



As I sit to write this I find myself in awe of all that I've seen and experienced. If you want a one sentence summary of what I've learned, it's this; Every church is seeking to serve their communities through the Holy Spirit and they have a plan.

Now that's in the open allow me to let fill you in on the details.

It all started at the Mission and Care Group meeting hosted at Beeston Hill. During this meeting we talked about how we can support, pray and meet each other's needs. During this meeting there was an emphasis on visiting each other and learning about each church's missional context.

As I drove home on what was a glorious early summer evening I felt the call to organise and participate in a pilgrimage to all the churches within the Mission and Care Group, 12 in all.

A few emails and some careful planning and I came up with the final plan. 3 walks over three days. The first in South Leeds, the second in North Leeds and the third in East Leeds taking as few main roads as I could. Whilst at the churches I would pray for them and their situations along with looking around and learning about them.

It is worth noting at this point that I wasn't and am not an expert in the many churches within the URC in Leeds, their memberships or their histories beyond my church, Wigton Moor, so this was going to be a brief and intensive learning experience.

My plan was greeted with enthusiasm and I was assured of both prayer and company, both on the walks and at the churches. It felt good!

So on August 2<sup>nd</sup> I was given a lift to St Mary's in the Woods in Morley for my first walk. I didn't know what to expect but I was met by a couple of their members plus my walking partner for the day Jenny Poulter. We heard of their plan to renovate the building to create flats for people who need extra care whilst keeping their worship and prayer space. It is an ambitious plan and one that the membership feel will help bring the love of Christ into the local community. We heard of their history, long and varied as it is and we prayed.

The next sentence is one you will read a lot; I really like the building. I also really like ambitious plans. For me they are the ones that work because of the level of commitment needed to achieve it. We left, with a gift of a palm cross and some Murray Mints (Thanks Heather!) for our next destination.

The church in Cottingley is a small church in both congregation and physical size. I'd never been before so it was a pleasure to have a look around. Cottingley estate pretty much has one road in and out of it and this road is viewable from the vestry window. The church sits in the shadow of the big, pinkish tower blocks you can see from the M621 motorway and the area clearly has its issues. These issues are clearly at the forefront of the minds of the membership (a mix of URC, Anglican and Methodist) and we prayed for numerical and spiritual growth within the church and its community.

At this point Jenny and I were joined by Terri Raddings from Beeston Hill United Free Church, our next destination.

As we walked through parts of South Leeds I'd never seen before Terri told us many stories of the events and happenings in the area. I chose to listen rather than add much as the point of the walks was to learn. I learned about the multicultural population and the ways they are making the area better.

We received a very warm welcome at Beeston Hill.

Their current Methodist minister, Godfrey Nicholson, was the minister at the Methodist church I first attended when I was four. He conducted both of my parents' funerals. He taught my sister the cello whilst me and my three brothers sat on the stairs listening. I am confident that without his ministry to my family over the years you would not be reading this article from me. Thank you Godfrey.

Beeston Hill are in a period of great growth. You may have read or heard about their charity shop, which has been nationally accredited. More news of which can be found on the Synod Website, or through a google search. They even have a video about it on YouTube! We were shown around and told in great depth about their mission, which is bringing a lot of new Christians and families into the family of the church. We heard about the triple baptism due to happen the first week of September and many other positive reports of how they are reaching their local community. We prayed, giving thanks to God for all these blessings. A quick photo and off we four went, our party was joined by Pauline from Beeston Hill, to the URC in South Leeds.

Of the many things I learned and had confirmed one physical nature stands out. Leeds is hilly. The walk from Cotingley to Belle Isle was a gradual climb. Our final leg was slowed further by big spots of rain and I was feeling the effects of too many cups of tea.

When we got to South Leeds the doors opened, beckoning us in but no one was around. A few minutes later we were joined by Anne Lewitt, the minister who shared their missional priorities. These include ministry to the local dementia home and their partnerships with the local community group. We were also told of the practical issues they face with such a modern building.

It is a beautiful building with high, light spaces and all the mod cons. However, to change a light bulb a cherry picker crane has to be hired and heating such a high space costs a lot of money. Add to that the front doors cannot be held open without leaning on a button which makes welcoming large groups of children or funerals difficult. Plus, once you are in the worship space the front door is out of view, raising security concerns. I encourage you all to visit the church as it is a beautiful space. We prayed for the mission and ministry of the church and then prepared for the second walk.



Over the weekend before the second and third walks I found myself struck down with a bug. On the Sunday morning I went to church feeling a little weird but ok in myself; on the drive home I realised I shouldn't be driving. When I got in I went to bed and stayed there, getting up only to watch Robot Wars and have a piece of toast. On the Monday I was due to have my son for the day but he had to be shipped off to my mother in law's for the day as I was no better. After more

sleep and a prayer, I ventured out the house to find myself struggling to walk the short distance up the hill to collect my son.

That night I prayed for the churches I was due to visit and for the mission and care group. The following morning – the morning of the second walk – I felt fitter than I had in weeks. A prayer answered!



We started our second walk at Wigton Moor, my home church. At Wigton Moor we have been following the 'Leading Your Church into Growth' programme (LYCiG) which has seen several key mission priorities identified. I shared our plans with the group and we prayed. There were nine of us there for the prayer and seven of us taking the journey towards St Andrews in Roundhay. They were myself, Jenny, Geoff Ellis from Headingley St Columba; Moira Gallagher and Sheena Kelly from Wigton Moor and Christine and her husband from Stainbeck and Moortown Baptist Church (technically making this an ecumenical event!).

We took the relatively short walk to Roundhay where we were greeted with warmth and a cup of tea by Sheila and the members of the church. We heard how even for a big church like St Andrews getting people to commit is a challenge, especially now they are in vacancy. It is a big church with a large congregation which suffers from the same challenges nearly all the churches in the Mission and Care Group face; aging congregations and elderships, an unwillingness to truly get involved in the running of the building. It could be argued that for a big church like St Andrews these problems and issues are magnified. If Wigton Moor's organ breaks down it would cost the church a relatively small amount of money compared to St Andrew's for example.

We prayed in their beautiful garden for their future and their search for a minister. We also prayed for their planned renovations at the car park end of the building.

We were joined for part of the next walk by Brian and Avril, the secretaries from Stainbeck as we prepared to walk to Trinity United, Harehills. Geoff led the way and we passed some very big homes and leafy suburbs before stopping for a comfort break at Tesco. During this stop a couple of our number got into a little bother with the security guard who suspiciously checked bags. I'll let you guess who it was...

When we reached Trinity United Church in Harehills no one was home. The group however shared any knowledge they had of the church and we prayed for them, their congregation, their community and their part of the URC. The sun was starting to beat down and we worked out our route to Christ Church, Halton. Pretty much all uphill in what was approaching midday sun.

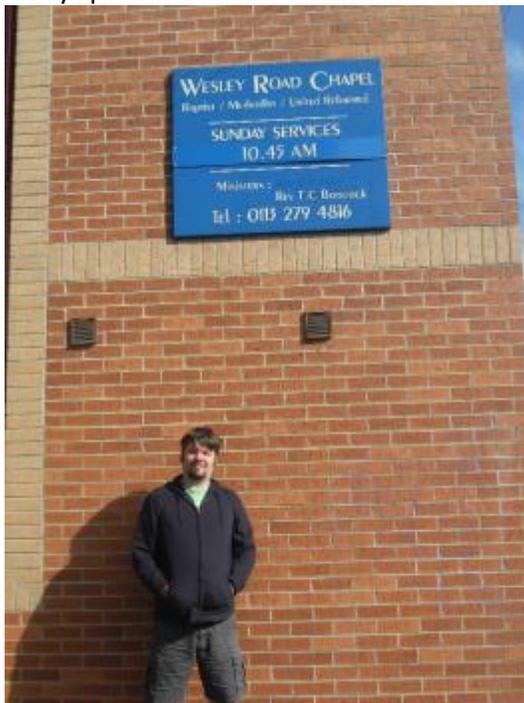
Before we'd left Wigton Moor Geoff had informed us of a 7% chance of rain. If at any point in any interaction with Geoff he tells you there's even the slightest chance of something happening, believe him!

We sheltered from the heavy shower before climbing up the hill to Halton. It's amazing how quickly the scenery changes whilst walking through neighbouring areas of Leeds and the biggest indicator can be the gardens. We walked past homes with perfectly manicured lawns and borders past terraces with tiny concrete back yards through to areas with scruffier, family spaces used for play. It's very eye-opening.

We arrived at Christ Church bang on the predicted time, welcomed with a lovely lunch. We prayed for the mission of the church, their messy church and their plans to go on prayer walks and we sat down for a bite to eat, which was welcome!



I encourage you all to try and take a tour of any church you are visiting. We did this at most of the churches and you'll get an idea of what kind of church and congregation it is. It's very easy when attending meetings to see just the meeting room, the space the coffee is being served from and maybe the loos. Go and check the spaces out, you'll be amazed at the sense of the Holy Spirit in them!



The following day was the final walk. This route would start in Armley and take us to Stainbeck via West Park and Headingley. The very last part of the pilgrimage in my own mind was the short walk from Stainbeck back to my house. I arrived at Wesley Road in Armley to meet Jenny again but alas no one else. Whether or not I didn't communicate my intentions very well or a message wasn't passed through we'll never know, but Jenny shared the information she had on the church and we prayed.

I have appreciated the time Jenny and I spent in each other's company. I've not known Jenny long, we are both on the vacancy group for the Mission and Care Mission and Ministry enabler post which has the 50% stipend alongside 50% at Headingley St Columba and we've seen each other at Mission and Care group meetings but I feel we got to know each other very well on these walks. I would like to thank Jenny for her kindness and friendship on the pilgrimages along with the practical help she gave with lifts and things.

We walked up the very steep Spen Lane to West Park. We were met there by their minister Anne Lewitt, five of the members and the church dog. They showed us around the building and gave us a potted history of the church. The worship area at West Park is stunning as are the grounds. I was literally taken aback. It's a big, open chapel space with light and air flooding in. The gardens are well kept too with a space that includes a memorial tree for ashes to be spread. As a church they are praying for growth as, like so many others, they are a small, aging congregation and membership.

They also told us of how they have little scope for doing 'church things' because of lettings. It is a balancing act for many churches between spiritual outreach and paying the bills.



After praying and being prayed for we walked over the fields with Anne towards Headingley St Columba. It was on this part of a journey that a seed of an idea was sown. There is a direct bus from Halton to West Park, virtually door to door between the churches. Why not try to arrange a bus pilgrimage? More on that another time.



We were quite late to Headingley. Aleck had driven out looking for us as they were worried. Whilst we waited for him to return we took a tour of the building and learned about their history. The same architect designed both Headingley St Columba and Wigton Moor and it shows. The church has just celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since coming together from two congregation on to the site they are on now.

We were told of their worship style and shown their lovely, grand worship space. We prayed for their mission within Headingley, remembering both the students and locals before heading off towards Stainbeck.

We took a detour via the Meanwood Olympics, an annual event organised by InterAct, a group Stainbeck church are heavily involved in, where we met Angela Hughes, Stainbeck's minister. We walked through the Beckhill estate which is an area of great deprivation. Angela told us of the work the church has been doing through Leeds Citizens to help bring the community together and get them actively involved with campaigning and lobbying the council and local decision makers into improving the area.

When we got to Stainbeck we had a cheese toastie, a cup of tea and a prayer. We were fortunate in seeing Peter Clarkson, Wigton Moor's (and by extension my) minister who joined us for prayer.



Jenny and I then took the short walk to my house before I gave her a lift home. (The garden is finished Jenny and looks brilliant!)

I'm glad that I took these pilgrimages and I thank all of you for your involvement. I have seen 12 churches, each with their own individual place in the Kingdom of God on Earth. I have heard worries, concerns and trials at each of them but also heard great joy at each of them. I have seen the Holy Spirit moving within all the churches within the Leeds Mission and Care group.

Most of the churches are worried for numbers, but I see no need to get bogged down, the church was started with just 11 disciples after all. I've heard the phrase 'we'd like some younger people' but God wasn't too concerned with Abraham or Sarah's ages when he called upon them.

Most of all I have heard, seen and witnessed the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit at work within all these churches in so many unique and brilliant ways and I am convinced that this is down to the churches searching for the will of God and following where it is leading.

'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things will be given unto you'.

What next? I hope that many of you will be able to join me on September 18<sup>th</sup> at the URC in South Leeds for a joint celebration of all the churches I have visited. It starts at 2.00pm and will be a great opportunity to share your good news within your church. I hope that through Mission and Care Group we are able to support and love each other through sharing, prayer and action. I encourage and ask you all to pray for the Mission Enabler post within the M&C group too.

Once again I thank you all for your support, prayer, company and encouragement during the pilgrimages. I continue to pray for you all and will do hereon. I ask for your prayer requests as they come up.

I look forward to doing more with you in the future.

Love in Christ,

Alex.