



Pioneer Ministry in a New Community: A case study on the first year of ministry in Cranbrook, Exeter

By the staff of the Strategy and Development Unit in conversation with the Revd Mark Gilborson, Minister for Cranbrook, Exeter

Introduction

The new community of Cranbrook, on the outskirts of Exeter, opened to its first residents last year. In this first phase of development, 1,100 houses are being built. Currently around 250 are occupied with about 7 or 8 new occupancies every week. 40% of the residences are social housing. The population is predominantly young and fewer than 2% identify themselves as Christian. In the long term Cranbrook is likely to contain upwards of 6,000 dwellings.

Pioneer ministry in Cranbrook has been made possible by the vision and commitment of Churches Together in Devon which, at a very early stage in the planning process, began to work towards ensuring that there would be Christian ministry and worship in the new community. Churches Together in Devon formed a planning group which, assisted by Ed Moffatt at the diocese of Exeter, started liaising with the local authority and with the developers in 2002, some 10 years before the first house was eventually built.

This early engagement bore fruit when it was agreed that the developers would provide a house for a minister and a 0.2 hectare site for a place of worship (the place of worship to be funded by the local church and built at some point in the medium to long-term future), under a section 106 agreement. Exeter diocese also led discussions with the Local Education Authority which culminated in the agreement that the first primary school on the new development would be a voluntary-aided Church of England school. A good working relationship with the developers and the Local Authority, based on a constructive, professional and open-minded approach from all parties and a long term commitment to the social sustainability of the new community, was an essential pre-cursor to the work that is now taking place on the ground.

The Revd Mark Gilborson, a Methodist minister, was appointed as ecumenical minister for Cranbrook last year. His 5-year post is being funded by the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church.

Creating Community

When Mark Gilborson first began his ministry in Cranbrook, he researched pioneer ministry on other new housing developments. He found that the earlier a pioneer minister began ministering, the greater the chance of success. He began his ministry at the same time as the very first residents were moving in to Cranbrook in the summer of 2012. He

moved to live on the development in December of that year when the house was completed.

Mark's approach was to create community because there was a need for that, although he notes that there is a theological precedent - God essentially lives in community – as well as biblical examples: Jesus formed community around him and the initial Christian gatherings were community, and Luke 4:18 contains an imperative to serve. Mark visits every new resident and presents them with a goody bag comprising a packet of biscuits (donated by the local Co-op), lists of useful phone numbers and community activities, a leaflet about his ministry and a fridge magnet with his contact details (on the premise that no-one ever throws away a fridge magnet). Mark says that the fact that he lives on the development helps him to form a bond with new residents and creates a context for his visit. With only one exception, everyone has responded very positively to his visits. He and his wife have started a running club which has around 15 members and is supported by 'Run England'. Mark has also created a Facebook page – 'Belonging to Cranbrook' – which now has around 430 friends and which has had thousands of posts.

Conversations about faith have arisen from this service to the community. However, Mark emphasises that: *'... the purpose I offer myself in some way or the reason the church washed their car is not so that we can tell them the Gospel but because it is intrinsically the right thing to do. Of course, I am glad of the conversations but they are a natural development from service, not the reason for the service.'*

Ministry at the school

The head teacher of the new Church of England primary school in Cranbrook - which is currently the only community facility open on the development - is very supportive of Mark's ministry and they work closely together. Mark goes into school daily and undertakes a range of activities, including leading collective worship, helping with RE and with reading, and running a ukulele club, as well as being a Governor.

Mark runs a coffee morning at the school to give parents the opportunity to socialise. So far, this has been less successful than he had hoped, currently attracting around 12 people each week. By contrast, the toddlers group, which Mark runs and which also meets at the school, is attended by around 40-60 adults and children. Mark has attracted a significant amount of support for the toddlers group from business: local branches of Mothercare and the Early Learning Centre have donated toys and equipment; B&Q donated fencing for a partitioned area in which to serve hot drinks; the Co-op donates tea and coffee - and the milk is given by the local milkman. Parents also donate toys and books. The result is that the toddlers group's running costs are low and Mark only has to charge parents a pound to attend. The next challenge will be to find alternative premises because the school will soon need to use the space in which the group meets.

Cornerstone church

In tandem with building up community, Mark began a house church. When it started meeting, in January this year, it comprised Mark's family and one other family, meeting at Mark's house every Monday evening. The house church did not draw in any new members for several months and Mark says that he found that situation very worrying. Then, in the

early summer, new people began to join. Cornerstone church now has 20 members. Half of them are unchurched or dechurched and they have come to Cornerstone through a variety of routes, including through Mark's pastoral care to the sick and bereaved, the Facebook page and the running club.



Photo courtesy of Terry Ife, Cranbrook Herald/Archant

Cornerstone church has recently started meeting at the school fortnightly for Sunday worship (continuing to meet at Mark's house in the weeks when it is not at the school). Mark invited every resident of Cranbrook to the first Sunday service on 29 September - Harvest Festival. With each invitation he enclosed four sunflower petals and asked residents to write their names on the petals and bring them to the service. People were welcomed with coffee and doughnuts and the service included traditional Harvest hymns, soup-making with the Harvest produce – and creating giant sunflowers. Just under 70 people attended, of whom over half had no previous experience of church.

CORNERSTONE
CHURCH CRANBROOK

Harvest Festival 29th Sept

WHEN? 29th September Starts 10.30
WHERE? St Martin's Primary School
WHAT? We will sing some traditional harvest hymns, share in a harvest story, make soup, bread and sunflowers!
WHO? Everyone is welcome!

On the day please bring some vegetables so we can make home made soup. Also if you bake or have a bread maker, please bring a home made loaf of bread!

Accompanying this are some 'petals' (in the envelope) please write the name of each member of your family on one side and a hope/aspiration/prayer for your future in Cranbrook on the other. Bring them on Sunday 29th (or give them to me) and we will turn them into sunflowers on the day!

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Cranbrook
Anglican Diocese of Exeter

The ethos of Cornerstone church is 'Blessed to be a blessing'. This will be put into practical action every month when Cornerstone church will give sacrificial service to the Cranbrook community, for example by litter picking, serving coffee, washing cars as one of their Sunday morning acts of worship.

Mark has received 9 requests for baptism for children and babies. These have come from school, from the toddlers group, from Facebook, from Mark's meeting people through knocking on doors, and simply, as Mark says, from '*being there and having conversations*'.

Leadership and Finance

Most of the ministry described above has been carried out by Mark, supported by his wife. However, he is gradually drawing in other helpers for the community work. He is also involving another family to help lead Cornerstone church.

Mark describes the need to step back in some circumstances. For example, he had planned to set up and lead a community forum but a resident volunteered to take this on and Mark decided to back away, partly because he was concerned about the possibility that people would think he was '*taking over*' and partly because he already has a high profile in the community. He is now a member of the forum but is not leading it and says: '*That is not as I originally envisaged it but is probably better*'.

Finance can be a challenge in that, although Mark's stipend and house are paid for as described above, there is no core financial provision for project work. Mark is having to raise money from outside organisations and from funding bids to the sponsoring partner denominations to meet the costs of, for example, moving Cornerstone church to the school.

Advice for others

Mark's advice for pioneer ministers on new housing developments who are just starting their ministry is:

- Have an ethos – something which grounds you and that you can celebrate.
- Knock on doors and be visible (buying a packet of biscuits and a fridge magnet with your contact details for every resident doesn't cost much and is a good investment).
- Have an inclusive theology - 'God loves you as much as He loves me'.

Mark's research indicates that there is some correlation between starting ministry early on in the life of a new development and the effectiveness of that ministry.

Conclusion

This case study has described how Mark Gilborson has approached the first year of his pioneer ministry in the new housing development of Cranbrook.

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