

Building Trust: How Come You Guys Don't Give Up On Us?

The missional transformation of a congregation is rarely rapid or free of obstacles and the story of The Well is no exception. The Well began life as Farnworth Baptist Church, a church plant from the neighbouring Bolton Baptist Church.

Six families began the church in 1872 and in 1906 they opened a somewhat prestigious building next to Farnworth town hall. At that time they had a membership of around 100 people with around 250 children enrolled in the Sunday School. This era represented the high point for membership in most local churches belonging to mainstream protestant denominations in England.

Following the First World War membership began to decline until, by the 1980's the church was facing a difficult future. At that point an energetic minister took responsibility for the pastoral and preaching life of the congregation. He was not from a Baptist background and was very conservative in his view of scripture and church life.

The congregation was gradually re-built on the basis of a strong preaching emphasis. Arguably it was mostly existing Christians who were attracted to this style of ministry but nevertheless, by the arrival of the new millennia, the congregation was probably as large as it had ever been – a not inconsiderable achievement at a time when most congregations were shrinking.

The minister who achieved most of the growth, died rather suddenly and unexpectedly. The person appointed as his successor had been converted through his ministry but had little formal training. By 2005 a dispute arose in the church about the role of women in leadership. The consequence of the deep division in the church around this issue was an acrimonious split and by the time the dust had settled, just seventeen adults remained.

Just before the controversy around women in leadership emerged, one lay leader in the congregation, John Bradbury, began studying on the [ForMission](#) MA in Missional Leadership. After the split John was invited to lead the congregation as a lay pastor. He has since become a recognized Baptist minister.

So where do you begin with a disheartened and broken church? In the video interview, John highlights three key issues:

Bringing unity to the existing congregation in terms of vision and hope.

1. Developing the building so that it could realistically serve the mission strategy of the congregation.
2. Implementing a mission strategy in order to enact a deep connection with the local community, in short, joining with God in the neighbourhood.

The detail of the story, particularly in relation to the development of the building, is inevitably complex. The core of the story is that the original building was going to be hugely expensive to restore and so was sold. That enabled the church to buy a nearby smaller building which they could then manage to re-develop and extend so that the needs of the community, rather than the needs of the church, could be more adequately served.

The redeveloped building centred around a coffee bar, a worship area and a series of rooms that could be used by the community for a range of events that include activities as diverse as a food bank and a ladies pamper night! The church community encompasses around 150 people in total which means that in terms of numbers the congregation has never been larger since its inception in 1872. Somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 different people connect with the church or its activities over the course of a year.

In addition to the work that takes place in the church building, there is also a community based venture under the auspices of [TLG \(Transforming Lives for Good\)](#). This is a separate charitable initiative that works with children and young people that have been excluded from school, usually because they experience a degree of chaos in their lives. TLG works in partnership with local churches seeking to build a service to excluded children which has deep local roots.

Much of this activity has produced good relationships with many in the community that have struggled with life and finding their place in the broader society. Some of these folk ask the question 'how come you guys don't give up on us?'. There is something very persistent and consistent about the activity of a Christian community, committed to serve and committed to remain.

That locally engendered trust has produced a wider trust from the social agencies and local government authorities. That in turn has led to greater potential opportunities. One such suggestion is the beginning of a conversation about turning an eighteenth century house, now semi-derelict, into a café and wellness centre. The house is located in the centre of a nearby park that sees in excess of 300,000 visitors a year.

Local churches work together well. There is a nearby church with a large auditorium and a tiny congregation and both churches are now exploring sharing space. Trust opens up possibilities for the kingdom of God.

Beyond all this celebratory reflection are the obvious frustrations around exhaustion, the absence of sufficient numbers of competent leaders, and the inevitable question that says something like, 'we have successfully connected church to the community, now how do we connect the community to a deeper awareness of God? How do we create a rhythm of spiritual life that sustains what we are doing for the longer term? How do we generate a community that reflects a goodness that is more than the creation of good deeds?'

Mission tends to be motivated by the love of God and although mission leads us down many paths, ultimately it needs also to lead us back to the love of God.