lewis who put it this way in *Mere Christianity*: “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw [people] to Christ.”

### ***Formats and Filled Pews***

Dave Criddle, at Pathway Church, Sheffield, said: “What came before was a one-size-fits-all and all-roads-lead-to-Sunday, so there was only one way for people to connect. The change means more potential entry points to the community of faith. The environment is better for equipping Christians for mission.”<sup>2</sup>

Chan writes: “We can get so focused on getting people through our doors that we don’t think about what goes out. The church’s purpose is not just to exist. It’s to produce. Are we producing mature disciples who imitate Christ by constantly serving others? Are we developing communities that are so deeply in love with one another that the world marvels (John 13:34-35)? If this is not being produced, why do we exist?” Devotional writer AW Tozer put it this way: “It is of far greater importance that we have better Christians than that we have more of them.”

### ***Taking off the fake glasses***

Through my experience of reading and of talking with churches in transition, a central theme emerged: Jesus didn’t call his followers to go to church but to make disciples. This process crucially includes the spiritual nurture of those who are already part of the community of faith in Jesus. However, there are risks that come with that. There is a risk that unless Jesus is Lord of the whole life of each disciple, he is reduced to just saviour. With that position comes a Jesus who does not sit on the throne of our lives. Instead, we

---

<sup>1</sup> See Story 9

<sup>2</sup> See Story 6

celebrate him in a form that reflects “the kind of Lord we are looking for”.<sup>3</sup> Such a Jesus doesn’t demand much from us. In fact, this isn’t the real Jesus at all – Jesus will not be contained – not by commentators or preachers or hymns or liturgy or institutions or formats. Jesus gives us himself and gives us a call and gives us a commission. Jesus calls us out from whatever rock we are tempted to hide under and urges us to follow his lead.

Chan writes this: “Have you ever read the New Testament? Do you find anything in Scripture that is even remotely close to the pattern we have created? Do you find anyone who ‘went’ to church? Try to imagine Paul and Peter speaking like we do today: ‘Hey, Peter, where do you go to church now?’”

Josh Raybould said: “There’s a bit of a Westernised approach – knowledge-based discipleship instead of obedience-based discipleship. God says it, so let’s do it.”<sup>4</sup>

### **“Jesus wants his church back”**

Another theme that became clear was responding to the end of Christendom. Christendom can be described as the place where Christian religion is the dominant world view and culture. With its ending, we are seeing a society around us that doesn’t assume Christian thinking is central and very often doesn’t have residual knowledge of Christian faith. The church in Christendom could function as a hub because the society it served looked to it, gravitated to it and trusted it. Those things are no longer true. And its patterns are no longer relevant to the world outside its doors. Christendom sits across our vision like a cataract. It distorts our vision and blinds the church today. We need that cataract to go so that we can see clearly again – see “the vision of the church as Jesus established it”.

As Chan writes: “If we are not careful, we end up with people who have been sitting in churches for years and complaining they aren’t being fed to their liking. This is the same kind of dysfunction as a 30-year-old complaining about his mum's cooking”

McGinley writes: “The church never reaches its perfect form and must always be open to the ongoing work of reform by the Holy Spirit. Reformation is about clearing away stuff that has built up that gets in the way of God, so that we can have more space for him. The danger is that, like the Israelites who at the first struggle of their new-found freedom began to long for the familiarity of slavery in Egypt, we will feel nostalgic about Christendom’s patterns and privileges. But Christendom is over, and Jesus wants his church back.”

### **Relationships that Transform**

Tozer put it this way: “The church was never intended to be a natural and intellectual organisation, but a supernatural instrumentality wholly dependent upon the power of God.”

---

<sup>3</sup> McGinley, p21

<sup>4</sup> See Story 4



Chan writes about the family nature of church, comparing it to US gang culture. In street gangs, the idea of being a family is central. Gang members are dear friends who look out for each other 24 hours a day with love and camaraderie. The family concept is central to God's design for the church and for gang culture. He adds: "... while we use family terminology in our churches... the gangs have a much stronger sense of what it means to be a family than we do in the church... Could you ever imagine gang life being reduced to a weekly one-hour gathering? No group would meet briefly once a week and call that a gang. Imagine one gang member walking up to another one and saying, 'Yo, how was gang? I had to miss this week because life has been crazy!'"

In talking to the churches, there was a consistent perspective that Sunday services do not produce the relationships that transform lives. Instead, the church should be set up to reflect the purpose of church, which is to make disciples. McGinley puts it this way: "The Church is meant to be the battleship where we get trained and equipped, not a cruise liner."

Speaking about, "the passivity of congregations", Louise Gilbertson said: "We haven't empowered people to step up and get excited. The foundations have not been laid, really."<sup>5</sup>

### ***Useless Bridges and New Cars***

In 1988, the Choluteca Bridge was built in Honduras as an indestructible bridge to ensure the Choluteca River could always be crossed. Six months later Hurricane Mitch blew through the country with devastating effect. The bridge stood firm, but the landscape was unrecognisable, and the course of the river had moved, meaning the bridge no longer spanned the river and no longer fulfilled its purpose! The church, where it has been built strong and proud to bridge the gap between God and humanity, can no longer fulfil its purpose if the landscape of humanity has shifted. The church needs to be placed in new ways and reflect both on what it is and how it engages with its surroundings. Mark Ashton Warner said: "The way we were doing things didn't communicate in the way that is needed."<sup>6</sup>

In Revelation 21:5, God says he is making everything new. The Greek word for this conjures up a sense of overhaul or refurbishment. McGinley compares it to the MTV show 'Pimp My Ride', where worn out cars are stripped back, repainted and fitted with gadgets. The result is still the same car but is "unrecognisable when compared with the old". God renews everything he touches.<sup>7</sup> This is always wonderful but less meaningful for us if we don't make space for the work God is doing. As Elizabeth Stoner said, "Sunday worship is part of us but it's not the 'all and everything'.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, we need to ask if we will create space as God asks us to, and partner with him in his reforming work? Or if will we inadvertently resist him and effectively oppose his

---

<sup>5</sup> See Story 3

<sup>6</sup> See Story 5

<sup>7</sup> McGinley, p10

<sup>8</sup> See Story 2





work? The church needs to clear space in hearts and lives, but also in its cultures and practices, to recognise its own tendency to put down roots in soil that isn't Jesus.

Oswald Chambers, the Scottish evangelist and First World War chaplain, wrote: "Beware of harkening back to what you once were, when God wants you to be something that you have never been." While 19th century Danish theologian and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, said: "The established church is far more dangerous to Christianity than any heresy or schism."

### **Courage and Imagination**

As Andrew McCausland said: "The kind of leadership needed going forward is 'courageous uncertainty'. We've got to take the next step without knowing what the outcome will be. I know we need courageous uncertainty to help reimagine local church. We have domesticated the church so well. We have lost our imagination so much."

This courageous next step comes with a cost. While that cost isn't theological – and certainly isn't biblical – it is emotional and significantly pastoral. Most churches have experienced a need to care for those who are courageously staying in a situation they find strange and difficult. Dave Criddle said: "People have said they'd love to go back. One lady was in tears and sharing how difficult she was finding it. But even in that moment, she was saying that she knew something different had to happen because she wants people to meet Jesus."

Chan writes this: "One young person in the church articulated it so well. He said it felt as if the rules were suddenly changed on him. He explained that for years he was taught salvation was a free gift and the gospel meant he could have a personal relationship with Jesus. It would be like someone gifting him a pair of ice skates. In excitement, he went to the skating rink and learned to do all sorts of tricks. He enjoyed this and did it for years. Now suddenly he was being told that the skates were actually given to him because he was supposed to be a part of our hockey team working together to pursue a championship. He wasn't supposed to just twirl around by himself. That's a huge difference! While he did not disagree biblically, it would take time to realign his thinking and lifestyle."

### **Values we chose, or values we inherited?**

This sentiment was seen throughout the churches that are in transition. This has meant churches in transition have needed to stick to their guns and to know what their values are, in order to hold their course. Chrissy Salmon said it's about "standing firm on where God wants us to go",<sup>9</sup> while Elizabeth Stoner said: "Our values are Spirituality, Sabbath and Hospitality," and "We are our values, not our building."

In *Scattered, Not Small*,<sup>10</sup> Andy Glover writes about his own experience of a changing church: "Partly the shape and the structure of church moved and shifted because we wanted to be better and more intentional around making disciples. And it felt like we weren't really nailing that in the way we were doing church, for us anyway. We had lots

---

<sup>9</sup> See Story 1

<sup>10</sup> *Scattered, Not Small* by Chrissy Remsberg and Alex Harris



of programs, lots of activity, but we weren't really thinking about discipleship. Key characteristics that enable disciple-making can be summarised in five words. They are: accessible, inexpensive, simple, empowering and resilient."

Disciple-making is one of several common themes across both the books and the conversations. McGinley puts it plainly: "Church is simply the plural of disciple."

Chan compares discipling to parenting and asks an incisive question: "What would happen to our society if parents didn't expect their children to start their own families? This is exactly what has happened in the church." Churches should boast less of how many are in that church and boast more about how many have graduated. If children are unable to leave the house, that's a sign of parenting failure.

### ***Discipleship with its pants on the outside***

There's a story of a church in China, built 'above ground' at a time when there was a little more religious freedom. It grew until it was shut down. The pastor said he was grateful in the end. The change of structure meant that people started coming to listen to the sermon and that stirring people to action became more difficult.

For Louise Gilbertson, her setting also brings an age-related perspective: "The church is an older congregation that has been preached to for a lot of years – but this has not necessarily led to practical whole life discipleship with our church community feeling confident to share their faith. To help us to grow in this area, our Sunday gatherings have become more interactive with lots of encouragement to apply what we are learning into our everyday lives."

McGinley tells a story from a discipleship conference; a vicar said: "Where has all this talk about discipleship come from? It used to be that all I had to do was take the service every Sunday, God was on his throne, his people were in church and then we could all go home. Now I'm expected to disciple people, and it just makes everyone feel guilty."

For discipleship to be all Jesus intended, the approach needs to change; this involved taking what has often been hidden and putting it out there.

### ***The cost of change***

Doing things differently, as the stories show, brings challenges as well as reasons to be excited. In each setting, there are common experiences and priorities. At the same time, there are noticeable differences, as each local church looks to be an expression of Jesus for its own time and situations. As McGinley writes: "There are no well-worn paths into the future."

Each of these churches has needed to be brave and willing to stay the course, digging deep to hold on to key priorities and remaining both creative and flexible. In some cases, this has meant taking the perhaps surprising step of not meeting on Sundays. In other cases, it has included allowing people to step away and find another fellowship or giving ownership of Sunday mornings to the community, rather than the church.



Whatever follows, the shape and priorities of the local church need to reflect the priorities of Jesus. Imagine if the church was reduced to a bible, a cup and some bread. Many around the world have just that and love it.

Chan calls on churches to avoid putting energy into the wrong things and make a deep love for one another the core of the church. He writes this: “What if we followed God’s design for the church and in doing so allowed the church to be pruned down to only those how wanted to obey [Jesus’] command to ‘love one another as I have loved you’?<sup>11</sup> We might discover that the branches that weren’t bearing fruit were actually sucking all the life out of the tree.”

### **A training ground for every age**

Chan adds this: “God values children and their role in His Kingdom far more than we do. We need to repent of this and do all we can to value their contribution. God sees them as far more than obligation or an inconvenience. In my setting, these passages (Matthew 18:1-14) have led us to incorporate our children into our gatherings and the results have been powerful. Listening to the kids talk about what they learn from their devotions is uplifting and encouraging. Having the kids pray over the adults has been humbling and powerful. The faith of their prayers and the simplicity in their sharing accomplish something adults cannot pull off.”

Simon Harris highlighted the value of small groups with young people: “One area that worked really well was kids with other kids in a missional community; their development grew massively and many of their friends came to faith.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Future**

In the case of the churches I have talked with, there are building blocks that are seen consistently in the different contexts. Intimacy with Jesus comes first – all other things follow. Discipleship doesn’t work where two lives compete, so one has to die. And the only context for disciple-making is community. At the same time, church is recognised as being a place of equipping and preparation. It’s important to remember that we are created as animals that live in the wild. If the church domesticates us, we can end up in a comfortable and controlled zoo. We need to get back into the wild – and the church should be equipping us for this.

Tellingly, churches engaged in transition shared a perspective on the future:

Josh said: “For the future – who knows what’s going to happen.”

Chrissy said: “We’re muddling through. And it’s good that we can make mistakes.”

Mark said: “I’m not especially interested in looking 5 years ahead. We’re expecting God to move and that’s enough.”

Andy said: “I don’t want to see anything grow big. I would hope there would be multiplication, with a group planting another one. It can be whatever the Spirit is leading on.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> John 15:12

<sup>12</sup> See Story 7

<sup>13</sup> See Story 8



Elizabeth said: “It’s in God’s hands.”

Louise said: “I don’t know what the future looks like and I think that’s ok. It’s about doing what’s in front of me and staying faithful.”

Dave said: “There isn’t a clear sense of where we will be in the future, although it’s good to assume that it isn’t something that has to be this way forever. I definitely believe the future of the church will be in scattered groups and I’m confident that the weekly gathered meeting shouldn’t become the centre of gravity again.”

### **Conclusion**

Weighing up the stories and reading, something is clearly happening across the country and Watchet Baptist Church is part of it. A movement into something new has begun. There have been various prompts – including the Coronavirus pandemic – but in each case, the outcome has been a move to something much more embedded in the community and in most cases, based around smaller gatherings. The focus that comes through is one of missional discipleship. This focus recognises that the church exists to “draw people to Christ”, that a growing maturity is essential for disciples and that neither of these priorities can wait for the other to happen.

The days of being Clark Kent – respectable, tidy and traditional – are coming to an end. Transformation is needed and, as disciples, we are called to be part of this process. Transition is never easy but behind this change is the opportunity to seize our potential, as God sees it. What we have already done at Watchet is a reflection on our willingness to hear the voice of Jesus and to hold on to courage as we set out on a new path.

It is important to reflect on the journey and recognise God’s faithfulness in it, our faithfulness to him and the future that we are moving towards. Ultimately, that future is a time when people who don’t now Jesus have the chance to encounter him through his disciples, rather than through an institution. After all, who gets excited about visiting a studio sound stage when you have the chance to meet the actor-director who made the blockbuster film? As disciples, we have a chance to introduce others to our friends who also know Jesus, to demonstrate what life with Jesus is like and to grow into the people Jesus longs for us to be.

The Spirit is speaking to churches right now about new ways of being at this time when change is essential – and when those who are listening are willing to be ambitious for the Kingdom, in the name and power of Jesus. That is Watchet Baptist Church – a community living for Jesus and going in any direction he is calling.

.....● *end of section* ●.....



## Three key books from the sabbatical project

### Summarising 'The Church of Tomorrow'

Without judgement or finger-wagging, John McGinley blends his own experience with the work of Christian voices before him. By doing this, he delivers a clear voice of practical, spirit-infused wisdom for what the church is and could become.

A vicar who is the son of a vicar, McGinley challenges assumptions and aims to refresh an understanding of who Jesus is and the difference that makes to what a church might be.

He points us towards prayer, leadership, holiness and discipleship – in a way that places Jesus front and centre and declares the gospel to be rich and life giving.

And alongside all this, McGinley's book highlights the importance of how the church functions with and for those who do not know Jesus yet.

The book is readable, sensible and not too long.

### Summarising 'Scattered, Not Small'

In this book, Chrissy Remsberg and Alex Harris tap in to the development of small church settings to ask about their priorities, methods and the culture in which they serve. It is a dinky book but full of encouragement. With an emphasis on making disciples, no matter the context, the authors turn to various leaders, ministers and pioneers to get their take, rather than relying only on their own experience of leaders in small or scattered churches.

### Summarising 'Letters to the Church'

Francis Chan is a former megachurch pastor who left the United States to serve in Asia and then returned. His book is hard to read in some ways. It is uncompromising, unashamed – and at the same time relentlessly humble and self-aware. While he writes with an acute awareness of US churches, his observations and use of scripture are full of insight and a determination that the church should be what Jesus calls it to be and nothing less. He talks with passion about commitment, fellowship, expectations, consumerism and expectations, drawing on experiences and conversations from around the world.

Chan writes his chapters with sub-headings and the book is accessible, while holding serious challenges for all of us who would claim to be Christians. And he calls on everyone who trusts in Jesus to live up to the call of Christ on his church.

.....● end of section ●.....

### Story 1: Shiloh, Guernsey

Chrissy Salmon has been in leadership for 3 years at Shiloh on Guernsey.

When she was first approached about leadership she asked the church not to call her unless they were up for change. They did call her and she began with community-facing activities – starting with a new Wednesday morning café. Soon afterwards, a local mental health group asked if to use the space to meet, as did the quitting smoking service. A couple of ladies from the church suggested running a bible study for people who came to the café, which took off and is now packed each week. A food bank and clothing bank for school age children followed, along with mental health charity MIND and Homestart.

This meant that the church was not just a Sunday thing but a Monday-Friday thing, too. People saw that it worked and would come to the café asking for prayer. In time, it became apparent that there was effectively a midweek congregation. At this point, the church closed the morning service to run the Wednesday café on a Sunday.

“On Sunday morning, the congregation’s job is to come and chat,” said Chrissy. At the same time, the evening service, home to the young people and young adults, remained open. And over the last two years, things have developed further. Chrissy describes the café as “the centre of the flower”. On Sundays, there is now a parenting course and a Basic Christianity course has become a discipleship course. On the 1st Sunday of each month, a revived morning service takes place, called ‘Fast Forward’. Regulars to the café come in as the space has become theirs. There is always lunch together followed by a church walk in the afternoon, making church a whole-day event. This is in contrast with some early feedback, which suggested the change was ‘not proper church’ and cutting the morning service would mean older people won’t come.

“It’s been quite a shift but a really positive one. We keep going back to it being relational,” said Chrissy, who added that in the old model “we were doing a lot of feeding on a Sunday but no one was coming in”. With the new approach in place, the congregation has “become quite excited; they’ve actually had to talk about Jesus!” Over time, the church has also seen “a few really great baptism services”.

For Chrissy, part of the process is about “standing firm on where God wants us to go”. She said that 40-plus churches on the island doing the same thing, so it was appropriate to try a new direction and stick with it. That meant acknowledging that it wasn’t for everyone, and the church would end up saying goodbye to some of the congregation. While this was tough, the church’s priority was to grow as people came to know Jesus.

Chrissy has been well-supported by leaders around her who understood the direction and got on board, even as the personnel has changed. Priorities for new leaders have included having an “eldership to span the generations” (20s, 30s and 60s), a heart for God and a passion for the place around them.

As for the future, Chrissy isn’t worrying too much. “We’re muddling through. And it’s good that we can make mistakes,” she said. On top of this, she is happy for Shiloh to be a first-base connection church – a springboard for people to continue their discipleship elsewhere if that’s what God has in mind.





### Story 2: Light of Life, Norfolk

Elizabeth Stoner arrived in Ormesby St Margaret in Norfolk between lockdowns. The church pattern was Covid-shaped, with online talks, and coming out of Covid proved to be the catalyst for change, along with the need for a sustainable approach.

“I arrived in the middle of Covid. They’d had 5 years without a minister. The church was exhausted and had dwindled a bit,” said Elizabeth. “We don’t want to put all our time, energy and resources into a Sunday service because that’s not what church is about.”

Page | 15

Now, the church meets in the following ways:

- First Sunday is called ‘Nourish’ – 30 minutes for breakfast and the same for a simple, set liturgical service. This moved from evening to morning, responding to feedback.
- Second Sunday is about listening to the church’s podcast. The congregation are encouraged to get together to listen and pray, although not many do.
- Third Sunday is a traditional service set up around tables. The chapel has soft seats, 8 armchairs and 4 little tables pushed together with craft bits.
- Fourth Sunday is Sabbath Sunday with no set activity. The congregation is encouraged to take a sabbath approach. Some Life Groups get together while others might take the opportunity to visit family who are not local.
- Fifth Sunday is something missional, such as crazy golf, for inviting non-church people. It is normal for the question to be asked: ‘What is your life group doing.’

“Sunday worship is part of us but it’s not the ‘all and everything’, said Elizabeth. “And when we come together, it’s a real celebration. The reality is that church is about something more – something relational. Our approach gives time and space to get to know people, including eating together to form deeper relationships.”

But change hasn’t been easy for everyone, including Elizabeth, who identifies as a people pleaser. The Leadership were all on board and encouraged her to stay the course, saying that a passive observer of a service doesn’t grow in faith like someone who is proactive on ‘Sabbath’ Sundays and ‘Podcast’ Sundays.

“We did lose some with a traditional viewpoint. And that was the right thing for them. The thing is, some people just didn’t get it and I wanted everyone to get it,” she said.

The congregation is up from 25 to 35 (40%) baptisms are happening, the local community is getting to know and love the chapel, and the congregation is getting involved in village life. There’s a weekly Renew wellbeing café, youth group once a month, a Lego café once a year, a village fayre presence and a popular Halloween hot chocolate drop-in.

“Our values are Spirituality, Sabbath and Hospitality,” said Elizabeth. “This is In, Up and Out. We are our values, not our building, and the congregation get it. They’re such a lovely lot. They’re up for change and healthy discussion and they’ve embraced things.”

Finally, the future isn’t something Elizabeth is worrying about.

“It’s in God’s hands,” she said. “Another Life Group is forming – they are about doing life together and that’s what we’re about, really. That and people alongside you who are also mad enough to try it!”



### Story 3: Seer Green, South Buckinghamshire

At Seer Green in South Buckinghamshire, Louise Gilbertson serves as Missional Leader. Faced with the reality that the church could die, there was a need to re-evaluate. What followed was a willingness to try things, as it looks to connect with the surrounding community. This has included garden church, forest church, meeting at the village play area, a craft group and walking group. The church has a monthly rhythm based on in/up/out principles with the congregation all together two Sundays a month (up), 2nd Sundays set aside for small groups (in) and 4th Missional Sunday being ‘Community Sunday’ (out). Easter and Christmas have a traditional feel and are intentionally mission and invitational focused. Alongside this, the church has started running a monthly ‘Fun and Faith’ session, like a holiday bible club for the whole family, with lots of energy, actions and craft and a monthly challenge to try at home. About 8 or 9 families attend.

“We did lots of listening and prayer together. The church was happy to wait on God and did some missional workshops together in first year. We’re willing to be creative and willing to accept that not everything will work. Having a worshipping presence in the building on every Sunday was important to the church – so there is always some form of worship. On our community Sundays, this takes the form of an informal creative gathering in our worship space. It’s accessible and ‘not like church’, with people inviting their friends,” said Louise. “The church is an older congregation that has been preached to for a lot of years – but this has not necessarily led to practical whole life discipleship with our church community feeling confident to share their faith. To help us to grow in this area, our Sunday gatherings have become more interactive with lots of encouragement to apply what we are learning into our everyday lives.”

Louise is keenly aware of what she refers to as “the passivity of congregations”.

“In the past, maybe we haven’t empowered people to believe that we are all called to be disciples who make disciples. Many in the congregation felt ill equipped to confidently speak out the gospel simply and clearly. There’s also an expectation that that all this work will deliver lots of new church members and increase our resources. But I think God is saying that’s not what this is about. It’s about building relationships with others and inviting people to come and join a journey of faith. Then waiting to see what God will do. I think, the way we do church and form our communities will look very different in the future. It’s taking a large shift in mindset, and we are definitely on a journey,” said Louise. “I think we are moving towards a whole-life discipleship attitude and an expectation of intentional mission, growth and maturing, with sharing testimony also key. But change can bring discomfort, so there’s a need to help people walk through change. This experience has been an interesting mixture of a sense of mourning and of sadness because it’s different from people’s experience of church over many years – but also an excitement and willingness to try something new. I’m encouraged by glimpses of people maturing in faith: those who are praying publicly, some people who have been released into ministry in worship, conversations about teaching and sharing faith with others.”

With the building hosting everything from the post office to an after-school club, Louise said church has become integral in village life: “I don’t know what the future looks like and I think that’s ok. I’d love to see more people come to faith. But it’s not something I can control. It’s about doing what’s in front of us and staying faithful. I want to trust God and confidently step out believing that he is at work and doing a new thing amongst us.”

#### Story 4: All Nations, Wolverhampton

Having been a busy, centralised church with hundreds gathering for two services each Sunday morning, plus two other campuses and midweek small groups, All Nations at Wolverhampton has made a big change. Now, this Pentecostal congregation makes space on two Sundays a month for 'Home Church'. With almost 30 Home Church groups around the city, it's been a big change. Josh Raybould from the staff team was an travelling evangelist and is now responsible for the Home Church network.

"Covid came and shut it down. When everything stopped, we felt God say that we were not fit for purpose. We were very front led, so it was a restoration of the priesthood of all believers and a shared sense of Great Commission," said Josh. "We believe revival is coming and we want to be ready. So, it's forming a structure and a net – to be ready for those who will come. The movement is about building a network in readiness for that."

When change came, the leadership was focused on how to be obedient to God's call, leaning on Acts 2:36-47.

"It was 100% something we were sensing – recognising that there's a consumer culture around us and that has an impact on the way the church works," said Josh. "With changing how we do things, everybody has a role and everybody gets to play."

"Some have left because they're asking – 'Do you mean I actually have to do something'. But that voice of opposition is starting to fade away. A lot of people left – and that was quite painful, but also people have moved into where we are to be part of it. It's a big cultural thing, change. It certainly is the case that you cast the vision and people say 'yes' but they don't want the process."

Some Home Church groups meet in the week, others on Sundays. In the summer, some have taken to meeting in local parks. Groups are encouraged to follow the '3 Thirds Model' of looking back, up and forward as they gather.

An emphasis on accountability has been a big part of the changes.

"The big piece that people miss out is the accountability piece. If you're following the pattern, it's usually the accountability that gets missed out," said Josh. "There's a bit of a Westernised approach – knowledge-based discipleship instead of obedience-based discipleship. God says it, so let's do it."

Those leading the Home Church groups (which typically have about 12 people) have been given training and, with oversight from Josh, the groups are empowered to function autonomously. With those groups focusing on authentic relationship, it can get messy and complicated, but Josh believes it's worth it. At the same time, the big gatherings have feel more powerful and significant as they don't happen as often. The central leadership also pulls together 21 days of prayer and fasting in January and September.

"For the future – who knows what's going to happen. It used to be 'let's have more campuses' but that's changed," said Josh.



**Story 5: Harbour Church, Purbeck (formerly Stoborough Baptist, Dorset)**

Having started life in 2006 as a church plant from nearby Swanage, Stoborough had faced challenging times. In time, the church started asking questions about whether setting up and putting on a service at the village hall was the best use of the community's energy. In response to this, the pattern switched to two home-based gatherings under a leadership team. Gathering in this smaller way has offered advantages, particularly in terms of stronger and more purposeful relationships across and beyond the fellowship.

Mark Ashton Warner, a retired church planter, is part of the leadership team there and described how the pattern works in a fellowship of about 25 members, described by 75-year-old Mark as “a little upper” in age range.

“On Monday evening and Friday morning we have home-based gatherings, in two different homes. Then, on a 1st Sunday, we get together for worship and teaching at 10.30am. On a 3rd Sunday, we have breakfast in the village hall at 9.30am – with missional input strictly limited to relational stuff. We're enjoying our Sundays.”

The once-a-month teaching has become a resource that is mined by the home-based groups through the weeks in between. And in August, it's all about doing social things.

“The whole thing is quite fluid but meaningful and has relational depth. At the same time, the challenge is all about reaching others,” said Mark, who added that the group he is part of has a meal together every six weeks or so just to invite connections and introduce them to people who know Jesus.

One of the challenges that brought the church to its change included finance. After a previous pastor moved on, a grant ran out and the money ran low. But there were other factors, too, that led to conversations about how to be church.

“We had trustees who were ready to put down the responsibility,” said Mark. “We weren't reaching people how we had done, such as mums at the school gates. We were focused on Stoborough, just outside Wareham, but felt the way we were doing things didn't communicate in the way that is needed.”

“Before the changes, there were those who moved on because there was nothing for the young people. Now, the relational and flexible approach we take has meant some people are part of a church that wouldn't be otherwise,” said Mark. One couple moved as meetings became less frequent, but without any hostility.

Among the changing congregation is a couple who were married (both were widowed) as they recognised the amazing love that they had experienced through the church. At the same time, a family with boys in their late teens are still walking with the church and we are seeing people coming exclusively to the church at home groups.

Looking ahead is not a priority for Mark.

“I'm not especially interested in looking 5 years ahead – and prefer to look at how the Spirit is leading as we go. The Spirit moves as he wills and I'm learning to relax into that. We're expecting God to move and that's enough.”



### Story 6: Pathway Church, Sheffield (formerly Beauchief Baptist Church)

In south Sheffield, a church has responded to the reality that the old way wasn't working by drawing a line under its old pattern and going again. What followed in Beauchief was an encouragement to think missionally and to dream, alongside a message from the Yorkshire Baptist Association that they wanted to invest in a different model of ministry. The church of about 20 adults voted to embrace change and welcome Dave Criddle as their part time (70%) minister. A relaunch and new name followed in January 2023.

“Names tell a story. Beauchief Baptist Church says it's for Baptists in Beauchief,” said Dave. “Pathway helps to say that we are different and to express our thinking.”

“Most weeks, we're in scattered communities – called scatter groups. One Sunday a morning a month we are all together. It's like an informal café church thing. We have sung worship and we look at the bible and we use Discovery Bible Study. We use the 3 thirds thing of look back, look up, look forwards,” said Dave. “We look at what the last month has been, what can we celebrate, what stories can we share. We then have sung worship, prayer together and open the bible. Then we have a commissioning as we're going back out and looking at what obedience looks like in the next month.”

Scatter groups have chosen their own times to meet, with Sunday mornings working well. Dave said that there are different reactions to the changes.

“Some were a bit done with churchy church and perhaps never loved it that much anyway and are going for it, giving it what we've got,” said Dave. “Others are actively finding it hard because it is different from what they've known and valued before and they miss seeing people every week. They have made the decision to go for it and are engaged with it – and I think there's something lovely and beautiful about it. They've counted a real cost and are going anyway.”

A third response is that people who always turned up they still turn up but not necessarily in the same place as before. Only one person has disengaged.

“People have said they'd love to go back. One lady was in tears and sharing how difficult she was finding it. But even in that moment, she was saying that she knew something different had to happen because she wants people to meet Jesus,” said Dave.

“There isn't a clear sense of where we will be in the future, although it's good to assume that it isn't something that has to be this way forever. I definitely believe the future of the church will be in scattered groups and I'm confident that the weekly gathered meeting shouldn't become the centre of gravity again.

“What came before was a one-size-fits-all and all-roads-lead-to-Sunday, so there was only one way for people to connect. The change means more potential entry points to the community of faith. The environment is better for equipping Christians for mission. They are spaces where people are more active and more engaged,” added Dave. “We've changed – and changed meaningfully. That's not a small thing. Just because you change the structure, that doesn't mean the culture comes with it,” added Dave. “People are sharing what's happening in their lives and it's increasingly about how they reach who don't yet know Jesus. You look at Jesus and he tended to keep sending them out in a way that would have been unsettling. Probably just as they started feeling comfortable.”





### Story 7: Burlington Baptist Church, Ipswich

With a reputation as one of Suffolk's big Baptist churches, Burlington was not somewhere Simon Harris expected God to call him. Traditional and mostly elderly, Simon said you "didn't have to be a futurologist to see it would be dead" without change.

"We were gathering a couple of hundred people, but who was discipling? Where was mission? We gather a crowd on a Sunday and hope for the best; Jesus was trying to get away from crowds and focus on the 12. I started seeing a disconnect between church and what Jesus did," said Simon, who was bothered by the size and purpose of Sunday mornings. "Turning up for a show was making me more and more alarmed. Are we just conductors for events and services, hoping the world will get saved, because it's not working. We loved Jesus and felt called to follow him, but I was mostly doing things that Jesus didn't bother with. We were acting like a yacht club but needed to launch lifeboats to help save people."

During a sabbatical, Simon and his wife Ceri listened to God and spoke with leaders from other churches, in and outside the Baptist network. What followed was the development of small communities linked to the church but acting autonomously, places where mission and discipleship happened best. People were encouraged to take their missional vision seriously, launching communities with a focus on up (towards God), in (discipleship) and out (mission). Examples included a sewing café and a community for drug addicts – church in the places and with the people where God is with us. The new approach didn't ask people to add more to their week but allowed communities to develop on a different day and not expect them to come on a Sunday morning. These communities are now key to the church's identity, with the church all together like a missionary conference and an encouragement to be part of the big and the small.

"We agreed that a missional community was as much an expression of church as Sunday morning. Those who only wanted to get together on a Sunday morning started feeling we were devaluing it," said Simon. "We weren't, but we were giving as much emphasis and priority to the communities. We never gave up Sunday morning but on any given Sunday, not everyone was there. The engine that will drive this church is communities of missional discipleship and not events on a Sunday. Because we know it's not the thing that's really going to cause the growth, we invest in it less – in time and emotion."

Time has brought challenges with some communities defaulting to the small group – up and in without anything missional and others almost all out and not so much up and in. Simon added that there has been much to celebrate, "We've seen people become leaders that otherwise never would have done. We've seen people come to faith that never would have done – reaching the last, the least and the lost. We've seen a sense to family, on mission together, that has helped people to grow. One area that worked really well was kids with other kids in a missional community; their development grew massively and many of their friends came to faith."

"You need the centre and the edge to be mutually supportive," said Simon. "The centre church and the cell church don't do it on their own. Change is right and we can't keep doing what we're doing. Church is broken."



### Story 8: Patchway/Stoke Gifford

What was two churches more than 10 years ago, Stoke Gifford and Amberley Road, near Bristol, covenanted to become one church, where Andy Thomas is the minister.

“I came to Patchway Baptist Church when it was 18 older ladies. There was some explosive growth. But I just felt hollow. It’s exhausting to do all that leadership and preaching and all that goes with it. At the same time, I had a pervasive feeling that this is not producing the kind of fruit for which I had given my heart, soul and life,” said Andy. “I remember it vividly when, on a Sunday, I’d preached my socks off and I had this moment of realisation that this was like going to a show; something just died in me. As someone who could have given my life to being a preacher in that way, I just felt that something in the way we gather was just not bearing fruit. Nick Cave, the rock musician, used to take heroin and then go to Mass, as if being in the building and hearing some stuff means you’re ok now; you can tick the box. I can’t give my life to something that isn’t bringing the transformation that Jesus is looking for. If people are coming to church and not being disciples – let alone making disciples – then what on earth are we doing?”

“For those who wanted a preach and those things, Sundays were really important, but as soon as you open your doors on a Sunday, the expectation is overwhelming; change it and everything opens up. We’ve been on a journey for many years with deep discussion and prayer before anything was done. What was hardest was 95% of the time, decisions were unanimous but people didn’t like the reality, so walked away,” said Andy. “The process has been like pollarding trees and seeing a thriving much later. Maybe two years before Covid, we started doing services where some stuff happened at the front but we made space for conversation. Some people left because it wasn’t just about turning up for the show. After Covid, some didn’t feel comfortable coming back. We talked about what church is about and the concept of missional communities made the most sense.”

Now, all the church’s groups meet midweek, with no Sunday events. Those who wanted conventional church went elsewhere; others find it an “absolute gift to have Sundays for sabbath and the family”, with proper rest and a stronger discipleship community. The church provides a kind of chaplaincy to those who hire the building (various groups include a pre-school) as well as running a community fridge and, three times a week, a where people are loved and nurtured, starting where they are, where they belong and where people pray together. Two midweek groups offer deeper discussion. Meanwhile, the church is still working to understand what it wants to be. Love, care, nurture and hospitality are foundations, alongside being vulnerable and willing to ask risky questions.

“We’re on this journey towards operating according to gifting and calling. It is vital to play to strengths and gifts,” said Andy, whose Fuelcast work produces video content to support discipleship communities. “In some ways, we’ve felt very alone; we’re not in touch with others who are on a similar journey.”

Finally, Andy has a take on how the church might face the future: “I don’t want to see anything grow big. I would hope there would be multiplication, with a group planting another one. It can be whatever the Spirit is leading on. I’m more of a midwife than a director. I’d love to see creative, imaginative and mundane things happening.”

**Story 9: Andrew McCausland, formerly minister at Seer Green**

Andrew served at Seer Green before Louise Gilbertson arrived and is now at Croyde.

“The purpose of the local church is to prepare the bride of Christ through spiritual maturity and discipleship. The key to making disciples is ‘going in to all the world’, so discipleship must be missional. That means church needs to create an environment that’s accessible,” said Andrew. “The two key passages for me are ‘I have become all things...’ and ‘going to all people groups’ and this means that one size does not fit all – even within a little town like Croyde where you have people groups like surfers and young parents and older people. We need to learn and speak a different language not because we’re in decline but because we have a passion for mission.”

Page | 22

“The big influence on me is Acts 19 and the hall of Tyrannus. Paul got kicked out in v9 and withdrew, taking the disciples so that all the residents of Asia heard. The synagogue wasn’t the only method for those it needed to reach. When you look at that, you realise the church needs to identify the cultures on its doorstep and ways to reach them.”

“It’s important that the established folks in the local church understand that mission is for all of us and that we all have to learn a new language and we have to put the mission – and the great commission – first. It’s about all of them understanding that while the church has become an attractional church, we are to be missionaries on our doorstep. That is being faithful. If our focus has become church, we are not being faithful, so we need to turn that on its head. It’s about challenging the mindset of what is faithfulness. The thing that has caused most angst is the gravitational pull of Sundays.”

For Andrew, a key Seer Green moment was when a member asked to share a picture of an apple tree in Waterperry Gardens by the M40, host to many varieties of apples. “He felt God was saying we should be one church that would bear fruit in a variety of ways, not just the way the church had always worked,” said Andrew. “That tree became a symbol of our transition. Our vision was to be one church with a variety of expressions.”

“Jesus is not in the business of keeping churches alive. He does allow them to die. And transition is not about whether we can; we must. We’ve got to do something different. We are dying because we’re not changing. What will kill us is perhaps that we’re not being faithful. Look at the letters to the churches in Revelation and the removal of the lampstand. Look at what those letters say to us about dying. It’s losing our first love. There’s lots in those letters about repenting and returning,” said Andrew.

“Churches have been led by pastor/teachers, so the church becomes about gathering and Sunday. The kind of leadership needed going forward is ‘courageous uncertainty’. We’ve got to take the next step without knowing what the outcome will be. I know we need courageous uncertainty to help reimagine local church. We have domesticated the church so well. We have lost our imagination so much. It’s better to make tough choices when the church is strong, rather than when we’re working out who to give the key to.”

“The Spirit is rewilding the church. The question is: will we get on board with it,” said Andrew. “I believe with all my heart that this is what the Spirit is doing.”

