

## Re-imagining church and mission in the Scottish borders

Those with a passion for mission, whether in the form of evangelism, church revitalization, church renewal or church planting, often comment that the rural scene is both different and often passed by. The failure to take the needs of the rural situation seriously is mirrored in secular as well as ecclesiastical life. From broadband to banks and housing to health, the needs of the rural scene are distinct and often unaddressed.

Like the inner city, the church in the rural situation is in difficulty, though for very different reasons. How does one engage in mission in a situation where people are asking spiritual questions, are often deeply conservative in their social attitudes and yet are disconnected from the historic or inherited modes of church?

Alistair and Ruth Birkett arrived in the border region of Scotland, very close to the border with England, for family reasons. This is where Ruth's family maintained a family home and for a period at least the family needed Ruth and Alistair's help. Alistair and Ruth had been involved in ministry for some years, but now that kind of leadership was placed on the back burner for a time. They attended the local Church of Scotland but they did not seek to engage in a leadership role.

After a time, the perceptive minister of one of the local parish churches suggested that they might consider becoming involved in a new programme that the Church of Scotland was pioneering through their 'Emerging Ministries' fund. The fund financed Alistair and Ruth for a five year period to engage in mission of an experimental kind.

The first year was to be a year of listening to the community. What was God up to in this neighbourhood? That was not an easy discipline for Alistair who was something of an activist and could easily frame what he might do in this situation. The point of the year of listening was to ask questions and particularly to gain a sense of the spiritual journeys that people were engaged in. As they built relationships with people they were able to ask the question, 'what would a spiritual journey look like for you?'

Year two saw Alistair and Ruth initiating a gathering – the Gateways Gathering. This gathering responded to the descriptors of spiritual journeys that people had shared with them. The time, the place, the frequency and the content of the gathering reflected what they had learnt in the listening process.

The experiment is now almost seven years old and a Gateways Fellowship has developed alongside the Gathering. The purpose of the Fellowship meetings is to address the spiritual questions that adults in the Gathering are asking. In practice it acts as a discipleship process.

At this stage there is an expectation and the beginnings of a plan to replicate the Gateways expression of church beyond the initial neighbourhood to other parts of the border region. It is not particularly important to talk about numbers at this stage but two points are worth noting.

First there are more people involved in the Gateways structure than are involved in the two local parish churches nearby. Second, these are mostly younger families who have not been connected with the existing churches. In other words new ground is being broken, new people contacted and notably people from a generation not connected to the existing church structures.

As you might imagine, some of those in the existing churches want to know when those who attend the Gateways gatherings are going to come to the parish church or 'proper church' as they see it. In reality that will probably not happen but still this new generation of growing believers might yet turn out to be the new church as the existing church continues to fade away. What that might look like in detail has yet to be addressed.

Curiously, despite the reluctance of many outside the church to attend the existing structures, the connection with the Church of Scotland was vital for Alistair in terms of gaining acceptance from those he was speaking to. The historic church may not be attractive but still has social credibility. In the accompanying video conversation we explore some these issues.