The Saturday Gathering Story so far...

It all began with a food bank - the *Halifax Food and Support Drop In*. However, the aspiration was not only to give out food but also to build relationships that would draw people to Jesus.

After a year of running as a food bank, we felt that God was asking us to introduce Him into the *Drop In* more dynamically so we set up a prayer ministry team and we were surprised at just how many people, when given the opportunity, wanted us to pray with them. Then, as we prayed, God answered and we saw people wanting to come to know Him better.

We began to introduce them to our own churches but that created problems. The people we were trying to involve did not know how to behave in that setting; they did not know when to be quiet – or not; some could not read the service sheet or the newsletter; they asked questions we didn't really want them to ask! They also couldn't hide what they were feeling, expressing their emotions in ways that far too many of us would consider inappropriate in 'normal church' – a place where the wearing of a 'mask' to hide emotions is very much expected by the majority of people for most of the time. Before long, it was a struggle for both the new Christians and the congregation to cope as it really served to expose those weaknesses.

As our often vulnerable people came along to the traditional church setting, everyone was very excited to hear the stories of the journeys they had been on but they really struggled with supporting them in their inevitable setbacks; and too often in the coffee lounge after the service no-one talked to them. It can be hard in any environment to socialize with people you don't know too well, but even harder when there is such a difference in life experience.

In addition, I became very much aware that the language that we use often makes services inaccessible - with words such as sin, repentance and atonement, which are complex and not in everyday use. As I sat and reread our service sheet (I attend an open evangelical charismatic church, with a low emphasis on spoken liturgy, so our service sheet is more easily accessible than most), I felt as though I needed to interpret most sentences. So it became clear, just bringing our new disciples into existing churches was not going to help them in the first instance. They needed an introduction to church.

More and more people wanted to follow Jesus so we set up a Bible study on a Monday afternoon. We figured that was a good idea as it coincided with a time most of our people needed to be at the job centre and they could come to us after they had been there. It worked for a few weeks and then it died, no-one came and we struggled with volunteers - most of whom were at work. So this was our first attempt at creating an introduction to church!

Then we set up Church Lite on a Sunday afternoon with a 'bring and share lunch' but it didn't work either. Again it was difficult to get volunteers because many of them were already at church in the morning and evening so an additional afternoon 'shift' was impossible. Our people didn't come either. Our second attempt at creating an introduction to church!

In July 2012, the breakthrough came when God inspired several of us with the vision for what

became Saturday Gathering and, in September 2012, we met for the first time. The three parts of the vision were:

- A family meal around a table
- A simple word from God to share His good news
- Sung worship drawing into the presence of God.

We set up a six-week pilot but the timing was important and challenging - Saturday evenings. If we looked at it logically then we had got it wrong, or rather God had got it wrong, because Saturday night was the time of the week when many of our people would be out drinking or using other substances while, for volunteers, Saturday night was the opportunity to be with friends, watching ‘Strictly Come Dancing’ or ‘Britain’s Got Talent.’

But six weeks came and went. We started with 12 and the number doubled, then tripled. Our volunteers increased and God seemed to be moving in ways that we had never seen before; lives were changing, with those of us who had the original vision changing the most! The project had started as Christians wanting to support those most in need; to do the things that Jesus asked us to do, following his example of sitting and eating with those considered unclean and the outcasts of society. However, for those of us involved in leading the group, it meant that God was was drawing us closer to His heart. These people we had called our guests were actually becoming our family. When they suffered, we did too; when their hearts were broken, ours were broken and when they were filled with joy, we shared that joy. God was sharing His heart for the poor and vulnerable with us and we realised that we were just as poor and vulnerable in so many ways.

I (Linda) had grown up in a broken family setting at a time when it was still very unusual to have a single parent family. We were pretty poor but there was always food, though not luxury items. Through education and working hard I had felt that I had managed to break the cycle of poverty and I had a good job as a senior civil servant when I came back to Christ after a 23-year absence.

My heart had got pretty hard over time because I had decided that, as I was able to make that change in my life, others should be able to do that too. I thought the inability to make a change was down to a lack of willingness to work hard. In coming back to Christ, I was quite shocked when God asked me to serve people who came to the *Drop In*. I had donated money and goods but when God asked, very directly, for me to look after the people who were struggling to such an extent, it was quite a shock. I had assumed He would want me to serve the senior people I associated with. Of course I later found out that there is no divide in God and I needed to learn to serve everyone, but that is a different story.

On my first trip down to the *Drop In* as a volunteer I prayed about how I was going to connect with the people God had brought down there and He told me I had to look not with *my* eyes but with His. I had to cast aside all of my own judgments and, as I discovered more of the stories of our guests, I realized just how much many of them had gone through. And in beginning to walk

the next steps of their road with them God pointed out the areas of vulnerability and poverty of spirit that were in me.

Although, on the outside, I was able to present an image of being ‘all together’ yet, inside, there was someone who lacked confidence, had low self-esteem and an addictive personality. For me, it was not drugs or alcohol but work and the continual compulsion to do better - no matter what the cost. I realized that it was no longer me, as someone who was allegedly ‘sorted’, acting as leader to those who weren’t leaders. Instead it was God growing us all as we journeyed together.

After six weeks, it became clear this was no longer a pilot and we needed to set about putting some structures in place that meant we could be in this for the long haul:

- People were divided into cooking ‘teams’
- An additional person was added to our worship band rota
- We scheduled in ‘time off’ for those who spoke and led

Interestingly, we refused to call ourselves church at that time, insisting that we were a ‘gathering’. The *Food and Support Drop In* is totally dependent on local church support for the donations of food and the supply of volunteers and it would have been very easy for us to lose the goodwill from the churches that we had gained over the years. Yet we knew that according to any real definition of church, we were one.

As we set out on this journey of discovery, our ‘running order’ for *Saturday Gathering* was to share a DVD, have a story about Jesus, eat together, sing and pray. People would come and go and, often by the end of the evening, we had very few people left.

People outside of church tend to not sing very much and so we began to play around with our structure to encourage them. We do not use much spoken liturgy, but Cath Binns, who leads our sung worship, was mindful of how people carry songs in their heads and how God uses that during the week to draw them to him. So, carefully chosen songs were used in the early part of the evening and prayer was used at the beginnings and end of each section. Over time, we offered the opportunity for people to be prayed for – and, gradually, more and more people stayed later into the evening.

One day, the local police sent an email to one of our supporters and suggested that we apply for funding from them. They said they were keen to support us because it had been noticed that people previously causing trouble on the streets of the town were no longer there. They were with us! We applied and were astonished that our application was accepted because we made it very clear that we were sharing our faith. We have received nearly £3000 during the year we have been running. It’s very gratefully received because it costs us about £100 weekly to run *Saturday Gathering* as we need to pay for the use of the rooms and the food. We have also been gradually building up our computers, screens, and sound equipment.

The transformations that were taking place in people's lives were amazing. People who had been on the streets, homeless, a few months earlier were being helped into housing, into education and some into work. Our volunteer group was growing because people who originally came in need, now wanted to serve – and, in serving, they were finding dignity and self-worth. Others wanted to raise money to support those who, like them, had been vulnerable by taking part in a sponsored cycle ride from John O'Groats to Lands End!

Families started to attend. We questioned whether it was appropriate as it can be very noisy because we do have people who are under the influence of drink and other substances. As each session began, it was never completely clear whether the dominant presence would be that of alcohol and substance or the presence of God! But we had decided early on that we would only stop people from joining us if they were a danger to themselves or to others - or if they decided to bring drink or drugs onto the premises. As we discussed and prayed, we felt God was saying He would bring whom He would to *Saturday Gathering* and our doors had to be open to all. So the families were welcomed in.

This was a significant transition point. We now needed to ensure there were opportunities for the children to engage in our worship and activities for them running alongside what we were doing for the adults. Other people, those who enjoy being creative, often join the children in their activities and so crafts are now becoming a part of our worship too. The activities are offered to one side of our hall so everyone remains together. Maybe at some point we will separate it into another space but, for now, it is integrated.

At the same time, the progression in spirituality in the group meant that we wanted to start and share Communion together. I am a Church of England ordinand so we needed someone who was authorised to do that. A local vicar, who had been supportive of Saturday Gathering, came along and led us; the *Saturday Gathering* family gathered around the Lord's Table for the first time and it was an amazing feeling. A few weeks later, another local vicar come along - this time from a more traditional Anglican church - and he led Communion in robes and with more said liturgy.

The times of sung worship began to develop. God's presence became palpable. Our own people began to tell each other that this was the best time; that the peace that fell was amazing; that God was answering prayer and changing lives.

In the summer of 2013, as we approached our first year anniversary, we started to ask questions about what was going on here. God was clearly moving in this community but what was it He was creating?

We had read and heard of fresh expressions of church, Missional Communities and Pioneering Ministries. Our people were referring to us as church and we could no longer stop them. They were turning up with forms for us to sign to say they had been worshiping with us for over a year so their children could attend church schools. We asked one of our local vicars to act as a chaplain to us and help us when we needed more authorization than we had.

We went to speak to Canon Dr George Lings, Director of the Church Army's Research Unit,

about our journey. Our conclusion was that we were a fresh expression of church that was both dependent and interdependent on other local churches. One of the key reasons we had been nervous about calling ourselves a church was because we want to encourage our people to participate in other Christian fellowships where they can be a part of a more balanced community, as and when they are able. To date, we have been quite successful - with some of our people attending the free churches and some local Anglican. Our vision is that people will come into our Saturday Gathering community from the churches, come alongside our people, and take them into their own fellowships. We feel that our back door and our front door should be open to allow free movement into, and out of, our community. For some of our family, we know it is unlikely they will ever make that step and that is fine too.

Having crossed the line into accepting that we were a church, some of our *Saturday Gathering* family decided they wanted to be baptised. The Bishop of Pontefract (Rt Rev Tony Robinson,) had visited us and had expressed an interest in getting involved when we were ready to start some form of initiation. He was asked to come and baptise and confirm some of our new disciples and a date was set. We decided that the training for baptism and confirmation would take place mainly in our usual talk slots on a Saturday night and a similar combination of DVD and short talk/ discussion.

ack into order
on and
ove all

On 11 January 2014, 19 men, women and children were baptised and confirmed. The baptism was full immersion in a portable baptism tank. We had anticipated that 16 people would be baptised but on the day we had four no shows but, as the service progressed another six came forward and wanted to be baptised on the day. For the Bishop it was the most “messy” service he had presided at, but he was absolutely amazing and seemed to enjoy every minute. Over 80 people came along to watch and participate, some from the local churches but many were friends and family of those being baptised - most of whom had never been in a church before. We think many of them will be back. The service itself had a real beauty about it; the baptisms were a massive celebration with applause, shouting and laughter. The confirmations were quieter and you could feel the presence of God as His Spirit moved and touched His people and once again in the breaking of bread and wine there was that feeling of family gathering around God’s table.

So what of those of us who have joined in with God’s mission so far? We have all changed. Those of us who lead have learned that we

have to be able to lead in the context of mess and noise. When any one of us stands to speak we know that we have to depend totally on God to let our words land. We have learned that letting people volunteer and take on responsibility is hugely important - but that brings with it the need to remind, cajole and be prepared for let downs as planning and organisation is a difficult skill to learn. We are beginning to see some of our family beginning to build up roots in other churches and that is brilliant because it gives the opportunity for others to experience the joys that we have and to learn some of the lessons too.

So where to next? We are talking to the local council about having our own premises to offer more support to our family and we would love to meet up midweek to worship together. The work that we have done through the *Food and Support Drop In*, *Inn Churches* and *Saturday Gathering* has given us favour with the council; they still struggle with the faith elements but acknowledge the changes that are going on and the benefit that our projects have had on the town and that we will not separate what we do into good works and faith. We have also discovered whole groups of volunteers who would be interested in helping our family learn to read and write, to use a computer, to manage their finances. We know that God gives us dreams. For many of our family those dreams have been dumbed down over the years but we believe that he wants to reignite those dreams so that His people can be who He made them to be, full of life and light. And that goes for those of us who have the privilege of leading too. God keeps telling us to “Dream Bigger”. We think we are but His dreams for Calderdale are bigger still.

(Photographer: Jim Cooke, Fresh Expressions.)