



PENYCAE NEIGHBOURHOOD CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE: EARNING THE NAME



Croeso I eglwys Penycae gymdogaeth y Nasaread....Welcome to Penycae Church of the Nazarene - everything has to be bi-lingual in Wales. We are in Penycae, a North Wales village just over the border from Chester in England. Our nearest town is Wrexham. We are not a large church and we have few resources, human or financial. But we know we have to make a difference before the gap between ourselves and our world becomes a chasm

When I went to the church one of the first questions I was asked was whether or not the church could change its name to *Penycae Community Church*. The idea was to make

a statement to the people in the village. However, I had to say that we could indeed change our name once we really WERE a community church! And for that we needed to become *missional*...

My training had taught me that a missional approach involved looking outwards and re-educating the existing congregation while creating new ways of engaging the community where they were. Trouble is they were in Wrexham- along with all services! There is a large council estate almost next door to the church but all welfare services, job centre services, and entertainments are in Wrexham! In our ward the post office has closed, the pub has closed and the community centre has closed. The doctors' surgery closed in favour of a large health centre two bus rides away. We have one small convenience shop and a kebab shop! So how were we to engage with our community - who didn't really trust or understand the church with the strange name? How could we invite them in?

In the event an important opportunity came through our poverty itself. The Wrexham Borough Council nominated Penycae a priority area for regeneration. The church was needed as an intermediary in a public consultation as the council had been unsuccessful in getting parents to engage at the school. Then the Welsh government stepped in. Penycae was no longer simply in need of regeneration it was officially deprived, perhaps in the top 10-20% of the most deprived areas in Wales. So eventually we and eight other villages became the Urban Villages Cluster of *Communities First*, which is a programme which brings community engagement funding and community development staff into areas recognised as in need.

It took almost 18 months of meetings, public consultations and post it notes to ensure that Penycae had a central place in this programme. I questioned frequently whether this was my job but getting these resources was important for my community whether I appreciate politics and committees or not! The church was the only gathering space available in the *Communities First* ward therefore we were fortunate to eventually become a hub for welfare and benefit advice, alongside adult education and parenting courses. But we didn't want to simply become a community centre - so we went to great effort and struggle to be more than that....

Our aim was not just to rent out building space but to integrate and become involved with the groups that use it. We provide refreshments and space for coffee where appropriate and build our own activities around various groups. We have always held family orientated 'Fun Days', but we decided to run an event with a young families' support group *Flying Start*. We had to raise our game ... The simple churchy fun activities of past fun days wouldn't do... So we applied for funding to hire a rodeo bull and bouncy castles - and purchased a ton of sand to turn the hall into a giant beach! This was great fun (but hard work to clear up) and we now have enough sand to supply our children for a year! Integration went further than events. None of the parents felt able to take responsibility for *Flying Start* so we have become employers and management.



Our centre runs courses for the community but these are barely viable because of numbers attending, so we send our members (whether they want to go or not...). I'm desperately trying to learn Welsh - I am really bad at it - but persevere - to ensure the course continues - and five people passed their exams last year.

Members of the church board do not just engage with church - they have intentionally joined the Community Council, become school governors, and represented us and the village at a local community organising group for North Wales.

It is incredibly hard work... And I have to be careful. Making a difference is inconvenient. My handful of available volunteers have to move chairs, oversee the building and interact with community groups who may not always be grateful, and may not be considerate.

Can I tell you that my congregation has doubled in size in the three years since *Community First* consulting began? No! We have baptised one family, and taken in two other members directly from community connection. We have had dedications and funerals... We have had council workers come into services and ask for prayers at different times. Our local Member of Parliament has attended on occasion and has written to thank us and support all our efforts. Our local government Councillor works closely with us as part of a community action group and he really appreciates that we 'don't seem like a church - we really get involved'. We managed to get Santa to come back with his sleigh for a pre-Christmas visit to Penycae after several years of absence due to past bad behaviour and now he comes every year... Someone recently said: 'I'm not religious - but you are doing a good job!' We're working on him! Truthfully, if the church ceased to exist - we would be missed.

It has taken two years to establish these community credentials, trusted by all agencies and really working together. From September we are focussing on social activities to try and build bridges from the community activities into church activities. Messy Church festivals and ladies pamper evenings...all these things run by the same small group of committed people. If God is not in this then we probably cannot keep up this level of activity for too much longer as we will have killed off or burnt out our congregation!! But if he is, and I believe he is, then he will build his kingdom - not just my congregation!

And he has built our congregation in ways that go beyond numbers. For myself certainly the focus of my relationship with God has changed. It's not all about me. He has made me realise that my response to him isn't just about measuring my own spiritual temperature - but that some of that measure is in my heart response to those who simply do not know him. For the congregation there has been a real sea change from the day they asked to change the name of the church. Their relationship with God is similarly less selfish. And in recognising the need of others, people have come to recognise their own needs and their own gratitude at having found answers. The more conversations they have with those

outside church the more 'real' their own faith becomes because they have to answer hard questions and sometimes it is in those very conversations that they realise what they truly do (and sometimes don't) believe!

Last year we did indeed change our name. We did not become Penycae Community Church as a similar name has been used elsewhere. We became *Penycae Neighbourhood Church of the Nazarene...* as I believe we are doing our best to love God and our neighbours and serve both.



Tracey Day

I was born in Great Yarmouth. I became a Christian when I was 15 when I started going out with my future husband, David at high school. We married in 1982 and in 1987 we moved to Thetford and, with three children three and under and no car we joined the Nazarene church which was 30 seconds outside our back door (very spiritual reasons). I felt called to ministry in 1995 and graduated from Nazarene Theological College. I have ministered in Bolton and Penycae. I am now 'Nana Tracey' to two grandchildren aged nine and two and a half!