

## The Journey of Journey Communities

In the early 1960s, nearly 70 years ago, the Council of Churches in one of Scotland's new towns decided to open a coffee bar with a room above designed to attract young people. At that time it made headlines. Even then, the churches, still firmly in the framework of Christendom, realised that they were losing connection with young people. Today, opening a coffee bar, or a café is not exactly revolutionary, indeed we might almost say it is hardly worth mentioning, it certainly won't make any headlines.

However, what matters is not the fact of a café, but what happens in the context of a venue such as a cafe. From the perspective of mission, a café is merely an open space that permits the development of relationships, of discussion, of friendship.

The story of Journey Communities and their café, is not one that says, 'here is a great new model of church', so much as, 'this is what mission tends to look like in a post Christendom, post secular and post so much else West'.

Jeff and Christie Lothamer have come to the UK to serve as missionaries which might traditionally have meant planting a church. That was certainly something that was familiar to Jeff and Christie in their context in the United States. Coming as missionaries, they realised that what worked in the United States was not necessarily going to be productive in the UK. Despite the perception that North America is travelling in the same direction as the declining church in the UK, it still is possible to plant and grow congregations, relatively quickly, in many parts of the USA.

That is not always the case in the UK. After much reflections, Jeff and Christie have formed a team that work to create what they call "gospel communities". What does that look like? In the interview Jeff describes two communities, essentially home groups meeting in different but related parts of Bicester in Oxfordshire. These two communities meet separately for discipleship or spiritual formation and then come together twice a month for something that looks a bit more like traditional worship.

Those who lead Journey Communities in Bicester, focus a good deal of time on the FLTR café. That is where they meet and serve those in a community which is to a large extent a dormitory community shaped to some extent by its proximity to the motorway.

What Jeff is describing is not a new model of church but neither is it a conventional approach to church planting. The DNA of this community of Christians reflects an intentionality around engaging in mission. That same mission is focussed on a particular community and has been shaped by the needs of that community rather than by a "cookie cutter" approach to a church plant that could have been rather imposed on the community.

The core of their activity is the creation of community, whether exhibited in the home groups or the café conversations. Welcome, food, hospitality are themes that are repeated in much that they do. The mechanism is a social enterprise, the approach is all about engaging in activities that generate relationships and then conversations, questions, debate, enquiry – in fact, life!

The point about all of this activity is that people do come to faith but not because this is an amazing new model – it really isn't, but because it is incarnational mission. In that sense it won't make headlines, it is really slow, but it is part of that "slow church" approach to impacting communities, one at a time, over time. It is extraordinarily ordinary. It is in such everyday engagement that mission takes shape.