

Norwich

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ST STEPHEN'S

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When

I first started, I thought it would be about, How do we get customers in so that the café can be self-funding? But the reality was, there were already people there. There was that holding together of some quite diverse groups of people within the café. It did draw some of the people on the fringes.

BECKIE WARD

Café Manager



THE CHURCH THAT CARES FOR THE COMMUNITY THROUGH A CAFÉ

St Stephen's, Norwich

For many years, the café at St Stephen's Church was in a small, dark corner at the back of the building, bringing just a few older people into the warmth of the church. But when the church was renovated due to a chancel leak in 2012, the café was redeveloped. Suddenly, St Stephen's had the facilities to reach the community on their doorstep. But they could not have foreseen how God would use the café, as it grew into a ministry to Norwich's poorest people.

In the past eight years, the café has become the way that St Stephen's cares for the community. Establishing a payment policy based on grace, they have seen a community grow around the business, becoming a place where the church can support people through relationship. In the supportive café environment, many of those who originally sought their help have given back as volunteers. And the café now pays for and hosts a community worker, offering more structured support to those who need it. Over the years, the café's purpose has grown. It now brings in people dealing with mental ill health, homelessness, addiction and isolation. But the café still serves the original clientele of older people, holding them together with people from very different backgrounds – through grace.

A community café shaped by grace

When current vicar, Madeline Light arrived at the church in 2009, the church's small café had just expanded into weekday morning opening, serving homemade cakes to older people. She saw the potential in this "tiny, warm corner in a very dark church." But with limited space and facilities, the church did not yet have the opportunity to make the most of it. That would come soon afterwards, when building work turned a crisis into an advantage. "The chancel cracked due to a water leak on the day that I was installed," Madeline remembers, "which was just such a blessing." Remodelling the church as part of the building work, by 2012 they had heat throughout the church, a new kitchen and an expanded café space.

A recent redesign of the nearby shopping centre was already bringing high footfall past the church. Now, a new glass front and large café

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**- Clare Melia,
Community Worker**

space were attracting the attention of this Norwich community. But the same small team of church volunteers was still running the café, overwhelmed by customers. Madeline took the opportunity she had imagined a few years earlier. She employed a café manager.

New manager Beckie Ward began in 2014 with a vision of a transformed café that would run on principles of grace. She introduced a guide price on all food and drink, as part of a new café policy – ‘eat, drink and share, pay what is fair.’ They aimed to encourage customers who could pay more to donate to support those who could not. “It did feel very much like that was something that God put on my heart,” Beckie remembers. She wanted to see “what grace could look like in a café.”

There was some concern from volunteers that the policy would bankrupt the café. If customers took the guide price as an invitation to free food, why would anyone pay? Beckie and Madeline took time to help the team get used to the changing vision of the café. Their aim was to be relevant to the people of Norwich, not to make money for the church. Asking volunteers to give the policy a month, they watched as the shortfall from those who paid less was covered by donations. “It was this incredible way of watching how that was taken care of,” Beckie says.

The policy is still in place at the café today, with the guide price now a minimum charge of £1 – and grace remains at the heart of what St Stephen’s do there. But the vision for the café would continue to grow organically, as Norwich changed around the church.

The emergence of café-based community work

Everything changed at the St Stephen’s café in 2016, after a sharp rise in rough sleeping in Norwich.¹ A perception of a free meal brought many of these homeless people into the cafe. At the same time,

customers from all backgrounds were drawn in by a café culture that valued everyone. At first, the café was able to hold together these very different kinds of people, as older people and homeless people ate together. "This doesn't happen anywhere else," Beckie remembers thinking. "And we established a bit of a culture within the café of how people would respond to one another."

But, from a small café with a volunteer staff, it was a challenge for the church to support the influx of homeless people and those struggling with addiction. This group was beginning to feel threatening to other café users. "Instead of them coming in and adopting our culture, they brought their culture with them," Beckie says. "It changed the dynamic." The profitability of the café was not the issue with the guide price policy. Local people valued the church's work with homeless people, donating more than enough to cover others' food. The challenge was to create a space that was safe for everyone who came to them through the payment policy, whether they were older, homeless, or dealing with any of the other needs that brought people through the café doors. The team trusted God for answers and kept working to build a culture that held all these people together.

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**- Clare Melia,
Community Worker**

Employing Clare Melia as a community worker made all the difference. Clare was working in an administration role at the church, with a background in a local homeless charity. She began to help on an ad-hoc basis in the café. As she built relationships in the café community, more café users shared their needs with Clare, from housing to debt. Clare knew where to signpost people for help. "The obvious needs would be presented daily," she remembers, "but there were all these hidden needs as well. But they only became apparent when you built relationships with people that were just regular customers of the café."

Madeline noticed not just the impact of Clare's intervention, but her connection with those in the café. "She had a heart for the homeless,"

Madeline remembers. The church created a paid post for her. With Clare taking on the role of a professional friend in the café, they were able to rethink their policy. The guide price of £1 remained, but anyone who could not pay would need to talk to Clare. She could then identify their needs, signpost to services, and support people to move beyond their current situations. The staff began to see the impact. Gradually, they found that more people who would once have asked for free food were willing to spend £1 on a drink so that they could be part of the café community.

Some of the real miracles that God has performed in people's lives [have] been a six or seven year journey, and there's been an unravelling.... We've committed for the long haul.

- **Clare Melia**

Presence in practice

Today, St Stephen's works in the cracks in the community, with those seen by local statutory services as difficult to reach. Through relationship, with people with complex mental health histories or addiction problems, the café team can build trust. The church has seen practical change in these people's circumstances.

And their ministry goes beyond the paid café team. A team of up to 40 volunteers is at the heart of the café, made up of people from church and community who have seen what the St Stephen's café is doing and want to be part of the work. Befrienders help the team to form relationships with more of the people who use the café. More informally, many want to come and be with those in need. Clare remembers a retired nurse who would sit at the community table, just to listen. With the café community thriving and supported, Clare and her team are often freed up to sit in a corner with a laptop and help people with benefit or debt issues.

Many of the volunteers are people who originally came to the café for support. Volunteering gives them a chance to give back to the café, in the safety of a community where they are valued. As staff invest time and support in the volunteering team, they see people's confidence grow. "It's a step to recovery," Clare says. For one rough sleeper with addiction issues who joined the team, "it was the first job he had

ever had in his life" – he thought of the unpaid work as his job. "In terms of his wellbeing and giving him something to do, that was quite remarkable." Isolated people benefit from volunteering, too, from retired to unemployed people. Relationship-based volunteering works for both café and the volunteers. The volunteers can access training and meaningful work experience. For the café, costs stay low, allowing them to use the profits to support the church's ministry.

The café team have seen lives change through community. For one man, experiencing complex mental ill health, the whole church came alongside him in relationship. Gradually, he began volunteering, and became a regular attender at St Stephen's services. He now sits on the PCC. "He's a totally different person," Madeline says. "He's moved on from being somebody in the cafe, but he was cared for by a whole community of people." No one person can support people in that kind of need, Madeline thinks. But a community like the St Stephen's café can make a difference.

The café is used by other groups offering support, who see it as a mutually safe space. Mental health support groups and asylum seekers' collectives meet there. Community Chaplaincy Norwich, which serves local prisons, has a corner of the café, and the local food bank uses the space. These informal partnerships have grown out of the café ethos, and they contribute to the café ministry.

You can come and sit and look peculiar and nobody takes any notice.

- **Madeline Light, Vicar**

The first mission of the café is still to hold different people together. This works through both simple presence – being with people – and more coordinated support – working for people.² As St Stephen's have gradually found the balance between the two, the vision for a café run through grace has been realised. Today, the café is a safe community that values everyone, where those with very different needs can share in meaningful relationships.



The Archbishop of Canterbury worked as a volunteer for a day at the St Stephen's café in 2018. Among other café regulars, he met the first person to come out of homelessness with church support.

Funding the café and community worker

In 2019, the café took £100,000. After paying salaries and bills, it gave a tithe of £10,000 back to the church. Key to the café's profitability is their large church building, allowing them to seat 50 at a time. This has helped them to stay open for reduced hours during the pandemic. But they must balance this against their small kitchen, limiting the numbers they can serve. The higher their profits, the more pressure there is on the café team – who are still mainly volunteers.

People really like supporting the work. It's the foundation of how it works. People know that when they eat in the cafe, they're serving the wider community with that money that they're giving.

- Clare Melia

But the church is no longer taking a share of the café's profit. Acknowledging that the café is the reason they have been able to reach out to the community, they are prioritising funding of the community work during the pandemic. They will review this in the future, but Madeline thinks this approach may work for the long term. She hopes it will allow the café to cover its costs, while the team will no longer need to push themselves beyond capacity.

At the heart of the café's success is the 'eat, drink and share, pay what is fair' policy. Local people are keen to support the social business model. Low prices and simple, homemade food bring people in. But when they see what the church does with the café's income, customers often want to pay more. Initial fears that the café would not be able to stay self-supporting have proved far from the reality.

Challenges

There has been a steep learning curve for the church, in this ministry of being with and working with the people of Norwich. "We've thrown ourselves at it, on the understanding that God will be gracious to us," Madeline reflects. "We've learned from our mistakes the hard way, but looked out for each other." Hundreds of "grace responses" to opportunities have made the ministry possible, as it grows out of the church's ethical principles.

Holding people together has been the café's biggest challenge. At times this has not been easy, but they have trusted God to guide them towards a café culture that works. "As different people came to us," Beckie remembers, "it highlighted what we needed to learn and grow, in order to carry on meeting some of those needs." Through the café's principles of grace, they have gradually built a culture that values everyone, made possible through the structured support of the community worker. Today, the church lives out the vision of a ministry that brings people together.

Slow cultural change has been a challenge for some of those that the café works with, over the years. Volunteers at St Stephen's were initially unsure about the employment of a café manager and the pricing policy. A new vision may take work to bring people on board. At St Stephen's, they gave people time to adjust to a new café role and culture. Volunteer management now helps their large volunteer team to work well together. They support the volunteers as a team, recognising their vital contribution to the café community.

PRINCIPLES OF RUNNING A CAFÉ THAT HOSTS AND FUNDS COMMUNITY WORK

based on experiences at St Stephen's, Norwich

At St Stephen's, they have **seen what grace can look like in a church café**. Through a guide price policy, they encourage customers to support each other, as one community. That principle of grace has transformed the café into ministry. It has helped them to create a space where change happens in relationship. As friendships and trust are built through the café community, they can do more.

They do not assume what people need, but respond to the needs that God brings them. The St Stephen's café has grown organically into the ministry it supports today. "If there's a need that comes and you have the resources to meet it, then you can work your model around that," Clare says. "But sometimes, if we assume what the needs are, we get it wrong." For Clare, this is about making space for God to shape the Kingdom around them.

They have responded to opportunities, developing the cafe strategically and prayerfully. Being with people is vital to what they do – but to build a community, the café had to be a safe, supportive environment for all the people who used it. Through thoughtful appointments of staff and changes of policy, they have been able to support needs that were beyond the capacity of their volunteers.

They see people as assets, not deficits. "Our philosophy has been to let people do what's on their heart," Madeline says. They supported Beckie's vision for a payment policy which could have been unsustainable, and all their work has been built on its success. They noticed community worker Clare's heart for their growing café community, and employed her to offer the support people needed. Through a volunteer team, they give meaningful work opportunities to people who use the café. Developing their own people has allowed the church to reach more of the local community.

The local community values what they do. This is central to their profitability as a café. It has given the church opportunities to work in partnership, as the Norwich community have come to trust the church and their approach. Their work is changing local attitudes towards church and Christianity.

Last Word

The ministry at St Stephen's is made possible through the café. Here, as commerce is guided by grace, it has grown into compassionate outreach. The central Norwich location may be what brings people into the café, but it is the community that holds people together. At St Stephen's, change happens in relationship.

"People have come to faith and are now pivotal members of the congregation. They came because they were aware of their needs. Being with and working for took many different forms, walking the streets to give a purpose to pacing, endless phone calls, times of prayer and much more. Now they are firmly embedded and are an essential part of our community. Now we are disciples who stand alongside each other."

- **Madeline Light**

⁷This rise in homelessness was partly a result of chaotic local prison discharge arrangements. St Martin's Housing, Official figures on rough sleeping in Norwich released (2018). Available online: <https://stmartinshousing.org.uk/official-figures-rough-sleeping-norwich-released/> [Accessed 5/1/2021].

⁸A Nazareth Manifesto

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