



## THE UNEXPECTED MISSION: JESUS AND SIMPLE COMMUNITY



Six months ago I moved onto an estate in South Birmingham. I joined two other women in a house that had become a light in the area. I moved in with a hope of joining them in increasing that light to the residents of the estate.



My first encounter with missions was as a teenager. I enthusiastically signed up for every short-term mission trip I could find, filling my summer holidays with adventures in Africa and Asia. I was passionate about spreading Jesus' love; changing and fixing a broken world for the better. I thought this was the best way to do so, whilst preparing myself for a life in the mission field. It was the only model of mission I knew. In my eyes, seeing the Kingdom of God come, meant being a missionary in Africa. Ironically, and much to my surprise, it was at a missionary training school in Mozambique, in the summer of 2011, that God spun me round and showed me the poverty and need in my own country. The word to me, at that time, in that place, was "Abbi start at home."



He gave me a fresh vision and passion to plant a church, one which did not simply reach out into a community in need, but was situated within that community. This bare-

boned vision was all I had and it became the basis of the next year's search to find a community. This was a completely new idea to me. God had ruined my previous model of mission and I had no idea where to start. Nobody around me shared this vision; however I kept hearing whispers that there were people doing similar things. This form of incarnational living seemed to be cropping up in various cities and I discovered that whole organisations were facilitating such things.

Shortly before I graduated, with the graduate void looming before me, I met Miriam. A series of unexpected and interlinked events led to this initial meeting, leaving no doubt that this was God's handiwork. It quickly became clear that we shared similar passions and vision. Thus, following a number of visits to the estate, and to some of the events, I moved in.

Miriam had moved into the area six years earlier. She found it easy, unlike most, to say hello to her neighbours in the street and invite them around for dinner. Relationships were formed through such dinners, barbecues, sports days, Easter egg hunts; and in the case of Beth, when Miriam knocked on her door with homemade cakes.<sup>[1]</sup> By the time I moved in, there existed a *Stay and Play* group in the church hall in the middle of the estate, an after-school club which took place every week, and once a month there was *Messy Church*. At this gathering between ten and twenty children send glitter and glue pots flying in a sort of holy chaos. Monday evening was known as *Ladies' Night*, where up to ten women joined Miriam and her housemate Jenny for dinner and a Bible study. All the work was supported by the church which Miriam and Jenny both attended. Furthermore, other Christians had moved into the area looking to serve and love their neighbours. Sam began work with some of the estate's young people, playing football on the green.

Having only become a part of this story recently, the beginnings of the work in the area are not mine to tell. I am now merely enjoying the consequences and marvelling at the nature of the near-church plant that exists here. However, as I listen to Miriam and Jenny recall and reflect on the course of events, a number of elements appear to be of central importance. In particular, the context within which *Ladies' Night* arose significantly shaped the nature of the group today and it is to this that I shall now turn.

*Ladies' Night* began to emerge in March 2012 with Beth's baptism. Beth had known Miriam for about six years, and the two had spoken about Jesus often in those years. Eventually Beth became a Christian and was baptised at a nearby church. She asked for a Bible study group, understanding that she could not sustain this new life alone. A number of her friends and neighbours who had attended the baptism were drawn into the Monday night studies. Others joined following conversations in the playground, through friendships at Beth's church and through the *Stay and Play* group. God appeared to be drawing people from a variety of places.

For Miriam and Jenny, however, this was a period of real spiritual dryness. They were in the middle of difficult personal situations, vulnerable, with little to give. They were two people you would not have chosen to start any kind of Christian ministry. So there were no expectations or agendas, never a thought about what would happen next. There were no planning meetings, no will to fix people, as they themselves were in need of fixing. Everything was much more natural. This seemed to create an

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environment for God to move and for an honest community to blossom. God used their weakness to birth a ministry that is now marked by its openness and vulnerability.

This can be seen in Sophie's recollection of events. Sophie attends Ladies' Nights and here she mentions the ordinary and agenda free beginnings, saying :

*I got a text from Miri [Miriam] after Beth's baptism saying that we were having dinner and a bible study with some of the ladies in the area and would I like to come? I had already been to church a few times, but when I came and we started to do the study it was almost like I was meant to read the Bible and I was meant to learn the Bible.*

She continues to talk about the nature of the group and what it means to her:

*I feel like it was here that I found faith, rather than church. In church you listen to a pastor's sermon, whereas here you learn other people's experiences with God...Everyone here has wonderful and open hearts. Miri is so there with God most of the time, but at the same time she still has troubles and she shares them with us as much as we talk to her about ours. There's no hierarchy here.*

Similarly, Helena values the way everyone shares their experiences of God. She finds the Bible becomes accessible this way, and more easily related to real life. Beth frequently refers to Monday evenings as 'church' and believes that without these gatherings she might not have retained her faith. She explains, 'It's difficult to go to 'church' sometimes but I say 'church' is where you're comfortable and love the people you're surrounded by and feel confident and can do it in good times and bad.'

Helena, Beth and Sophie describe the way in which we are living our lives together, learning together as we do so. This is the real beauty and consequence of such honesty and vulnerability; no one tries to fix any one. Beth's words paint the nature of the group as one of safety and family. We are all able to come as we are, and share our hopes, dreams and struggles with one another. For me, this is a refreshing contrast to church communities whose members always claim to be fine and well. These women openly share the serious obstacles they often face. I frequently find myself unable to aid them and instead am left to merely walk beside them and attempt to bear it with them. Rather than lead them, I find their faith and attitude in difficulty has taught me so much about Jesus, His Kingdom and myself.

On a practical level the evenings themselves usually begin as you would expect; with a cup of tea and conversation about the week past. The answers to the regular questions, 'how are you?' and 'how was your week?' are always brutally honest and lead to encouragements, regardless of the answer. I am often struck by the women's warmth as they act as Jesus' hands and feet to one another. Cooking is shared and we squeeze around the conservatory dining table to eat our main

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course and pudding. The room is filled with sounds of laughter, typically brought on by an outrageous comment or a ridiculous question. The themes of safety and family run throughout the evening, not just when we talk about Jesus. In the latter part of the evening we are currently working through *The Freedom in Christ* discipleship course.<sup>[2]</sup> It consists of a video clip, followed by discussion questions on issues such as identity and forgiveness. Finally prayer requests are shared and we spend time praying together. Throughout the week a group message continues on *Whatsapp*, a free internet messaging app, where prayer requests and answered prayers are shared, advice is sought and even children's play dates arranged. The evening has a basic structure, but God has shaped this environment and we are still learning, doing so every week as we turn up alongside our neighbours and friends.

This was certainly not what I expected mission to look like. God has changed my original idea of mission. We work without a model or strategy, to reach and love the community where we live. Miriam's ability to connect with her neighbours, so naturally, over a long period of time, built a solid foundation. I believe the vulnerability in the origins of *Ladies' Night* has allowed this community to flourish, in a very unique way. We simply attempt to live alongside one another, knowing that no one has the answer, but God alone. I am still learning, but am fortunate to do so alongside some truly wonderful and wise women. As Sophie said, there is no hierarchy, but a diverse family, always open and honest, hoping to spread His light together.

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[1] Apparently Beth's first comment to her children after this was to instruct them 'Don't talk to that woman. She's crazy!'

[2] <http://www.ficm.org.uk/> (Last accessed 19.6.2013)



## Abbi Macallister

Abbi Macallister graduated from the University of Birmingham with a first in Theology in July 2012. She has since remained in Birmingham, working in a community café and getting acquainted with her neighbours.