

The Pilgrims of Bonny Downs

In the narrative of scripture we often hear of God's people as pilgrims, a body-in-movement and, ultimately, those who are 'sent'. Of course, being sent is coherent with being a people who remain in a specific geographical location across generations. Christians are sent to those who are our neighbours as well as those at the very ends of the earth. I am not particularly comfortable with attempts to make a virtue out of 'staying' or, put slightly differently, of avoiding the temptation to move around. Jesus moved from place to place. The disciples were commissioned to travel beyond what they had known. The friars walked between villages. With these examples in view most of us avoid inferring that 'staying' is what faithful Christians *should* do.

Perhaps I am trying to justify my own errant lifestyle. I have family in the East End of London but I have moved house many times and never stayed anywhere for longer than six years. I am rooted in Christ, a citizen of his coming kingdom, an active and engaged member of his pilgrim people but in general, following what I perceive to be God's call, I have lived more like an itinerant friar than a monk practicing the virtue of *stabilitas*. But sometimes, clearly, Christ calls those who follow him to stay where they are. For these, staying is an act of humble obedience.

If the story of Bonny Downs is one of staying, then those who have stayed have done so because they believed that God was asking them to. Angie and Sally's family stayed in the 1960's because they discerned that Bonny Downs was where God wanted them to worship, serve and witness. They also stayed because Bonny Downs was where they felt they belonged. It was home; a place of shared memories and deep family identity. Angie and Sally continue to stay because it is a place in which they perceive an opportunity to build something of value for God and for others.

And we remember that staying is the story of *some* in Bonny Downs. Others have presumably moved on; called away to settle elsewhere, to put roots down in other places, to grow and share among different people. And new people have arrived. The church has grown. Bonny Downs is becoming a place for those who were not part of the original story, making it necessary, as Sally tells us, to regularly rehearse the things that God did in the early days so that new arrivals are also part of a shared story (we recall God instructing the Israelites to share the story with their children so that their identity is maintained and strengthened). And as those who stayed in Bonny Downs look back and tell the story as they understand it, we are able to see the providential hand of God across time and within their lives. Angie and Sally's family are rooted in the area and their story of staying gives meaning and shape to their lives. As the story is repeatedly retold and others are encouraged to place themselves within it, the account of staying gives meaning and shape to the lives of those who join.

Those who stayed in Bonny Downs have begun to reach further afield now. The church plant is beyond Bonny Downs. It is three miles away and is made up of 'professional' people. It feels different, although Sally tells us that it shares the sending church's commitment to being 'a missional community who worship together rather than a church that does mission'. So staying has provided a strong foundation from which to reach out and expand. Remaining in Bonny

Downs has generated the confidence, energy and resources necessary for Sally and her husband to spot a new opportunity for kingdom work a little further away. Staying has provided the relationships and trust that has allowed them to stretch out their arms to embrace another community, albeit a small one in a disused community centre. And the Spirit has breathed on what was apparently dry and insignificant and has brought fresh life and 60 people are regularly gathering to worship and serve the community. So we see that the story of staying is also a story about expansion and growth. The vision of obtaining a larger building was set out and achieved. The community centre, which had been a negative space, rife with problems, was now transformed into the base for a wide range of projects aimed at serving many others. As the work of the Bonny Downs Community Association bore fruit and expanded, the church grew to have various congregations. This is a story of spiritual and numerical growth. It is also a story of growth in trust, confidence, employment, opportunity and hope.

We see too, growth in the reach, influence and social impact of the local church. Those who choose to stay in Bonny Downs and who perceive the need for reimagining as time passes and culture and circumstances shift, draw deeply on the knowledge and trust that they have stored up. With God-given entrepreneurial spirit and deep commitment to place and people, those who stay are a blessing to those among whom they live, including those who have left other places to join them.

As the church and community association in Bonny Downs move into new waters I wonder how those who tell the story of staying in Bonny Downs might ensure that it is held lightly and with open hands and hearts so that many more people are able to discover in it meaning for themselves and a place to stay and make a home? And how might the story of five generations who stayed in Bonny Downs be told as part of the larger story of generations of wandering nomads, called out of Haran to begin the story of the people through the ages and across the globe that God calls his own?

This article is a reflection on '[A Deeply Rooted Missional Community in Bonny Downs](#)', an interview by Martin Robinson with Angie Allgood and Sally Mann