WELLBEING ON THE HIGH STREET AND A PLACE OF PRAYER

Ruth Rice, minister of a Baptist church in a Nottingham suburb, pioneered a high street wellbeing café called Renew 37.[1] This café has turned out to be helpful for the mental heatlh of the local community and for the church- and a place where both can encounter God in prayer. Ruth's story is one of amazement at every turn because this café was not part of some long term plan but has emerged from relationships within the neighbourhood and a compassionate conversation about some lonely people.

Ruth what first made you sensitive to the mental health issues in the community?

It was clearly a concern within the church itself. There were quite a few folk among us with poor mental health and I also had experienced burn out a few years earlier. But then came my learning journey with Springdale College (now ForMission College) with Roy Searle and the Northumbria Community and with others. I discovered inner practices like silence, centering prayer, meditation and the Examen and realized then that these were the stuff of wellbeing. So, with my heart facing outwards, which is because I've been a teacher all these years, I thought 'how do we make this available? It can't be right, that it's only Christian leaders that are finding this way into wellbeing.' At the time I was spinning plates trying to help people with severe mental health issues in the church and that wasn't helping my own wellbeing. I was the only person to whom they related. I wondered how we could become a caring community and where we could find safe spaces together. I started to look out for a quieter place to gather, a place for stillness, away from our fairly lively charismatic worship.

Were you aware of issues in the wider community too?

I used to spend a lot of time in my local café because we don't have a church building, and the café was a really useful place to meet people. The café owners, who weren't Christians, said to me 'we're concerned about the number of people who come in here for coffee who are obviously lonely. We haven't time to talk to them though. Will you talk to them?' Of course I said 'yes', but it wasn't that straightforward to approach people. The answer came when the shop next door went on the market. The café wanted to expand but were not quite strong enough to do this themselves, so we formed a partnership with them. We are now the leaseholders for the whole space, and sublet the original café. We knocked a hole through the wall to link the two enterprises so now we're semi-detached. Three days a week, there's one continuous café.

How does this work for wellbeing?

We used our new space, all settees and tables, for things like mindfulness colouring, knitting and furniture restoration, with an emphasis on co-production- people working together, alongside each other. It's very relaxed. Anyone can lead a hobby or share a hobby so it isn't power based at all- it's not programmatic.

How did you make room for inner practices and stillness in this busy place?

We built a prayer room- that was absolutely essential. It's a simple space with a cross on the wall and it's always open. We have a liturgical rhythm of prayer in that room- a short morning, midday and evening prayer, but otherwise it's quiet. At the beginning of the day we take a psalm, and choose a memorable phrase for the week. We will sing in the morning and it is a bit more charismatic in the morning, but accessible. In the evening we weave reflective questions into our liturgy: 'What have you seen of the love and the beauty of God today? Where have you not seen the love and the beauty of God- this is the time to let that go.' It's important to enable people to look outwards too. We pray for the persecuted church and there's a writing group who write to people who are in prison for their faith.

How do non-Christians get on with this going on around them?

Explicit prayer only happens in the prayer room. We have to protect the café space and we're quite firm. Nothing should happen in the café which could be off putting for visitors. I walked in the other day and there was a group in a prayer meeting in 'shampoo position'. So I said to them 'Sorry, stop!' They looked really shocked at me so I tried to explain: 'If I'd just walked in now, and it's taken me three months to walk in through the door because I'm nervous, I would walk out and never come back.' We need to remind one another not to be 'churchy' together in that space. Some of my more charismatic leaders have struggled with this but I have 'gone to the wall' on it. People in the local mental health services trust us, for example our occupational therapist, who is agnostic, brilliant and respectful. She's told me that mental health teams will 'bite your hand off' for a place for people to access community off the record, but they won't do it if they think people will have something rammed down their throat. They know we're offering a way for people on a spiritual journey but also a safe place for people who aren't explicitly on that journey.

Do they refer people to you?

It's more accurate to say that people are recommended to come along. The council run a two hour mental health group in the space so people are referred to that and can access services with us. But also, because we're overtly inclusive, we do end up with people who wouldn't go anywhere else.

How has this impacted the church?

There's three hundred percent more prayer going on now and people are discovering contemplative prayer. Our own wellbeing has improved and I'm not running around as a pastor, doing lots of pastoring, because the people who are lonely or needy or difficult within the church have found their way to Renew 37. I have noticed a change coming over them in that setting, and realized what had been missing for them previously: nobody has ever been able to help them to work out how to be well. Attending to our own wellbeing at Renew 37, we encourage one another to be encouraging, rather than complaining. We don't talk about volunteers and service users there, because Christian or not, we're all just being human. We don't talk about church- but we do talk about Jesus, and hobbies and life and faith and how we're coping. We don't get into that 'church speak' thing. I recently baptized a lady who's become a Christian and her only contact is Renew 37. She doesn't do church on a Sunday. Entertaining the stranger is right at the heart of who the church is now.

Interview by Mary Publicover.

[1] Named for the street number and for Psalm 37 which begins the with words 'Do not fret.'

Ruth Rice

Ruth Rice is minister of the New Life Baptist church in West Bridgford, Nottingham, United Kingdom. She is member of the leadership team of Fresh Streams (freshstreams.net).