

Life on the Margins: The Saturday Gathering in Halifax

Linda is a minister, an Anglican priest, based in Halifax, Yorkshire, a town which has areas of high deprivation. She is curate of two congregations in this town, and also co-leads [Saturday Gathering](#), a Saturday evening church which emerged from a [Food and Support Drop-In](#) and other services, run by [Christians Together Calderdale](#). She told us something of the story of the beginnings of *Saturday Gathering* [here](#).

In conversations with Martin Robinson and Mary Publicover Linda goes on to reflect on some of the challenges of this ministry, but also her hope for this community and their district.

In this video Linda outlines some of the journeys which are typical within her community and their sense of mission and discipleship. Linda is in conversation with Martin Robinson.

In this second video, Linda describes to Martin how the *Saturday Gathering* of marginalised people transitioned into a church, and about some of the practices that enable stability there. They also discuss how partnerships have grown between *the Gathering Place* (home for the *Food and Support Drop In*) and the town council and other civic authorities. Linda outlines her understanding that God is in mission within and beyond the boundaries of Church.

The conversation continued in these exchanges:

In this amazing story of growth Linda, I'm guessing that you have some difficult pastoral and discipleship challenges.

We have. In fact it often feels that we're right in the middle of the mess. I find myself asking 'How do we handle this... or this?' For example about a quarter of our population now are gay, or at least they would not present themselves as straightforwardly heterosexual. This is one of the most difficult areas that we're trying to work through at the moment. We've always said we'll accept everybody, love everybody- that can't change. But if I could get all our people of any sexuality to abstain or to just have one partner that would be such a step forward. The promiscuity of our environment does so much damage. So how do we make that happen? I don't really know but I just keep reading, thinking and praying that God will give us a way forward. We have to work on the basis that we don't really know most of the time. We have to fall back on finding a way that works within our values framework.

Do you have pressure from your wider church contexts about this?

We do. Someone phoned me after *New Wine*^[1] and said 'It's time you started preaching more morality from the pulpit. You need to be telling them...' I understand how they feel. But *God* is drawing our people and they start such a long way from a typical Christian starting point. If we said 'In order to become a Christian you must give up this, that or the other' it would just drive everyone away. But there are lots of people who think we are not handling this as we should.

We are always about trying to find that way of grace. It's an adventure and we have to trust that God will lead us every step of the way. We don't come into this with masses of knowledge. We find our way as we're able and trust that God will lead us.

How do your people find their way into the *Saturday Gathering* in the first place?

Saturday Gathering operates out of several ministries under *Christians Together Calderdale*. The council have given us a building and money for staff so we're able to operate a night shelter through the winter, a *Food and Support Drop-In*, a pay-as-you're-able café and support work. The community receives care from these ministries, and as their lives get less chaotic, they discover their own creativity, so we help them with stories, poetry, music and art. Some of our ministries are intentional about sharing faith, so as our people become part of the family they begin to realize that a faith in Jesus is at the heart of it. This morphs into 'I believe in Jesus now. Will you baptize me?'

The council are supportive even though you are explicitly evangelistic?

They are. According to the *Cinnamon Trust* our social action is worth £6M per year, and the council do recognize that. It does surprise us sometimes though. We used to minister from rented accommodation but the council approached us about more permanent provision. Recently when this came under review we went to see them with paperwork all ready and arguments lined up. But before we had an opportunity to speak they said that they were blown away with everything that we're doing. 'How could we take the building away?' At a different meeting they asked me to present what we do and why, so I stood up and effectively preached the gospel!

Is your relationship with the Council starting to feel like a partnership then?

Yes, for example we had severe floods in Halifax on Boxing Day 2015. Three or four neighbourhoods were flooded. The first people the Council phoned that Boxing Day was ourselves. 'We don't know what we're going to need, but can we use your networks?' By the end of Boxing Day we'd housed eleven people and a dog and many volunteers had appeared from the local churches. We received so much stuff, bedding and clothes, that we had to call halt.

How does the *Christians Together Calderdale* network of churches operate?

Most local churches are involved to some degree. Six churches directly support *Saturday Gathering* and have welcomed people from *Saturday Gathering* into their own congregations. Other churches will give food, volunteers and money. Most support the winter shelter. We approached a church which had been at one stage marked for closure, as to whether they would be a second venue for *Saturday Gathering*. They were blown away.

In the journey so far Linda, what can you say you have learned?

I have experienced what the Gospels teach, that God is close to the brokenhearted. For

example in the *Saturday Gathering* I can almost guarantee that if I pray for someone they will be healed. God just does. Yet if I pray for someone with the same ailment in my own church, not so much. In healing we encounter a sign of God's goodness in a world that doesn't know him. So it frustrates me that others don't see mission in the same way I do. Lots of effort can be put into an 'event' which is evangelistic and a person or two may come to faith. Instead what we need to be doing is infiltrating other communities as influencers, being God's light in our neighbourhoods and letting him change the culture through us. I also have grown in my understanding that God is about the re-creation/ renewal of all things. In the kingdom there will be no poverty, there will be no homelessness, no addiction so how in this place, how in this town, does that begin to happen? And what is my role, the role of my co-leaders, *Saturday Gathering*, in all of that?

What are your greatest challenges?

Breaking the hold of addiction in people's lives and I am praying into that. We do see God touch our guys and we do see people healed but it's rarely instantaneous. There's always a pull back. The drug dealers never back off. They are constantly looking for opportunities to draw people back into addiction. We believe there will be a day when we will see far more complete healings of addictions.

We have evangelists a number of times a year at *The Gathering Place*. It's good to have the opportunity for people to raise their hand and pray 'the sinners prayer'. But all of our guys do it every time you ask! I say to these evangelists, don't walk away from here and say one hundred people gave their lives to Christ, because whenever you ask our guys, they'll do it again. (To be honest it is the same for me whenever the Gospel is presented. I need to respond too.) We have wondered how you take people with no knowledge whatsoever and bring them through? How does their journey work? Our approach so far is to stay with the Jesus story, teach continually and provide opportunities for courses (like *Alpha* and *Freedom in Christ*) and small groups. We provide a lot of support through social media and texts and we pray.

What is coming next for you?

We now have two Saturday Gathering congregations and a Thursday Gathering. We hope before long to start a third *Saturday Gathering*. We like to go to a hill top overlooking the town, and there we get a sense of the dark places where God is calling us to be present and pray. We noticed a café at the town centre bus station and we are hoping soon to start a community hub there, working with other church leaders who see the opportunity for mission. So for us the dreams are just getting bigger. We are so privileged to be able to join in all that God is doing in Calderdale. We know this new wave of God is just at its beginning so we are excited to see what else is next for us.

[1] A movement among UK churches, with a major summer festival.