

A Tale of Two Town Pastors



Neil Biles has just picked up a Community Award for his work as Weymouth's Community Chaplain and he is delighted, especially as he is following in some pretty big footsteps:

"My faith, my beliefs and my role as community chaplain are based on the journey of Jesus, who came to serve people."

Neil's job description is just as big an ask.

It tasks him with bringing Good News to Weymouth Town Centre by serving the local community through the opening of St Mary's Church Centre as a beacon of light in the town for all to enter.

"St Mary's District covers the retail hub of the town, but there are also several flats and bedsits including new blocks of private flats. We have a mix of young adults and the elderly as well as those who work here.

"More ward residents claim disability benefit - and there is higher unemployment - than in the rest of the borough.

"The nature of the area means there is a floating population of seasonal employees and a large influx of holidaymakers. Despite a boost from the Olympics in 2012, the town centre now has many empty shops.

"Weymouth & Portland Borough Council has, however, recently proposed a Masterplan for Town Centre Development which would considerably improve this area. In this, the overall vision for the Town Centre is for it "to be a place of unique character and distinctiveness, which builds on its maritime heritage and family friendly offer, to provide a vibrant mix of shopping, cultural and leisure activities, supported by thriving businesses, tourism, commercial and cultural sectors."

"The objectives of the Masterplan include achieving a diverse, thriving and attractive town centre which is vibrant around the clock, full of activity as a place to live, work, shop, spend leisure time and enjoy the scenic coastal location. Developments at the Station Gateway, along Commercial Road, at the Ferry peninsula, and at Lodmoor are within the Parish, and the Harbourside development is close. All are intended to improve the public realm and provide some residential development within St. Mary's District.

"The local congregation has great enthusiasm and a big heart for the future of St Mary's Church, and continues to pray regularly for its central involvement and place in the town. They recognise that, as an elderly congregation, they have limited resources themselves but continue to pray and support a new vision for the future with St Mary's at the heart of the Weymouth town.

"As a Weymouth boy, I use to attend St Mary's Church on a regular basis, as I attended St Mary's School that used to exist on the current Library Site. I have had some involvement with St Mary's over the years and heard many concerns about its future. It was not until I became Chair of the Parish Profile Development Group that I realised that I personally had a bigger interest in the Church and recognised that

there is a wonderful group of praying, serving people who have a desire to see the Church used but needed support from others. I believe that God is calling me to support the future.

“I felt that God had called me back to Weymouth.”

Neil was Operational Director for Church Army until 6 years ago, when he felt called:

“Imagine a small group of ordinary people, living and working closely to one another, sharing their lives and resources. They meet frequently to pray, to eat, to apply the Scriptures to their lives, to relate to God together and support and love one another.

“They discover what God is already doing and join in by immersing themselves in the surrounding community, building relationships, meeting practical needs by working for social change, and finding innovative ways to communicate the good news of Jesus.

“People come to faith, their lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit and baptised into the community, the Christian Faith. In turn, the atmosphere in the wider community lifts. New believers are nurtured and taught the ways of Jesus. They become part of the newly formed Christian community and begin to introduce friends and neighbours to Jesus. As new people are added, the nature of the community changes and develops.”

That was Neil’s vision, but how could he implement it?

“I considered ordained ministry but I wanted more flexibility. Originally I thought I would work four days a week and give the rest of my time to God, but he provided the money, through a trust, to fund me, to allow me to work for him full time.”

Neil’s Chaplaincy role sees him dividing his time between St Mary’s and St Ebenezzer’s Evangelical Church in the town.



“My focus is across a lot of projects and across the week, I flow from one thing to another. Those things include a Monday Brunch Club that feeds 30-odd, Tuesday Prayers that “light the town centre church up like a disco”, according to one curious passer-by, a Wednesday Coffee, and a Thursday Lunch that between them bring around 50 people to St Ebenezzer’s.

Then there is the ‘Christians In Work Breakfast’ that sees Neil using his catering skills again,

cooking an early town centre breakfast that allows local Christians to eat, pray and talk together before work.

“We see about 50/50 attendance between church and non.”

Neil has many hats - he is Benefice, PCC and Deanery Lay Chair - and he says this allows him to garner help from lots of different places.

“The local congregation has great enthusiasm and a big heart for the future. This enthusiasm relates also to the Salisbury’s Diocese vision for our communities by ‘Renewing our Hope - Praying and Serving with the outcome of Growth.’

But the key to his work?

“Double listening. Listen to God and listen to the context, but then add a third: what are your gifts and talents and how can you use them?”

“My ethos is hospitality, I offer the welcome ‘Come to the table, come to eat, come to have fellowship and by the way, you can meet Jesus if you want to.’”



Down the road in Poole, John and Anne Ainsworth spend every Saturday afternoon looking for trouble in the town centre - not because they want to join in, but because they want to help.

John and Anne are part of the Poole Street Pastors team. Their Saturday afternoon ministry involves wearing hi-viz jackets and caps, and offering a calming, approachable presence at key ‘trouble spots’ such as the Bus Station and High Street. Anne says,

“We do this at the request of the Police, because there is a great need for positive support especially among the youth, the homeless and elderly.

“Sometimes we find someone in pain who needs a listening ear and we offer prayer.

“Other times we do practical deeds such as giving gloves in cold weather, phone for a taxi when someone is ill, we have picked up a

motorbike rider after a fall and stayed with him till he had recovered enough to go home.

“It’s an opportunity to open conversations about God. One gentleman asked us to have a word with ‘The Guvnor’ - God - to sort out the mess in our Government!

“The homeless are reassured of finding emergency accommodation and hot meals, local charities are promoted where possible, and connections are made between the public, Safer Communities and neighbourhood police when needed.

“Our aim is to help unite the town of Poole in Jesus’ love, allowing the opportunity for all to make the best of life. Being the face of Churches Together, we believe, encourages individuals in the community to live peacefully and to get to know God. We love any opportunity to talk about Jesus but we don’t force it, God will use whatever we say in Jesus’ Name for His good purpose.”