Rebuilding the Ruins on Weoley Castle Estate

Nearly 13 years ago our family moved onto Weoley Castle, a large council estate in South Birmingham. It’s a struggling estate- falling into the lowest 10% for deprivation. Our milkman refused to deliver there. We had lived nearby for a few years but felt God was calling us to focus on Weoley Castle and to plant a church. We felt that it was important to live in the place because we had some idea that we needed to have real relationships with people rather than just run projects and ‘do good’.

There is a real castle in Weoley Castle: the ruins of a fortified manor house that date from the 12th Century. These castle ruins have been neglected by the council and this seemed to reflect the reputation and atmosphere of the estate. But when we moved on to the estate we believed that God was telling us to 'rebuild the ruins' with walls of love, strength and compassion and the flag of the cross flying above. But at that time we hadn’t realised that we were also a part of the ruins and that in that place we would learn far more than we taught.

Through the years there have been many disappointments, as the original church plant did not work out as we had hoped and many projects, activities and people have come and gone. However, the call to stay has remained and God has proved faithful. We continue to see lives changed by the Holy Spirit as our friends encounter Jesus' love for themselves.

One activity that has been consistent for the past few years is a women's prayer group that runs

on Wednesday mornings at our house. About 10 years ago we had a daytime Alpha group that was women only. This was fruitful in many ways but as our friendships grew so, did the nature of the group. The Alpha format became restrictive and it morphed into a ladies' prayer group. Every Wednesday morning we meet to pray, laugh raucously, cry and laugh again, eat cake and drink coffee, and often welcome newcomers. I don't know what image '*ladies' prayer group*" conjures up for you. but that image is unlikely to look like us..

We read a bit from the bible, share something good that has happened or say thanks for something that has helped. We ask for prayers for terrible things that are happening and for our own personal sorrows and hardships. We pray for anything that moves: each other, our friends, and their families, John the 'petshop man', Stephen Lawrence's mum [1], the children in Syria. Our ages range from 17 to 78. Everyone has their own story and God uses us to encourage each other along. As my friend put it, we are together in God's hands. Many of the ladies first met in the school playground so our lives criss-cross over the course of a day or a week. We are there to support each other through crises of birth and marriage, divorce, rape, assault, death, illness and surgery; in need and in plenty. . .

Our prayers are answered and we have seen some miracles. We pray for joy in the middle of sorrows. We pray for injustices to be righted and for hope when there has been fear and despair. We have prayed thousands of pounds for someone who had nothing, and for our hoovers and mattresses, houses and sofas. . . Whoever comes can pray. The people who might claim unbelief, frequently pray and share God given wisdom with well established believers.

God shows me people as if on a road, sometimes a long way off. Over the years I see them come closer as they seek out Jesus and hope and faith. Often he's been talking to them for a long time before we meet. The room may be full of people who would not call themselves Christian but who know they are looking for God. Someone at the start of their journey may bring along a friend who hasn't even put a foot on the road. Essentially we are friends and we love to see each other becoming close with God. We try to get out of the way so we each connect with God for ourselves. What better thing could friends do for each other?

One friend who had been along to prayer group a few times stopped me on the way to school one morning. She said 'I think God spoke to me last night but I don't really know him so can I tell you about it and you can tell me if you think it was him.' Apparently the night before an elderly family member had been assaulted and left on the road. This, along with previous serious events, had triggered such distress in the family that my friend, after a traumatic evening in hospital, had gone to bed, as she put it, 'with murder in her mind'. She said that her mind had been 'a blood bath'. But at some point in the night she had heard a voice calling her name. The voice had said, "In life there are always times when you will walk in dark alleys. Your path may take you through a dark place but don't set up camp there. Get up and come out the other side." My friend said that she had then decided to forgive the people she had wanted to murder. A peace had settled on her and she was struggling to feel angry now. She asked me 'Do you think that was God?" It was easy to give an answer.

Another friend had been having a recurring dream of being at a cross-roads. She asked me what I thought it meant. I suspected this was about Jesus and that she was facing a decision

about her developing faith. But it wasn't my place to say at that time. I felt that this was one that God would unfold for her. She needed to work it out with him. Months later, after a time of healing prayer ministry, Jesus did come and meet her at the crossroads and in conversation with him she decided to follow him and trust him with her life.

As we look back and reflect on our time here we realise that we have learned and are learning many things. Firstly we have learned that relationships take time and there are no short cuts. Initially, we wanted people to join in with what we were doing and with how we were living. Actually, what we needed to do was to join in with what people were already doing, where they were. But this has involved a long process of building trust and being prepared to let go of our expectations and plans. We've learned that we aren't right! And we have found that we aren't the ones with wisdom, or selflessness, or compassion or generosity. Instead we have found that our community is already rich in these things.

We have discovered that God speaks to and through anyone, in many different ways, and in a language they can understand. Few people here have any church or Christian background and they don't know the Christian 'language'. This often leads to situations where the Holy Spirit speaks in unexpected ways and without bible verses and stories. One friend doubted that he would ever feel like a proper Christian and so, after getting home from the pub, he put the radio on, and asked God for a sign. The next two songs in the playlist were his 'birth song' and a song that was played at his Nan's funeral. This has become a story that we can remember together whenever he's struggling. It reveals that God cares and he's interested.

We have been shown the importance of honesty and rawness in prayer, of 'telling it like it is'. There's no religious way of doing things when we pray together. Prayers can get interrupted and questioned and added to at any time. There can be swearing and frustration, and God can be given a very hard time. However, God copes with us and always shines his light into every situation. And when he meets with us where we're at, we hear phrases like 'being drunk on the glory' from people who've never heard those expressions before but are just describing their encounters with the Holy Spirit.

It is easy to talk about being part of 'God's family' but living like it is far more challenging and far more rewarding. We have found that living with people and allowing them to experience all of you enables the trusting relationships which lead to transformation. People can see us outside meetings and beyond set times. We aren’t always well prepared but if we really are family together then this must affect how we do relationships. It's not neat and tidy and compartmentalised, and we need to be knowable- our strengths and weaknesses, our gifts and vulnerabilities.

We find that there is often a vague belief in God but people don't feel good enough for church. People must feel accepted and loved for who they are now, not for what they might be. So we need to be continually amazed by God's grace to us, so we can be full of grace for each other. It sounds simple but it can be so hard when my default position is to judge. It's therefore all about seeing as God sees, and loving as he loves, which is a daily battle.

We have discovered how good it is to wrestle with the bible when it's completely new and fresh

for people, to watch them encounter God in the bible for the first time. Our friend started reading the Bible in bed at night and worked through the book of Job without input from anyone but the Holy Spirit. She said it had really helped her as Job showed her that bad things don't happen to people because God is punishing them but often the people he loves suffer.

Finally we have been surprised by the generosity and sense of community on the estate which we benefit from and enjoy. So much of what we have, has been given to us by people who have so little financially: our hoover, carpet, TV, many bags of clothing, and my favourite ever leather jacket. We needed all these things (the leather jacket wasn't strictly needed…) and they came as God's provision to us through our neighbourhood. At prayer group we have a giving pot, which started with a few pounds. One of the ladies said 'Just watch, it will start with a few pence and go on to overflow for whoever needs it.' This has been the case. I rarely ever see money go in but it is permanently rammed with notes. As a group anyone can suggest a need and there are a few of us who pray and agree how much could be given. We err on the side of generosity. It has been a miracle pot and has already provided hundreds of pounds.

We still don't really know what we're doing! And I hope we never do. This is often uncomfortable and always a challenge in a good way. However, one of the women who has been a regular at the prayer group for the last few years has put it far better than we could. She writes-

In terms of the Weoley Massive [the nickname for who we are] I know nothing's guaranteed and things change but one thing I am sure of is that we are reaching people that everyone else is striving to reach, the ones who have been so lost, lives full of unjust acts, pain, sorrow, darkness, who have fallen out with GOD, never believed or given up believing, people like me. The relationship with God and Jesus, the friendships that we have all built, the support, the prayers, through the tears and laughter, the family that has been planted, and the joy and freedom that each of us have got from knowing Jesus, all of it comes down to the fact that we are full of the love of GOD and are full of such Hope.

At the moment, although we've been here for some time, we're experiencing new beginnings. Paul started working for the Message Trust in September 2014 with the aim of developing an Eden Team on the estate over the coming months and years.[2] The job will also involve supporting possible Eden Teams across the Midlands and building relationships with people and churches who want to get involved in the more deprived areas of the region.

Effectively, we are also church planting, although what we do does not really resemble church as we know it. We have started a fortnightly family meeting on Sunday afternoons in our house, where we seek to learn from the bible together in creative ways. We're currently going through the book of Acts and find that using a storytelling/interactive approach works really well in helping people of all ages and backgrounds to get stuck into the stories. It's always a 'bonkers' time as we never quite know what's going to happen but it's been incredible seeing how people have responded to the possibilities opened up by the Holy Spirit.

There'll be other meetings and activities and projects that we'll set up as we go along but the aim will always be that these won't dominate our time and make us less available and

responsive to what's happening. Rather these things will enable and support our friendships and our intimacy and dependency on Jesus. It's been quite a transition for us as we glimpse what this new church may look and feel like. Sometimes it does feel as though we're going against the grain but we don't want to do church to people, rather our aim is to do it with them. It's definitely going to be an adventure and we want as many people as possible to be a part of it.

We said earlier that we had not realised that we were also part of the ruins of Weoley Castle; that we had more to learn than we could teach. We thought we 'had it sorted' and that we had the answers about how to do church and have a relationship with God, and how to live. However, we are being taught what real community could look like, and what a real and living relationship with God is. And we feel like we're still scratching the surface of what the possibilities are. Interestingly the actual castle ruins themselves have recently undergone restoration and are being used in new ways.

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[1]Stephen Laurence was a young black man who was murdered in 1993. The subsequent police investigation was eventually understood to reveal the institutional racism within the police force.

[2] Eden is a partnership between local churches and dedicated youth workers who commit to a place. See the Message Trust's website for further information: http://www.message.org.uk/ Last accessed 8/12/2014.