



'THE SALVATION ARMY' - AN UNUSUAL PUB IN THE FOREST OF DEAN

The challenge to plant a church can lead us into some surprising places. When Viv Prescott was recruited to plant a church in the Forest of Dean, flexibility and listening was always part of the approach. Those who know anything about the area quickly realize that it combines astonishing natural beauty with demoralizing rural poverty. It is a poverty that saps strength and imagination, it depresses, damages self esteem and tends to encourage those with significant ability to leave the area and not return.

That background has become part of the landscape that has shaped the way in which the small Christian community, sponsored by the Salvation Army, has taken shape in that place.

Two examples of recent activity help to illustrate the non-traditional approach to church planting taken by Viv and her team. This is not a programmatic approach to church planting. The centre became a local, disused pub that was purchased by the Salvation Army to act as a base for social engagement and also for worship.

One of the groups that started to meet in the Salvation Army “pub” was a knitting group. They began to develop social relationships with each other as they knitted to provide blankets and other products for people in need. The scale of the activity led to the question – ‘how might we obtain our wool from more affordable sources?’ That question led to a meeting with a local person able to teach spinning and that also led to an awareness that the local breed of sheep had wool that was thrown away, unsold and unused. What if that wool could be collected and spun and used?

Another conversation led to contact with a local weaver who might be able to weave their wool into a variety of other products. In turn that sparked a conversation about the uniqueness of the local breed of sheep – the Tatt. Apparently this particular breed of sheep only exists in the Forest of Dean. Imaginative leaps suggest new possibilities for design and marketing. Perhaps a whole new industry is being born, all as a consequence of some sensitive church planting!

While much of that thinking is still in the future, another initiative is very much in the present. The ‘pub’ has a good sized garden and Viv, in conversation with a local person realized that this man has the skills to grow good quality, natural food that could either be given away through the already active food bank or cooked in the pub kitchens to provide nourishing food for the hungry.

That thought was taken further to a cookery class to teach the skills of making nutritious food available to those who were struggling to manage on a low budget. So, when insufficient food is available in the garden, then the cooking group buys local produce from local markets, very cheaply when it is in season. Additionally, the pub gardener also helps Viv to give away seeds to local people to encourage folk to grow their own food. A whole new range of skills are being developed from this related set of ideas.

Apart from the financial benefit of these initiatives, at a deeper level the transmission of skills, the dignity of work and the social relationships engendered by these forms of engagement, all help to shape a new imagination and community confidence about what might become possible. In the midst of all this activity the reality and practicality of the love of God is sown and grown.

The active worshipping community is growing in its confidence too. None of these activities were begun in order to convince people to become Christians but out of the social relationships that have developed questions about faith have emerged. Some have become Christians, others have re-discovered their dormant faith, still others have located a place to worship that addresses their culture and need for belonging.

Apart from growing in confidence, the Salvation Army as a worshipping community is slowly growing in

an area where most churches have struggled to arrest decline. Relationships with other churches are strong and generous. Other churches have been encouraged by what they see happening in the pub that has become the Salvation Army.

Viv Prescott tells more of the story here in the interview with Martin Robinson: