

Organising for Growth

Growing inner-city churches in number, depth and impact

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IN MEMORY OF
FR MARCO LOPES
1973 - 2023

Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone.

Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet.

Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium

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FOREWORD

‘The harvest is more plentiful than we imagine, perhaps because we need to look at things with different eyes’.

This report shows the profound effect of doing just that – of looking at things with different eyes. It tells the story of a growing number of churches which have harnessed the power of community organising to grow in number and depth, as well as social impact.

But this is no contrived, technique-based approach. This is authentic, prayerful, intentional ministry in some of the most economically deprived communities in the country, and it’s resulting in growth.

More growth than was anticipated.

Growth which is ‘fragile and plentiful’ and much like that which is seen in the tree which sprouts forth from the parabolic mustard seed, because ‘what God grows, grows close to the ground and can look chaotic and messy’.

And it’s an approach which speaks into the sort of estates-based parish contexts with which we’ll be familiar but, in peeling back decades of deficit-based narratives about such places, gives us a new vision and new frames of reference.

The approach to welcome is to be ‘porous not predatory’ and there is the notion of engagement via a third space, found between Church and the wider community; a fringe of those within our orbit. In Holy Trinity, east London in my own episcopal patch, that fringe is a physical third space – a garden

intentionally and beautifully tended, and open to all those on the estate which surrounds it. A garden where once darkness visited, but where the light has now returned.

This is the story of kingdom building from the edges - vocations discerned and nurtured, discipleship deepened and extended beyond that which is safe and familiar; intentional journeys undertaken without any anxious rush to the destination.

This report captures, across churches from different contexts and traditions, a vision for a radical change of culture, for the raising up of a generation of local leaders and for a new way of being Church.

And, finally, this report is dedicated with love to the sacred memory of Father Marco Lopes, whose life and priesthood signalled the presence of God within us and among us, and whose legacy lives on.

I am grateful to have been a small part of this work and pray God continues to breathe kingdom transformation through it.

The Rt Rev’d Lynne Cullens
Bishop of Barking Church of England
Lead Bishop for Estates Evangelism
Chair of the National Estate Churches Network



REMEMBERING FR MARCO LOPES

This report is dedicated to the memory of Fr Marco Lopes, an extraordinary priest, pastor and evangelist. Marco was Vicar of St Martin’s Plaistow and leader of the Luso-Hispanic Mission in Newham, and he died suddenly and unexpectedly at his beloved church in January 2023.

Those of us who knew Marco greatly miss his energy, vision and compassion, all of which flowed from the depth of his faith in Jesus Christ.

In 2022, on the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, Marco wrote that

St Martin’s church is full of saints not unlike Joseph. Ordinary citizens, with quite extraordinary stories of challenge, triumph over evil, many quietly working against the odds set against them. Like Joseph they are trying to provide for their

family and making sure their children can have a future much better than their present marked by toil, low pay and ignorance of which doors to knock on to better their lives.

Like Jesus’ foster parent, these are people in the background, unacknowledged. It is our hope, indeed our new parish vision to be “a place of welcome, freedom, acceptance and warmth, where you come as you are but leave fuller and more alive in God with a sense of having found a family.

The response of these leaders to his death - in grief, in mutual support, and in St Martin’s continuing witness - is a tribute to his role as a channel of God’s grace.

We give thanks that Marco now sees in full what he helped so many to glimpse here on earth.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report tells the story of a growing number of churches which have harnessed the power of community organising to grow in number and spiritual depth as well as social impact.

Here are the key themes emerging from our research:

A PLENTIFUL HARVEST

- Many of the churches that have grown had been at risk of cuts or even closure. Community organising did not offer an additional set of initiatives for an overstretched church to undertake

- but rather a set of practices to help churches discover the gifts God had already given them.

- This approach has revealed that the harvest is more plentiful than we realise (Matthew 9.35), as it has identified and developed leaders whose energy and gifts had previously been untapped
- The journey of renewal is also enabling many of these churches to become more financially sustainable. An intentional, missional and relational approach to how churches use their assets can yield financial resilience and resources for mission.

PRAYER, PEOPLE AND PATIENCE

- Prayer has been central to this process of renewal - not just as an "add on" but as an essential part of the Organising Cycle, which involves listening, lamenting and discerning before acting.
- Organising is only effective when it is patient and focused on the development of people. It is then that it can help a church build capacity, rather than placing new burdens on existing leaders.



LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- The community organising method is only effective if it involves a focus on culture change, not just on activities
- Almost every church that has grown significantly has taken part in a year-long Learning Community. Their teaching and mentoring, and the building of a community of practice, has been vital to ensuring this culture change happens



INVESTMENT IN LAY LEADERSHIP

- CTC's Wagstaff Programme has been key to the development of lay leaders who in turn have been at the heart of the actions that have grown the churches.

The power of this programme lies in (a) its rootedness in prayer and Biblical reflection; (b) setting the process of vocational discernment for individual leaders in the context of the wider parish and its mission; (c) the interweaving of teaching and action, and (d) the building of a community of lay leaders across churches.

INTENTIONALITY WITHOUT ANXIETY

- This work requires an intentionality about both leadership development and numerical growth - but this must be done without anxiety or hurry
- The "Flow of Discipleship" diagram (see page 13) has been a simple but powerful tool, encouraging churches to focus on the areas of growth which are outside their comfort zones
- This has involved thinking about how to become more "porous", so that those who want to explore faith and deepen engagement find a safe, welcoming and supportive environment for that journey.

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS

- Both this report and CTC's previous research challenge two persistent myths about church growth:
 - Churches do not need to be in a particular tradition in order to grow. The method has proved fruitful in congregations of a wide range of sizes and traditions.
 - Social action need not compete with numerical growth. These go together, so long as internal and external action is used to develop new leaders, not adding to the workload of existing ones.



INTRODUCTION

This report presents the stories of 15 churches, most of them in east London. They are surprising stories – perhaps most surprising to the churches themselves. For many of the churches featured in this report had internalised the wider narrative that they were doomed to decline and ultimately to close, or that the only way to grow was to abandon their own spirituality and tradition. Yet, each of them has harnessed the potential of community organising to grow in number, depth and social impact.

Community organising is best known as a campaigning movement; starting Britain's Living Wage movement, winning a cap on interest rates, and working for climate justice. Why would joining a community organising alliance lead to church growth? If all a church does is send some of its keenest lay leaders into these campaigns, surely this would deplete its capacity for other aspects of mission. What is it about these churches that has enabled organising to make an impact within as well as beyond the church?

To answer these questions we must remember that authentic community organising has never just been about the campaigns. Since its inception in 1930s Chicago, its primary focus has been on developing the agency and leadership of the people the wider culture marginalises and oppresses. Community organising recalls the Church to a central Gospel truth: that these are the very people through whom God chooses to work in every generation (cf. Matthew 11.25, 1 Corinthians 1.26-29, James 2.1-7).⁹

“Realities,” writes Pope Francis, “are greater than ideas.” Debates about the relationship between community organising, social justice and church growth are rarely fruitful when they remain abstract. We can only demonstrate the fruit of slow, patient, prayerful community organising by telling the stories of people, congregations and neighbourhoods which are trying to put it into practice.

⁹ For an extended discussion of this theme, see Angus Ritchie, “Beyond Help: *diakonia* in the Contemporary Church” in *Political Theology*, 20(8), 631–642 and *People of Power: How Community Organising recalls the Church to the vision of the Gospel* (Centre for Theology and Community, 2019)

What is Community Organising?

Broad-based Community Organising (which we will shorten to “community organising”) works through alliances of parishes, congregations and other local institutions to discern and act together for the common good.

CTC grows out of the work of churches deeply involved in their local chapter of Citizens UK, the national community organising alliance.¹⁰ We believe the practices of organising express some of the central commitments of our Christian faith

- that relationship is at the heart of God
- that power is good and God-given, even though it can be abused and distorted
- that in Christ, God engages with the world as it is, not just as it should be
- that faithful engagement with the world inevitably involves tension and struggle.

¹⁰ See www.citizensuk.org for further information. Note that Citizens UK is the umbrella for smaller local Citizens alliances referred to in this report e.g. Hackney Citizens, Waltham Forest Citizens.

Broad-based Community Organising involves the following key practices:

1. Beginning with relationships:

Community organising begins with relationships. Face-to-face meeting and intentional listening come before action. The one-to-one relational meeting is foundational to all community organising. The one-to-one is a very intentional way of having a conversation in which two people, who may not know each other very well, identify common ground, shared interests and experiences. Through the process they learn about one another's core motivations. The one-to-one conversation is a key tool for listening, but also for identifying the gifts and leadership potential of people. Crucially, it is a two-way conversation in which both participants share mutually, distinct from pastoral care or an interview.

2. Acting on people's interests:

In building relationships, community organising identifies the actual interests and passions of our neighbours – and works on the issues where these interests and passions are shared. The term “self-interest” is used in community organising to describe what matters to and motivates people to act.

3. Positive about power:

Community organising seeks to build relational power; the ability of citizens to act with others to change their neighbourhoods for the better. Power can be abused, but Christians involved in organising understand it to be a God-given capacity which we should develop and use together. The recognition of power's influence also involves reflecting on how power is distributed within institutions.

4. Building around local institutions:

Instead of mobilising individuals to campaign together on single issues, organising uses those issues to build a long-term alliance between the religious and civic institutions within a neighbourhood. There is a focus of campaigning on “winnable issues” so that people unused to any kind of successful action in public life (let alone action with neighbours of other faiths and cultures) begin to have confidence that common action is worthwhile.

5. Financially independent:

Organising builds local alliances (e.g. Hackney Citizens, Waltham Forest Citizens) which are financially independent. Their costs, including the pay of salaried professional organisers are funded as far as possible from annual dues paid by member institutions (“hard money”) topped up by grants from charitable foundations (“soft money”).

6. Committed to developing leaders:

Community organising understands a “leader” to be someone who is being developed to take action in their institution or community. The term “leader” here does not specifically refer to institutional leaders in the traditional sense, and indeed anyone – regardless of education, position or background – may be capable of leadership. A good leader listens to, works with, and develops the potential of others. Organising builds power by identifying leaders through face-to-face meetings, and developing them through training and action. Community organising works on the basis that “People” and their development are always more important than a particular “Programme” or “Project”.

7. Beginning with what unites us:

Community organising seeks to build relational power in the most deprived and diverse communities, by encouraging neighbours to focus on their common concerns and aspirations. This means that when people of different faiths and cultures face issues of disagreement, they do so as friends and not strangers.

8. Willing to generate tension:

Community organising recognises that change usually involves a struggle. It is willing to generate tension in order to achieve social justice, but that tension is always deployed to achieve a deeper and more lasting harmony; the true peace (shalom) that can only come when there is justice.

9. Teaching through experience and action:

Community organising seeks to develop leaders and congregations through experience. It cultivates a habit of creative, intentional action – so that new relationships are constantly being built, and local leaders are constantly developing their capacities. While a high value is placed on reflection and research, these are always engaged in to improve the quality and focus of action, and not to be a substitute for it.

10. Gathering in assemblies:

mass meetings – assemblies – are at the heart of community organising. The power of the local broad-based alliance comes from its ability to gather organised people. Regular assemblies bring thousands of members together, to hold the ‘targets’ of an action to account. This is participatory democracy in action – grassroots leaders calling elected officials and business and governmental managers to account on issues of local concern.

Harnessing Organising for Renewal and Growth

Over the last ten years, we have had an increasing focus in our work on strengthening local churches to grow in number and depth as well as social impact. We have undertaken practical delivery work and engaged in empirical evaluation and theological reflection (including our *Love, Sweat and Tears* report on church planting in east London and our *A Time to Sow* report on Anglican Catholic growth) so that our learning is robust, learns from others, and can be shared more widely.

In 2013, we developed the “**Hallmarks of an Organised Church**” (see figure 1) to express the way in which community organising strengthened the internal as well as external life of the church. These hallmarks provided the framework for our first year-long Learning Communities in Congregational Development through Community Organising.

In 2018, as part of our evaluation of these Learning Communities, we began to develop a course to work more deeply with some of the lay leaders who were growing through the work. This six-month programme (known as the “**Wagstaff Course**”, after Olive Wagstaff, a much-respected grassroots leader at St George-in-the-East in Shadwell) began to run alongside the Learning Community, and became a powerful process for accompanying leaders spiritually and practically in the work. To date, the programme has trained over 75 lay people across east London and supported them to step up in leadership in their churches and wider parish communities.

At the same time, we also noticed a pattern of significant numerical growth in Church of England parishes that were intentional about both their community organising work and their desire to grow in number and in depth of discipleship, as well as in social impact.¹¹ This led on to CTC partnering with St George-in-the-

¹¹ These churches included St Mary's Walthamstow and St John's Hoxton (which became Hub Churches on *Organising for Growth*) and St Barnabas, Ealing.

Figure 1: Hallmarks of an Organised Church



East on a journey of renewal and growth, and to the development (with Citizens UK and the then Bishops of Barking and Stepney¹²) of the three-year pilot project of *Harnessing the Potential of Community Organising for Congregational Growth*.

We intentionally sought out smaller, inner-city parishes, believing that supporting them to take hold of the principles and practices of community

¹² The Rt Rev'd Peter Hill and the Rt Rev'd Adrian Newman respectively.

organising would make a difference. We are excited to be seeing even greater levels of growth than we had initially hoped for. There is a striking pattern in which the greatest area of growth is among children, young people and families. Additionally, people from within the congregations are emerging (from a broad range of ethnicities and social classes) with the gifts and commitment to develop new ministries to these groups, within and beyond the church.



Participants graduate from the Olive Wagstaff Programme, Autumn 2023.

Like all genuine fruitfulness, this is the fruit of prayer as well as action. In the Bible, the two go together: it is God who gives the increase and our role as God's “co-workers” is first to listen and discern where his Spirit is at work (cf 1 Corinthians 3.6,9). When community organising is deeply rooted in prayer, it becomes a powerful tool for discernment and action - and helps the local church to experience the Holy Spirit as a companion and guide in its life and mission. This is illustrated by the “**Cycle of Prayer and Organising**” (Figure 2). Like the “Hallmarks of an Organised Church”, this emerged from reflection on local Christians' experience.¹³

This report tells some of their stories. It is written by people directly involved in the work, with semi-structured interviews with clergy and lay leaders from 15 churches. Alongside this qualitative evidence, we have included quantitative data on the way community organising has helped these churches grow in number (average weekly attendance) and also in financial resilience. For the three churches in the main case studies (chapters one to three), the quantitative data (average weekly attendance, new

¹³ The Cycle was developed by Fr Josh Harris whilst working for CTC on the Organising for Growth project.

worshippers, and increase in parish share) included is from the year each church started the programme to Autumn 2023 (when the programme formally ended).

Figure 2: A Cycle of Prayer and Organising



The Churches in this Report

Most, but not all, of the churches featured in the report have been engaged in projects overseen by CTC to harness the potential of community organising for congregational renewal and growth.

- **Six smaller inner-city churches** have been part of a three-year Organising for Growth project funded by the Church of England's Strategic Development Fund (SDF), with support from Citizens UK and two larger Hub Churches experienced in community organising.¹⁴
- The project had a target of helping the six churches to have 190 new worshippers by December 2023. In fact, a **total of 211 new worshippers were attending by September 2023, 86 of these new worshippers (40%) were under 18. Average Weekly Attendance** (for which no specific target was set) had **risen by 106 across the six churches.**
- No targets were set for parish share payments, but the project has already led three parishes to

¹⁴ The six partner churches are Holy Trinity Leytonstone (See Chapter 1), St Andrew's Stamford Hill (See Chapter 2), St Barnabas Walthamstow (See Chapter 3), St Martin's Plaistow, Trinity Saints in Haggerston and Dalston, and St Paul's Old Ford (all mentioned in Chapter 5), with St Mary's Walthamstow and St John's Hoxton being the Hub Churches linked with the project. We will use 'OFG' as shorthand for 'Organising for Growth' throughout the main chapters. At St Martin's, the SDF project only included the English-speaking congregation, as there was a pre-existing SDF project supporting the pioneering work of the Luso-Hispanic Mission.

achieve an increase of more than £15,000 per annum with further increases anticipated.

- CTC have also supported the development of **"Choir Church" - a New Worshipping Community (NWC)** which reaches beyond the Sunday congregation by creatively engaging with primary school aged children and their parents through music - in parishes in Shadwell and Bethnal Green. Choir Church was also an inspiration for the "Holy Moly" NWC in Dalston. We are now also supporting Christ Church Three Mills, a growing NWC in Newham in an area where the parish church closed back in 1961.

We have also included testimony from **two Anglican churches outside east London** who have been using a similar approach as part of Citizens UK, and from Pentecostal and Roman Catholic congregations in east London.

For most of these congregations, the journey into community organising has involved a year-long Learning Community, with accompaniment by a designated community organiser from CTC or Citizens UK.

The process teaches clergy and lay leaders how to

- undertake **one-to-one relational meetings** to explore the gifts and passions of their congregation and its neighbours;

- conduct a **power analysis** to consider who are currently overlooked and under-represented, in church life and leadership.
- **develop action teams** to help the church grow in **number** (evangelism), **depth** (discipleship) and **impact** (action with neighbours for the common good).

The aim is to move churches beyond a consultative process, where a "we" at the centre seeks to solicit the opinions of a "them" on the peripheries. The purpose of the one-to-one is to identify the gifts and passions of those currently on the edge, so that they become part of a more inclusive "we." This process of identifying gifts and passions is held in prayer, for it is in fact a process of listening to what the Spirit has put on people's hearts.

Churches undertaking this process learn from experience that God has given them everything they need for the mission to which he has called them. As new lay leaders emerged from the partner churches, 20 of them participated in the Wagstaff Programme over the three year period, which accompanied them in a more intensive process of vocational discernment, learning the practices of community organising in a way that is grounded in theological reflection and prayer.



Emerging lessons

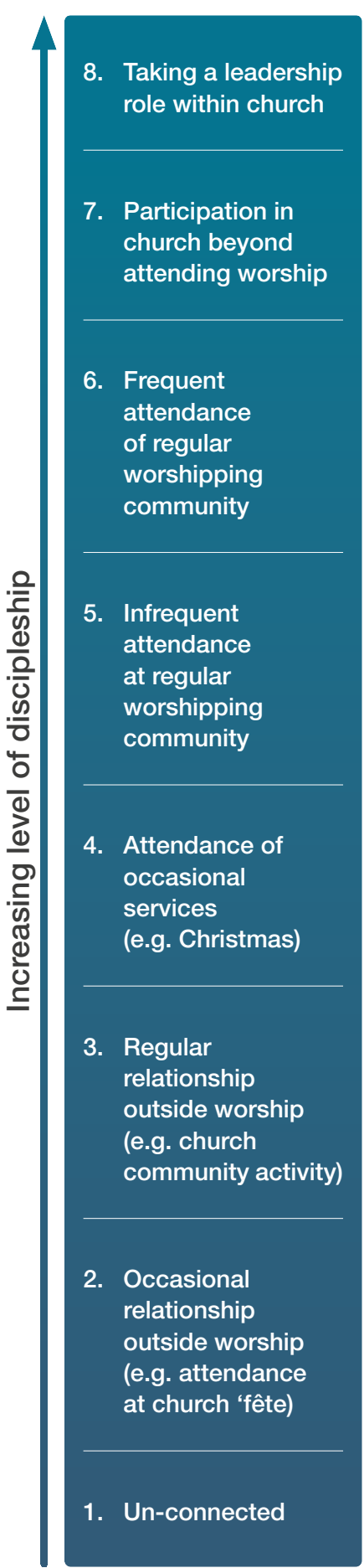
The experience of these churches suggests a number of other lessons – some specific to churches' engagement in community organising, and others which may have wider application.

Firstly, **church growth requires intentionality.** The story of St Barnabas Walthamstow is perhaps the most striking case in point: it has been involved in community organising for a number of years, which has helped it build a wide range of relationships in the community. The Organising for Growth project was the first time this work had an intentional focus on evangelism and on the development of new leaders within the congregation. The "Flow of Discipleship"

diagram [Fig 3] provided a "light bulb moment" for the church's leadership: growth would not come if the only focus was on more and more activity on the left-hand side of the diagram. The church also needed to think carefully about how to help people make the step from connection to joining the worshipping community, and from being part of the worshipping community to taking a role in its leadership.

The stories of St Luke's Woodside Park and St Frideswide's Milton Keynes shows how parishes in other chapters of Citizens UK have adopted community organising methods to grow in number as well as social impact.

Figure 3: Discipleship flow





Secondly, **churches can take meaningful steps to promote growth without changing tradition.** This is

one of the most striking lessons of our project. In at least one church, some members were initially put off joining the project because they thought it would involve an “evangelical takeover.” They could not imagine growth that occurred within their own tradition and ethos. Yet, in each of our case studies, the churches remained firmly anchored within their existing identity and spirituality – with this often intensifying through the process.

Parishes that have lived for years with decline, and have often felt undervalued within the wider Church, can lose hope. The stories of St Andrew’s and Holy Trinity Leytonstone both show how growth begins with small, achievable steps – that foster a missional imagination. Churches learn that there are steps they can make to grow which build on their existing ethos.

In his mid-project evaluation of our work with these churches, Matt Wilson writes that

Phrases like “the fringe”, “fuzzy edge” and “porous” were some of the interesting ways that the church leaders spoke about what has been taking place. The sense was of a growing number of people appearing in the liminal space between the church and the wider community...

For many people it seems that the journey from the wider community into the church includes some time spent in a third space between the two, as visualised below. [See Fig 4] Understanding this journey better, from the perspective of both the incoming member and the receiving church, could be very valuable.

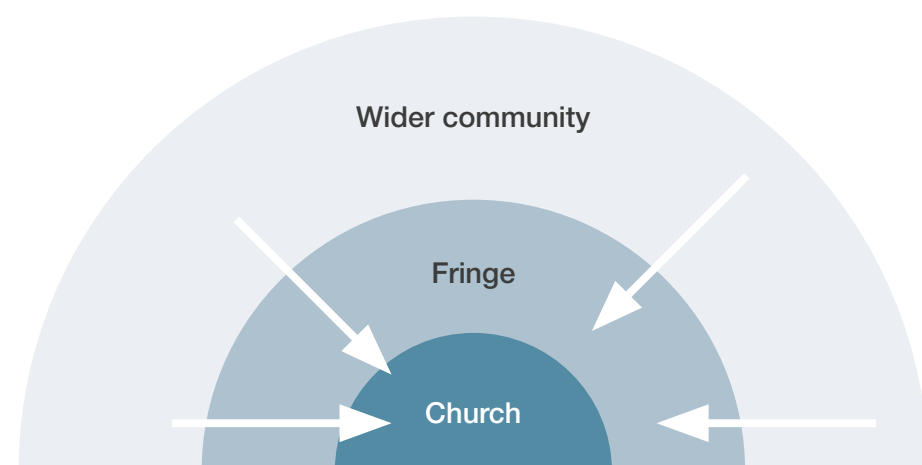


Figure 4: Enabling journeys into church



There is, however, a need for caution and sensitivity. The churches we worked with were often concerned about becoming “predatory.” Their impulse for building relationships and acting with their neighbours for the common good was love, and they did not want that to be instrumentalised.

Community organising has enabled

these churches to become more “porous” - offering a prayerful and confident accompaniment of those who want to move from that initial encounter to explore discipleship.

Thirdly, **growth requires both patience and discipline.** In almost every context, there were points in the organising cycle which required us to

hold our nerve while very little seemed to be happening. Under the surface, however, the steady practice of one-to-ones was identifying the leaders and developing the relationships that in time would bear fruit.

There is a subtle yet very important point to note here, which is that in these early stages it is vital to attend to the *shape*, *not the size* of the actions taken. By this we mean small steps that are building the capacity and confidence of grassroots leaders and congregations to act in ways that lead to greater fruitfulness. Whether in action for social justice or congregational growth, each little success makes the next step seem more achievable – so that those who have internalised the negative judgments of their wider culture begin to believe in their God-given potential and power.

In this work, as in the parables of Jesus, horticultural images often capture the realities best. Our colleague Edward Badu likens the process to the flowering of bamboo: “for a long time it can seem as if very little is happening, but then suddenly it blossoms.”





This is where, in monitoring and evaluation, it is important to distinguish leading and lagging indicators. “Lagging indicators” measure the “harvest” for which we are praying and working: the growth in number, depth and impact. But experience suggests we can and should also have “leading” indicators: measures which assess whether the planting and sowing is going well. When there is a disciplined process of one-to-ones, a refusal to rush to action before grassroots leaders have been identified who will own and shape the work, and when this is held in prayer, our experience is that there will in time be a plentiful harvest.

Fourthly, **what grows is both fragile and plentiful**. The pressures on the poorest and most marginalised leaders and communities – insecure housing, uncertain working hours and health issues, to name just a few – mean that harvest is both wonderful and yet fragile. What grows is a Kingdom which looks very different from the worldly empires which so often capture our imaginations, even within the Church.

Jesus’ parable of the Mustard Seed featured frequently in our reflections (Matthew 13.31-32). It is often taken simply as a story about the extent of growth, but a more careful reading shows it also to be about the nature of growth. Jesus takes and transforms an image from Ezekiel 17.22-24, where God takes a tiny sprig from the “lofty top of a cedar” and plants it so that it becomes a “noble cedar” in whose shade nest “winged creatures of every kind.” In replacing the cedar with a mustard tree, Jesus is teaching that what grows in God’s kingdom remains close to the ground and can seem chaotic and untidy. Lay and ordained leaders from a great many of our churches resonated powerfully with that image.

This leads on to the final lesson from the project – namely that **the harvest is more plentiful than we often imagine**. In each of the parishes in this study, the greatest growth has been among children, families and young people – the very groups that churches often despair of reaching.

Churches such as St Andrew’s and Holy Trinity Leytonstone faced a twofold challenge. Firstly, they had experienced a decline in the number of people attending, the frequency with which people attend, and their consequent willingness and capacity to lead children and youth work. Secondly, there has been an increase in expectations within the wider culture about the quality of welcome and engagement offered to children and families. This left them demoralised – as they saw a growing gap between the expectations of families and the quality and range of children’s and young people’s ministry they were able to offer.

As the case studies show, the slow, patient process of organising identified and developed the capacity and relationships that enabled these churches to connect with local families and young people – and in doing so, they discovered afresh the Gospel truth that “the harvest is plentiful.” Community organising did not offer an “add on” - extra initiatives for an overstretched church to undertake - rather, a set of practices to help churches discover the gifts God had given them to enable the fulfilment of his calling for them.

We are sharing these stories because they bear witness to the hope at the

heart of the Gospel. These courageous urban churches have taken a leap of faith. They have trusted in the fragility and fruitfulness which Jesus teaches lie at the heart of the Kingdom of God. And in doing so, they have experienced the action of the Holy Spirit in people and places that the wider culture often overlooks, belittles, and patronises.

We share them in the hope that they will call forth a response in many readers - both to share what God is doing in your midst, and to consider what new things might be possible to reap the fullness of his harvest.

Members of the congregation of St Martin’s Church, Plaistow, celebrating ‘Our Lady of Quinche’ feast day procession.





17

Baseline Weekly Attendance⁷16 adults +
1 child

58

Average Weekly Church Attendance
after Organising for Growth⁸

48 adults + 10 children

⁷ 'Baseline' refers to weekly attendance prior to the church's participation in the OFG Programme.⁸ The weekly attendance figure for all case study churches is dated Autumn 2023, after each of the case studies had completed the programme.

CHAPTER ONE HOLY TRINITY AND SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

HOLY TRINITY AND ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO parish in Leytonstone partnered with the Centre for Theology and Community on the Organising for Growth (OFG) Project in Autumn 2020. The approach and tools of community organising have helped the church to think about how it can be more welcoming and have a greater presence in the community. Since that time, the congregation has grown in confidence, in presence and in partnership working within the community. This growth, along with greater financial resilience, has in turn led to growth in people - in particular a growth in families with young children.

Context and Background

HOLY TRINITY is in Leytonstone, in the east London Borough of Waltham Forest. It is an Anglo-Catholic Estate Church which sits in the middle of three different housing estates. The church has historically had a modest sized congregation, (though attendance has fluctuated over the years), and up until recently a largely elderly congregation. The demographic is mixed, with a significant number of Afro-Caribbean members. The church was built in the 1970s, replacing a Victorian building that was demolished and rebuilt as part of a land sale with the borough council in the face of a local housing crisis.

The parish is diverse, with relatively high levels of deprivation and child poverty. Many residents work in the care sector, including the NHS, with others on zero-hour contracts and in other forms of precarious work. Community demographics are changing: whilst the neighbourhood was previously predominantly a Black neighbourhood, with many families settling at the time of Windrush, along with working class East Enders who'd resided for many generations, more recently there are many Eastern European migrants living in the area, as well as other migrant groups. Rev'd Polly Kersys-Hull, vicar of Holy Trinity, described the parish as "fragile and fragmented... a place where a lot of resources have been taken away... even the Christmas lights don't come to our end of the high street".⁹

Polly arrived in May 2020, part-time, on secondment to finish her curacy, and inherited a set of challenges around

⁹ For the purposes of this report we are using the forms of address for clergy reflective of the different traditions in the work. In most cases this means referring in the first instance by the full title, and subsequently by first names, subject to the individual's preference.



Rev'd Polly Kersys-Hull at
the Community Food Share.

numbers, confidence, and capacity. The Churchwarden Jeanette described the period leading up to Polly's arrival having been a challenging time for the church: a previous incumbent had left in 2019 leaving her to take up much of the responsibility for the church's activities, and an unpopular proposal to merge the church with another parish had left the congregation feeling anxious about their future.

Numbers just prior to the Covid-19 lockdown were low and the congregation altogether was an average of 17 worshippers, sometimes much less than that on a Sunday morning. Many were older and travelling in from outside of the parish. There were no young people or children. Polly described a lack of confidence within the congregation, compounded by the pandemic: "They felt that the parish church should be in the community, and shouldn't be shut, but in reality they were facing closure". There was however, despite the challenges, a sense of team, and a small but committed and faithful PCC.

Despite some initial reservations, the PCC agreed to the partnership with CTC and Polly reflected that the sense of crisis in fact opened the congregation

up to trying something new. "It was a fight to survive... so there was a sense that 'we needed to try this'". A key part of the community organising process was about supporting the church and PCC to be honest about their hopes and fears

for the church. Polly found that reflecting with the PCC and congregation on a community organising tool called the "stick person" which supports individuals and institutions to think about what matters to them, was really helpful.

Jeanette, Churchwarden and member of the
community at the Community Food Share.





Lent Listening

In the Spring of 2021, the congregation committed to an ambitious goal of having 100 conversations across the church and community as part of a “Lent Listening Exercise”. The listening was a way for the church to engage with the “See and Hear” stage in the “Cycle of Prayer and Organising”, and followed some initial training and support on how to have one-to-one conversations by a CTC and Citizens UK community organiser, Frankie

Webster, for key lay people - in particular volunteers from the church’s Community Food Share project, an outreach to those in the neighbourhood struggling to afford food. At the start of the pandemic Food Share had been going for several years and was serving an average of 20 households in the community through a mixture of delivery and collections of food parcels.

The intention behind focussing on the Food Share team was that unlike the

rest of church, they had not been closed by the Covid pandemic and had both an energy for and means of connecting with the wider community. The framing question of the listening was “What’s important to our community?”.

Churchwarden Jeanette, and member of the Food Share team, admitted she is not someone who naturally liked talking to people she doesn’t know. However, by chatting to people in the queue with whom she already had a relationship, and asking simple questions such as “*how do you feel living here?*”, and “*what’s it like entering this church?*” she found a natural point of entry.

The first meeting held in the church to launch the listening in the community was “packed out... everyone had a chance to talk freely and be heard”, Jeanette remembered. There were small groups, talking about themes like street safety, the elderly, and the church itself and what it felt like to come in from outside. Some people commented on the fact they didn’t know this was actually a church, others that the railings had put them off. “That was a big step for us as a church, where we were able to talk to the people around us - that made all the difference”. Following the

“**The listening was about more than just feeding into action, it was relationship building, and gave a foundation to act further down the line. That initial listening campaign has been the bedrock of all we’ve gone on to do.**”

“

The project is porous, it feels like an act of worship... the liturgy of unpacking bread and broccoli, welcoming friends and neighbours, offering warm refreshments, safe listening spaces and offering prayer.

listening exercise, the church hosted two “house meetings” on the theme of safety and space.¹⁰

Polly was initially optimistic that after the listening there would be a straight-forward process of following the cycle of action “but that wasn’t what happened at all”.

In reality, the process has been slower, with a seemingly fallow period whilst Polly went on maternity leave. Nevertheless the benefits over just a few years have been huge:

“The listening was about more than just feeding into action, it was relationship building, and gave a foundation to act further down the line. That initial listening campaign has been the bedrock of all we’ve gone on to do”. (Rev’d Polly)

More Confident, Welcoming & Present

There are several developments that have emerged from the initial Lent Listening and the adoption of the community organising approach in the parish.

Firstly, the Listening has led to a **greater ownership amongst the congregation for the church’s public role in the community**, and a confidence in reaching outside.

The mission, team and reach of the Food Share have developed significantly,

¹⁰ A house meeting, in community organising, is an opportunity to gather people together after a series of one-to-one conversations, to discern which issues to take action on, and to begin to build a team and develop leaders. As such, it is a crucial part of the “discern and decide” phase of the “Cycle of Organising”, which is about asking how God might be calling us to respond to what we have heard.

Local councillors, the police, census, and housing teams have all held surgeries alongside the project which has enabled local people to access the information needed to advocate for housing and safety issues.

The Food Share also regularly hosts CV writing workshops, debt advice, domestic abuse support and digital art for wellbeing courses. A number of individuals have developed in leadership through this process, including John, whose story is highlighted below. Polly reflects: “The project is porous, it feels like an act of worship... the liturgy of unpacking bread and broccoli, welcoming friends and neighbours, offering warm refreshments, safe listening spaces and offering prayer”.

The church recently successfully applied for a grant of just under £30,000 to redesign the church garden - as a space not just for church members but for others who use the church too. The garden was a long-term vision of the original leadership team who wanted to make the church and Food Share more welcoming. Thanks to the London Over the Borders fund, Roots in the City is now a safe space in which community

Members of the Leytonstone community gather together at the Food Share.





Young member of the church in the new garden.

members come to spend time, and learn how to grow fruit and vegetables.¹¹ The garden space is now used by a range of people in the community, as a welcoming space to enjoy: Food Share clients, participants in the ESOL classes which take place at the church, and local residents. “Now, when people come in for things like Food Share, they think of it as their church” (PCC Member).

As one member of the congregation said “putting ourselves in the shoes of those who don’t yet attend church” has led to other missional opportunities that are yielding growth, from a gospel choir workshop inside church with a presentation and performance in the park outdoors, to a scratch nativity in the amphitheatre in the park and carol singing in the local pub.

Secondly, the listening provoked the church to think more seriously about how its physical space can be more **welcoming**.

The organising approach and initial listening process has helped the church to think about the journey “from

¹¹ The church also now partners with an organisation called Time to Grow who take overlooked urban spaces and turn them into fruitful land. Users of the Food Share on the Estate allow volunteers to adopt their gardens. The volunteers are taught practical skills in agriculture, abandoned spaces are fruitful, lonely residents have company and take pride in their homes and locally grown food comes back into the Food Share to be shared in the community.

grounds, and in response to this the church erected railings around the site. A difficult dynamic for the congregation was the desire to feel safety versus a concern that the congregation may not feel welcome. During the PCC meeting, Polly asked members to experience with her what it’s like to enter the church from the outside. She asked them “How many barriers do you have to overcome to get here?” Whilst the PCC were standing outside, a woman who lives over the road shouted “when’s your service?” and since then has been attending. The woman is the mother of one of the boys previously involved in violence on the estate.

Finally, the Lent Listening led to a willingness to **take action for the common good**, which in turn fostered **trust and a sense of the church’s presence** in the neighbourhood.

Since the initial listening process the church has hosted two community meetings about safety in the community - in the wake of a number of fatal stabbings that have shaken the neighbourhood, and the church has become a point of contact for the police. Holy Trinity’s story also highlights the importance of the “Lament” stage of the “Cycle of Prayer and Organising”; these meetings were not only spaces for discerning action, but crucially spaces in which the community could come together to first lament and grieve, and pray for an end to violence in their neighbourhood.

One of the specific actions which has come out of the concern for public space, identified through the listening process, is a park lighting campaign initiated by the church in relationship with other local organisations (read more below). The campaign has enabled the church to develop some key connections and foster trust with local people and organisations. This trust and partnership working is now being formalised as the church has entered a partnership with CTC to explore “neighbourhood organising” in the community with funding from the Mercers Foundation.

Light up Langthorne Campaign

Following the initial meetings about public safety and in response to a sense of anger that young people couldn’t travel safely to and from their youth club at a community centre in the local park, in 2022 an action team was established. The team is made up of members of the church, as well as around a number of other local residents and organisations including a youth centre and a Toy Library. The focus of the campaign “Light up Langthorne”, and the team: “Friends of Langthorne” is to get decent working lights for the local park. Polly reflects that the campaign has been longer and harder than she thought it would be, but that the action has energised the team. Actions have included meetings with the local council, a petition of over 500 local signatures, making videos, and creative actions including a “bulbs for bulbs” event which featured planting bulbs to raise awareness of the need for actual light bulbs.

In Christmas 2023, the group hosted an action around the south Leytonstone area where members of the community and church carried lanterns and wore fairylights to highlight the dark parts of the neighbourhood and sing Christmas

Members of the Leytonstone community gather together at a Christmas action for lighting in the local park.



“ It was the listening campaign that changed things. It’s easy to say that you need to listen, but it’s not always easy to do in reality... If you don’t hear what people are saying, what’s the point?”

Member of PCC

carols. As a result of all of these actions, an extra flood light was added to the Pavilion building in 2024, moving the team closer to their goal of better lighting in the park. Since then, the campaign has evolved to thinking about safety and social cohesion within south Leytonstone, beyond the park itself. This has now led to a time of celebrating the work that has taken place and gathering the stories around the area to showcase the depth of life and beauty South Leytonstone has to offer.

Ultimately, the Lent Listening and the subsequent action that has followed, the willingness to not just listen to the

community, but to act together, has fostered trust and presence in the community. “... We’re showing that we are worth our salt in terms of being here... we’ve become a reference point, it’s really put the church on the map”. (Polly)

“It was the listening campaign that changed things. It’s easy to say that you need to listen, but it’s not always easy to do in reality... If you don’t hear what people are saying, what’s the point? If you’re going to care for people and love people in community [as the church and Christians are called to do], you must know what’s going on in their lives and what makes them tick” (Member of PCC)

A Growing Church

Significantly, the growth in confidence, relationships, trust, and recognition within the community, have led to both numerical and demographic growth in church attendance at Holy Trinity. “At the baseline, we have more bums on seats and more money in the bank” Polly said, frankly, both things of vital importance for a church previously living in the shadow of closure. “If you look out from the front on a Sunday, what you see today is very different from a few years ago”.

Holy Trinity Leytonstone has more than doubled its weekly attendance. Yet it is not pure numerical growth that counts here, but also who is attending. Those coming are much younger for example, with an average of 10 additional children and their families reflected in the weekly attendance figures, and there is now a much greater reflection of who is actually living in the parish (the vast majority of these new people live within walking distance of the church). Polly and her team are clear that this growth is happening because the church is being intentionally welcoming using the approaches outlined.

Tools like the “Flow of Discipleship” and the “Hallmarks of an Organised Church” have helped Polly and lay leaders to make connections between relationships built during the week, and church on a Sunday, giving them the confidence to be intentionally invitational.

Polly also emphasises that the church is not operating out of anxiety for growth or fixated on numbers but rather “We are focussed on joyful growth... how are we seeing the Kingdom of God in the midst of this east London estate?”

There are now members of the church who are attending on Sundays having first encountered the church through Food Share, and other members who have come across the church through its wider engagement in the community. This was the case for John, a local resident who grew up in the neighbourhood but had been disconnected from church for a while until he heard about Rev'd Polly and Holy Trinity from a local resident involved in a campaign to save a local youth centre. His story is outlined at the end of this chapter.



We are focussed on joyful growth... how are we seeing the Kingdom of God in the midst of this east London estate?



Members of the congregation celebrate the church's 50th anniversary with the Bishop of Barking.



An All Age Service at Holy Trinity.

Financial Resilience and Stewardship

Since partnering with CTC and adopting organising, the parish has increased its parish share by over £4,000 from £16,000 to the full £20,570. Polly made the point that “It’s naive to think that just because you have organised relationships, your actions will be successful... you need to organise your money as well.”

Adopting the approach of organising and in so doing fostering confidence and ownership within the congregation has helped the church become more financially resilient in a number of key ways:

- **Giving:** There has been a big increase in church giving. Polly attributes this to a greater sense of ownership of the church. Whilst prior to the pandemic the church was able to rely on a long-term let to a nursery, there has now been a recognition of the need to diversify income streams. Jeanette noted that not being able to do the plate offering during the pandemic provided an opportunity to encourage regular giving online which has since made a huge difference, bolstered by the increase in numbers. The church also innovated and now has a contactless machine for giving.
- **Stewardship of Assets:** The church and PCC now think more intentionally about how they use their building. “We are asking ‘How can we use our assets in a way that will be good stewardship, and glorify the kingdom of God?’”. We’ve shifted the way we see our finances... is this the mission, or are we just funding the mission? Or can we discover a way for it to be both?” (Polly). This is demonstrated in how the PCC have thought about hiring out church space after a long-term hire to a nursery ended after several decades during the pandemic. There has been an emphasis on what kinds of activities the church wants its space to be used for and an interest in the values of the organisations it chooses to partner



Rev'd Polly

with, for example local digital literacy and ESOL providers. Having the tools to intentionally think about what the church’s mission and “self-interest” is - thinking about both the church’s values but also the need for financial sustainability - has really supported this process. In January 2023 the church entered into a lease agreement with a new preschool provider who are paying a higher rent, with a better agreement for both institutions, resulting in a more effective partnership.

- **Ambitious Fundraising:** With support from CTC the church is now writing funding bids and grants, something they haven’t done before, inspired by having a greater vision for how the church space can be better used to service the community. Polly comments that, “There has been a shift towards not being afraid to ask for money, and more of a

willingness to take risks with our projects”. In addition to the £30,000 fundraising grant mentioned earlier, grant funding has also enabled the church to renovate their small kitchen and refreshment facilities, to fix the heating, and to establish more fruitful relationships with stakeholders. One example of this is that the church now hosts a food truck “Fellowship Foods” providing weekly hot meals cooked by young apprentices to the community.

Growing Leaders

A final aspect of the organising approach on the church’s growth and development is their intentional focus on lay leadership development. Polly reflected that it was crucial at the start of the process to have one or two absolutely committed lay leaders, but that through adopting an organising approach she has been able to identify and develop others, for example John, whose story is outlined below.

“ I really feel my faith has developed. Since being at Holy Trinity I’ve gone through confirmation through which I’ve grown spiritually.

JOHN’S STORY



John is a middle-aged resident who lives in Leytonstone. He’s a father of three teenagers and having left school with no formal qualifications, returned back to education as an adult, and achieved a Building Surveying degree. John now works as a building surveyor for a Housing association in east London.

John was prompted by a desire to re-engage with his faith and spirituality after having not been able to get to church for some time. John is relatively new to the church and had been worshipping at Holy Trinity for a year at the time of interview, but is an example of someone who has been supported to develop both in his faith and in his confidence as a leader in the community.

“I really feel my faith has developed. Since being at Holy Trinity I’ve gone through confirmation through which I’ve grown spiritually”. A key activity that John has been involved with is the Food Share team. He has been part of the process of transitioning from a more basic giving service to something much more relational, “I love learning more about the people we meet on a Tuesday morning... we are seeing people coming into the church and begin to see it as their space”.

John feels that his involvement in Holy Trinity and community organising has developed his sense of God’s calling on his life to help and serve others. To further pursue this John enrolled on CTC’s Olive Wagstaff Programme, to connect his faith and spirituality with his desire to change his community for the better.

“Through the Wagstaff Programme I’ve learned about relationship building, the importance of tension and accountability in action, and I’m growing in confidence as a leader.” This has built John’s confidence in encounters with public officials (including councillors and police officers) which has been particularly helpful in building the Lighting Campaign, in which John has been a key galvaniser.

“It’s only now that I realise, I am a leader and I see the power of community: acting together with others...that has been spiritually moving for me”.

“ I love learning more about the people we meet on a Tuesday morning... we are seeing people coming into the church and begin to see it as their space.

Polly admits that initially she felt the weight of holding everything together and that the work of identifying and developing new and perhaps overlooked leaders “takes time, but it’s worth the investment”. Now she is seeing leaders like John, step up. Those Polly thought would be the church’s leaders in community organising have not necessarily been... “But the transformation I’ve seen in some people has been really interesting...it has brought courage: people feel braver, and brave enough to hope that we can grow.”

There was a sense from the long-standing lay leaders interviewed that this approach was relieving a pressure and burden from them. One PCC member reflected that “Having the opportunity to think about how others can grow in leadership and take on roles, and to be able to step back, has been an absolute blessing”.

When reflecting on the overall value of this approach to church growth and renewal, Polly noted **the importance of starting with what you have** and who is already here.

“If we truly believe that God is calling us into fullness of life, then this model is that...it’s about looking into our community, sharing the love of Jesus in a gentle way, led by the spirit, to help people realise the potential of who God has made them to be. ...It’s intrinsically Gospel”. (Polly)

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CHAPTER TWO ST ANDREW'S N16 STAMFORD HILL

ST ANDREW'S N16 has been part of the Organising for Growth project in partnership with CTC since 2020. Since then, it has been on a journey of growth in new worshippers, growth in lay leadership and discipleship, and a greater willingness and capacity to work in partnership and build relationships across the community. The growth in new worshippers has been particularly notable amongst children and families through a new initiative called "All Age Church".

Context and Background

ST ANDREW'S is in Stamford Hill, Stoke Newington, in the London Borough of Hackney. Stamford Hill is a diverse neighbourhood and is home to one of the largest settlements of Haredi Orthodox Jewish people in Europe, established since the 1950s. The church

is Anglo-Catholic in tradition. Most of the congregation are Afro-Caribbean and West African, with a few other demographic groups.

The incumbent, Rev'd Charis Enga, arrived in 2016, in a context of declining numbers over several decades in spite of a congregation who wanted to grow. In her words "the key block to growth was resource". She had inherited a set of practical challenges on arrival around buildings, finance and governance which needed to take priority, having come into a church which had experienced a long interregnum.

Charis was initially introduced to CTC and the OFG project through her Bishop, and although she was interested in the project - it chimed with her values, approach and theology - she had concerns about capacity. When she met with Angus, CTC's director, his assurance



to her was that if the project is "one more thing", it has failed - rather it should provide tools and skills to support and develop what she and the church were already doing.

Describing it as something of a "do or die" moment, Charis was ready to take a leap of faith and partner with CTC. Moving from vision to action took some time, involving several meetings with the PCC over several months. One sticking point was the nominal £1,000 fee for the church - a significant contribution at a time when St Andrew's were struggling to pay their parish share. There was also

anxiety around "taking anything new on", exacerbated by the impact of the Covid pandemic, which had dented confidence. Eventually however, the PCC came to see that the effort and investment would be worthwhile.

The initial plan was for Charis to identify one or two lay leaders to be part of the learning community group and accompany her during the first year of the OFG programme, however she struggled to find anyone with the time. What happened next, Charis described as "the synchronicity of God".





Left: Covid-testing centre fencing which barred Sandford court residents from accessing gardens and green space
Top right: The story of residents action makes the BBC London Evening News.
Bottom right: A young resident struggles to access play area on Sandford court.

Action for the Common Good: Covid-19 Testing Centre

In October 2020, residents at Sandford Court, a nearby estate in Stamford Hill, were given 12 hours' notice about a Covid testing centre being erected in front of their homes, without any prior consultation from Hackney council or the NHS. Only two minutes' walk from St Andrew's church, members of the church were amongst those fenced in and anxious about the risks posed. Keisha, a committed member of the church, was one of those affected. Feeling angry and powerless about the situation and its impact on her young family, she called Rev'd Charis.

Charis, with the support of her local Citizens UK organiser, Froi Legaspi, encouraged Keisha to take action. Along with a few church members, she helped Keisha design a petition for local residents to lobby local political leaders and demand the relocation of the testing centre to a more appropriate site. Following a three-month campaign, which included a headline on BBC London news, in January 2021 the site was relocated.¹² The campaign provided an immediate focus and opportunity to put into practice the methods of organising Charis was learning about as

¹² See: www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2021/01/13/sandford-court-residents-celebrate-covid-test-centre-relocated

part of the fortnightly learning community. There was a significant impact on Keisha too, as illustrated in her story.

Additionally, the campaign was a turning point for the church's journey towards growth for two distinct reasons. Firstly, **the campaign had provided a focus for prayer and worship through which people in the church and community grew in faith.** In Advent 2020, in the midst of Covid restrictions St Andrew's put together an online interactive Carol service, featuring recordings of choir music, readings and testimony, interweaving the Christmas story with that of the testing Centre and the theme of joining in with God's plan. At a time of great darkness, the carol service and story of the community's defiance was an act of hope.

A weekly online prayer triplet from the church also began to support Keisha in the campaign.¹³ St Andrew's experience of integrating prayer alongside action demonstrates the importance and power of churches who act in a way that is anchored in prayer, as outlined in CTC's "Cycle of Prayer and Organising".

Secondly, the campaign was significant because of **the relationships and connections fostered across the wider community.** "The people involved in the action were from different parts of the community... and people who live very separately were suddenly working together" (Charis)

¹³ This prayer triplet continued for a year until it evolved in early 2022, using one-to-ones, to discover what others in the congregation may want to join in with. It is now 'Seeking Stillness' (a simple Celtic night prayer, with time of silence and sharing thanks) followed by optional Seeking Scripture where lectio and discussion of the next Sunday's Gospel.

The people involved in the action were from different parts of the community... and people who live very separately were suddenly working together.

KEISHA'S STORY

Keisha has been attending St Andrews since 2011. It was "peace of the church" that drew her, at a time of personal grief. She is a mother of three and works for a local SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) school. Not long before the partnership with CTC, she was invited to join the PCC. "I saw the numbers dwindle to less and less...there was something inside me which said how can I make this a place for families? A place of growth?"

Reflecting on the start of the Testing Centre campaign she said, "I thought about how it was going to impact my son and other family members, and it was something I felt angry about". The intentional decision to equip Keisha to take the lead on the campaign, rather than Charis taking a lead on behalf of her parishioners, was transformative. This was supplemented by support from Froi, who met with Keisha and provided coaching and support with things like chairing meetings, drafting letters and speaking with local politicians. In Keisha's words, "Charis and Froi didn't do for me what they knew I could do for myself, which had a huge impact on my confidence... all the way through it was my story, our story".

The campaign was a turning point in Keisha's own sense of power, agency and leadership development, as well as the power of the wider community. As a result of her experience with the Sandford Court action, Keisha has been inspired to harness organising to

I have definitely really grown in my faith, and I've opened myself up... before I was a very closed person, now I'm more open and confident sharing my faith publicly.

Keisha



Keisha, member of St Andrew's and church-based community organiser in Stamford Hill.

strengthen and grow St Andrew's, and has discovered something about her own vocational calling. She has also taken part in formal community organising leadership training through CTC's

Olive Wagstaff programme, which has enabled her to connect the dots between building relationships, taking action and deepening her faith through prayer and theological reflection. Keisha is now employed part-time as a church-based community organiser for CTC.

"Every time I meet a blockage where 'I think I can't do this', I can leave it, pray, read the bible and all of a sudden it makes sense ... now I use the bible as a tool for directing my action...I have definitely really grown in my faith, and I've opened myself up... before I was a very closed person, now I'm more open and confident sharing my faith publicly". (Keisha)

I saw the numbers dwindle to less and less...there was something inside me which said how can I make this a place for families? A place of growth?



Members of the church
after a Sunday service.

Developing Confidence and Leadership

Initially, Charis didn't feel as though the journey with OFG and the testing centre action was deeply changing the internal life of the congregation itself, or necessarily growing the church numerically. A shift came when Charis began using some of the tools of organising to think about discipleship. "At St Andrew's, we don't have a lot of confidence about speaking about our faith together, it's often seen as a very private thing. Discipleship courses haven't really taken off and there's not a culture of sitting together and reading the bible and sharing faith publicly."

In June 2021 Charis began a listening exercise called 'Seeds of the Sacred', in which she had one-to-ones with

parishioners. Together they would reflect on the Sunday lectionary gospel, and ask, "does this remind you of anything in your life? What resonated?" With permission, Charis would write up some of the conversations and include them in her Sunday sermon slot. This developed confidence in talking about faith with one another, has supported the congregation to grow in discipleship, and was a key way of bringing story-telling and testimony to the heart of church and services: "We started to hear each other's voices".

Ivan, the Churchwarden of St Andrew's and a member of the Church for over 30 years, feels that the church is now trusted more in the community. This has happened through "going out and talking to people, meeting face to face so that we have faith in one another".

One outcome of this has been that when he opens the church during the week more people are using the space to light candles and leave prayers.

Ivan himself has been developed as a leader and grown in confidence through the church's journey with community organising. Recently he graduated from the Wagstaff Programme, which has helped him to think practically about how to grow St Andrew's church, as well as the opportunity to reflect on questions like "where does power lie in the church and community?". Through the course he has become more confident in sharing his story of faith, and building relationships with people in the community. "It's made me come out of my shell... before I wasn't very socially confident".

Ivan, Churchwarden
of St Andrew's.



An example of this is that Ivan has begun having one-to-one conversations with members of the congregation and wider community: "finding out people's concerns, what matters to them, what changes they want to see and then to work together". This has been helpful in organising events like a Pancake Party for the community.

Reflecting more generally on the value of the one-to-one tool in her ministry as a priest, Charis said: "a really big piece of learning it's not just that initial one-to-

one but keeping on with them". As well as helping her to know where people are spiritually, she has found they have been a great way to meet with new people in the church, and to rethink church rotas.

The approach of community organising has also supported Charis to reflect with key lay leaders and her PCC on where power lies within the church, and how it can be better shared, through the church-based power analysis tool, as well as supporting the congregation to reflect together on how they can build relational power with their neighbours. One-to-ones have been a key part of enabling power to be shared.

Commenting on the development of leaders in the congregation like Keisha and Ivan through public action, Charis said: "It's about enabling people to discover that they are loved and valued but also that they can work for the transformation of the future".

Working in Partnership: Stamford Hill Unites

It was after the campaign win that Charis, with Keisha, made the decision to invest more deeply in the new relationships fostered. "We didn't want the relationships not to go anywhere, and whilst previously we had been fighting against something, we wanted to ask 'what are we for as a neighbourhood?'".

Together with residents who had been involved, including the chair of the PTA for a local primary school, a

community event in a local park was held to celebrate the success, and to listen, asking local people what affected them and what other issues they wanted to make change on. The clearest theme that emerged was the need to create new spaces in which local people could connect and build community.

Out of this, *Stamford Hill Unites* was born: a local network, chaired by Keisha, with ongoing support and coaching from her organiser Froi (as well as Charis) on behalf of the church. The group brought together a diverse group of local leaders of different faiths (and none) including from local primary schools and community projects. Since its inception the team have organised community events, wellbeing days and a gardening project on the Sandford Court estate, which came from a desire to improve the physical space in the neighbourhood. *The Walled Garden Group*, collaborates to create a greener Stamford Hill. The ‘neutral space’ of shared seedbeds on the Sandford Court fosters a deep sense of community, with significant participation from both the Orthodox Jewish community and children and parents from St Andrews Church bringing together groups who may not otherwise interact. The group has raised funding from Near Neighbours to sustain the project, developing the fundraising capacity of lay and community leaders in the process.¹⁴

It is clear also that this work has

¹⁴ Near Neighbours is a grant-making charity that brings people together in communities that are religiously and ethnically diverse, so that they can get to know each other better, build relationships of trust, and collaborate together on initiatives that improve the local community they live in. See more at: www.near-neighbours.org.uk/about

“I’m not a religious person or church-goer, but it’s helped me see the church as a place I can connect with, as a community organisation, a space that’s for all of us.”



A recent community fun day for Stamford Hill Unites, hosted by the church.

shifted how people outside of the congregation see their place in the community, which in turn has opened missional opportunities. Most recently, the church and its neighbours, through Stamford Hill Unites, have started a ‘‘Rubbish’’ campaign’ to tackle the problem of litter and fly tipping in the streets of Stamford Hill. This arose directly from listening at the most recent community fun day that the group organised and, so far, the group have successfully carried out extensive door knocking, and held a public meeting where local councillors and council officials were present to be asked questions by the group and many members of the public.

A local member of the Stamford Hill Unites Leadership Team commented: ‘‘I’ve lived in Stamford Hill since 2014 and I’d never set foot in St Andrew’s church until I met Keisha and Charis. I’m not a religious person or church-goer, but it’s helped me see the church as a place I can connect with, as a community organisation, a space that’s for all of us’’



Flyers to the church’s recent ‘Rubbish’ campaign

In the same way, conversely - it has shifted how the congregation of St Andrew’s see their own place in the community, and there has been an increase in confidence and willingness to reach outside of the church walls, and to take responsibility for the public role of the church in the community. Charis has used the ‘‘Hallmarks of an Organised Church’’ with her PCC, encouraging them to reflect at regular intervals on where the church is at in terms of their willingness to develop relationships, share faith, develop leadership and work with the wider community. Early on this supported key lay leaders to recognise that the church needed be more intentional and invitational with their neighbours.

Church events previously aimed at inviting the existing congregation, for example an annual church BBQ and a Shrove Tuesday Pancake Party, are now planned with the wider community in mind. Intentionally invitations are made through networks like Stamford Hill Unites, local schools, and the Jewish community through the Sandford Court gardening project.

At a summer BBQ in 2023, 73 people attended, including 34 from the wider community. Only 17 of the 73 present were involved in St Andrew’s before the OFG project began and 22 were new regular worshippers. The church has also run several socials and trips for building relationships, including a series of summer holiday trips including 22 people who went to the seaside, only four of whom were involved with St Andrews before the project.

Finance & Parish Share

The increase in the church’s confidence has manifested in some very tangible ways. St Andrew’s parish share has increased significantly since the project began, and whilst a large part of that increase has been due to work done by Charis prior to the partnership,¹⁵ in her view, ‘‘The project gave us confidence to be more ambitious in giving back more than we felt comfortable to do so... before we had gotten into a scarcity mindset’’. She estimates the church is giving at least £10,000 more than they might have previously felt confident to do so. OFG helped Charis and her PCC to learn to be bold in giving to the common fund in huge increases each year. ‘‘We continue to be bold, recognising that ‘the harvest is more plentiful than we imagine’, and it is ‘in giving we receive’, which organising has

¹⁵ This work included looking at the systems and finance (including fundraising, building works to make the space available to rent, securing the nursery provider etc).

Keisha with members of the congregation and community



helped us to do. We are more ambitious about what we can take on and to continue to apply for lots of funding.’’

In November 2023 Charis was formally licensed as a full-time vicar at St Andrew’s. This was a hugely significant moment for the church, who have not had a full-time vicar for 18 years (since 2005). The special service was celebrated by many local people of all faiths and none, with local dignitaries including the Deputy Mayor of Hackney and a local councillor to mark the joyous occasion with local people.

Growth in Children, Families and Young People

‘‘All Age Church’’ is a service that launched at St Andrew’s in Autumn 2021. The format of the service is a monthly Sunday afternoon slot that is accessible and relaxed. There is a chance to listen to a bible story with children along with arts & craft activity kept broadly in line with the main service theme, plus food and refreshments. At the heart of ‘‘All Age Church’’ at St Andrew’s is a commitment to **informality, involvement and inclusion**. One parent attending commented that ‘‘anyone can get involved, anyone can participate.’’

The relationships yielded by the church’s organising journey up to the summer of 2021 provided a huge missional opportunity for the church to do something more: to encounter those who are open to exploring faith for the



Rev’d Charis’ licensing in November 2023.

first time, or those who are revisiting faith. Both Charis and Keisha have young children and wanted church to be a place that was really welcoming for them. With some support from CTC, the church was able to bring Keisha on board for a day a week as church-based organiser to do some focussed listening with local parents.

Keisha and Charis began by mapping out key relationships with local schools and community groups and listening through one-to-ones. Many other conversations took place through impromptu encounters in the local park or school gate or neighbours on Keisha’s estate. The focus of the conversations was people’s experience of living in the community, their experience (if any) of faith and their hopes and aspirations for their families. Through these conversations, Keisha discovered an appetite for a practical activity for families, for greater connection with other parents, and an openness to exploring faith.

Crucially, it was about **conversation, rather than consultation**. Not ‘‘surveying’’ people so the church could ‘‘put something on’’, but rather being open to the gifts and potential of people, and attentive to the Holy Spirit. In time Keisha had identified a team of five local parents to lead the initiative, some with a background in children’s work, and, after an initial set of planning meetings, in Autumn 2021 ‘‘All Age Church’’ (AAC) was born.

The emphasis on developing the leadership and discipleship of the parents involved has continued. Keisha described how even for those with limited

“ There has definitely been growth in my faith... Every time I go I learn something different. Recently we talked about the story of Moses ... I felt like Moses as well, because I came from very far away. I don't live here with my family, it's just me and my kids - this story made me not be scared, to trust in God... I could see myself in the story.

faith experience, they have been able to draw on knowledge from childhood experiences about bible stories, and to go deeper.

Dee, a local parent who got involved with AAC is an example of someone whose faith and confidence has been developed, as well as that of her children.

“I have two children, so I thought it would be great [to get involved in AAC] because I want them to make friends, to learn more about Jesus, and to build relationships locally - be part of the community”.

Dee's involvement in AAC has developed her gifts, for example thinking creatively about different ways of telling Bible studies using arts and crafts has drawn on her experience as a nursery

Dee, a local parent and leader for All Age Church.



assistant, and it has also helped her to be more confident in her English language and communication, as someone whose first language is not English. Describing the difference it has made to her children, Dee said: “It's built their confidence and supported them to make friends”. Dee's son has a speech delay and it's helped him to “come out of his shell” and it's supporting her children to learn about and understand their faith.

In terms of the impact on her own journey of faith, “There has definitely been growth in my faith... Every time I go I learn something different. Recently we talked about the story of Moses ... I felt like Moses as well, because I came from very far away. I don't live here with my family, it's just me and my kids - this story made me not be scared, to trust in God... I could see myself in the story”.

“ If you asked me 2-3 years ago, does Stamford Hill have a Christian community, I would have said no - I would never have thought of something like All Age Church. But through the tools of organising, we've been able to identify something.

The church now integrates the congregations at an All Age Eucharist on the first Sunday morning of the month, where the monthly afternoon congregation are also encouraged to come and everyone eats a bring and share meal afterwards together. As with the other case studies in the report, those adults and children now attending live locally, too.

“If you asked me 2-3 years ago, does Stamford Hill have a Christian community, I would have said no - I would never have thought of something like All Age Church. But through the tools of organising, we've been able to identify something ...Just sitting in the park with another mum, watching our children play...ends up with them visiting All Age Church!” (Keisha)

Whilst AAC isn't a new idea within the Church per se, it's new to St Andrew's. Though the model has lots in common with and can learn from initiatives like Messy Church and other Fresh Expressions of Church aimed at families and children - it's worth noting that what is unique about this initiative is the way it emerged. By gathering new people - 'non-church', local people - through one-to-one listening to create a new service: the time, the content and the sessions have all been planned and run by new local people and not through existing church members. Another significant area of encouragement is a weekly youth group (aged 11-18) that has started up on Friday evenings in recent months, with roughly 10 young people attending each week.



Fragile and Plentiful Growth

It is worth noting that St Andrew's is still on a journey of growth, that is fragile as well as fruitful. Whilst “All Age Church” is a major area of growth for a church which previously had hardly any children on Sundays, Charis observed a small drop off in 2023 after a big influx in the 2nd to 3rd year of the project, which she puts down in part to people moving out of the area due to factors around work, housing and poverty.

She has also observed variations in church attendance patterns, with some families preferring only to attend the All Age monthly services. Towards the start of 2024 numbers rose but more recently have gone down again. St Andrew's story is an embodiment of both the fragility of the fruits of this approach to church growth, and the prayerful patience it requires. The church's journey also serves as an important reminder that numerical growth is not all that counts: evident in the deepening of the congregation's confidence, leadership and discipleship, and their growing impact in the neighbourhood.

“ ... It feels like you have to be able to go much slower and patiently than you naturally want to go... Every time there is a temptation to do something quickly, it's about saying ‘Have we spent enough time building relationships, having one-to-ones so people feel like they really own this?’

Reflecting on the Organising approach as a model for church, Charis shared: “... It feels like you have to be able to go much slower and patiently than you naturally want to go... Every time there is a temptation to do something quickly, it's

about saying ‘Have we spent enough time building relationships, having one-to-ones so people feel like they really own this?’because that will be sustainable, and over time I think I'm trusting this approach because I'm seeing that it does work”.



CHAPTER THREE ST BARNABAS WALTHAMSTOW

ST BARNABAS CHURCH (PARISH OF ST BARNABAS AND ST JAMES THE GREATER) partnered with CTC in 2022 having been involved with community organising and Citizens UK for several years prior to that. Since then, the church has harnessed the potential of community organising to develop lay leaders, grow, deepen and share faith, foster relationships of trust in the local community, and grow the church in number - with a particular growth in families and children.

Context and Background

ST BARNABAS CHURCH is an Anglican church in the Anglo-Catholic tradition that has served the community of Walthamstow, in the east London Borough Waltham Forest, for over 100 years. The church sits close to a large housing estate, which is also served by a local mosque.

The congregation of St Barnabas itself is ethnically mixed - including several Afro-Caribbean members who moved to Walthamstow in the 1950s and 60s as part of the Windrush generation, as well as a large Filipino community who have arrived over the last 50 years. The church's diversity is part of its legacy, owing to the welcoming approach of successive incumbents which allowed



St Barnabas is a very unique church... you can see the image of God, all the colours and languages and attitudes and strengths are there...it's a unique congregation.



Sunday Mass at St Barnabas.

different communities and ethnic communities to serve in the church when that may have been more unusual in other churches at the time.

The current incumbent, Fr Salvador Telen said: "St Barnabas is a very unique church... you can see the image of God, all the colours and languages and attitudes and strengths are there...it's a unique congregation".

Prior to partnering with CTC the church had faced significant challenges; a common story of urban church decline, compounded by the sudden departure of their incumbent priest in 2019. Co-Churchwarden Averil noted that whilst being an incredibly difficult time for the

congregation it was also a galvanising moment in which people came together around their desire for the church to remain open, and indeed, to grow. Averil also reflected that her membership of Waltham Forest Citizens (Citizens UK) was a source of strength - both in terms of the support she received from other local churches, faith institutions and community leaders in the alliance, as well as the leadership training she had received.

Fr Salvador, priest in a neighbouring church, took on the parish in 2022 in an enlargement of his role. Shortly after the appointment of Fr Salvador, CTC approached St Barnabas to become



Averil, Churchwarden and community leader.

a formal partner church of the OFG Project. The attraction for the church came from a sense of wanting to ground the approach of community organising in prayer and theology, and a desire to harness organising more intentionally in the service of church mission and growth. Averil also expressed a hope to listen more effectively within the church congregation and community, a desire to focus more intensely on developing lay leaders, and a curiosity to see where the Holy Spirit might lead.

Fr Salvador Telen.



Prior Engagement with Community Organising

In contrast to the other case studies, St Barnabas already had some experience with community organising prior to the partnership with CTC. Three leaders, including Averil, her husband Mark, and Fr Salvador, had already completed community organising training with Citizens UK and the church had been a dues-paying member of TELCO since 2010 and Waltham Forest Citizens since 2016 (when it was founded) participating in a number of borough wide campaigns and actions.¹⁶ These individuals had already started having one-to-one conversations within the congregation, and this early experience, Averil reflected, helped to develop the existing St Barnabas church mission-oriented activities.

Two examples of initiatives the church had run prior to 2022 using the approach of community organising that have formed the foundation of subsequent initiatives and contributed to the church's growth are as follows:

1. Chocolate and Chat

This initiative began during the coronavirus pandemic and involved using the outdoor space around the church for local young people, residents and families to come and have a hot chocolate and conversation with one another on Thursday afternoons. This initiative was significant in establishing relationships with families from the local mosque in particular. Averil comments that "The church has become a space that Muslims in the local community feel at home, and able to use." Fr Salvador also noted that since partnering with CTC, the church is more intentional about integrating a practice of one-to-ones into these sessions as a way of more intentionally getting to know residents.



2. Covid Vaccination Campaign, 2021

In 2021 the church joined with other local institutions belonging to Waltham Forest Citizens in a local campaign to enable hundreds of undocumented people to have access to Covid vaccinations. Averil is a residential care home manager in Walthamstow and was aware that there were people in the church and community working as carers and childcare providers who were undocumented. This meant they had no access to book vaccines, putting their personal safety and ability to work at risk. Many had never seen a GP because they were afraid of the threat of deportation, and many didn't have NHS numbers. In 2020, CTC, as the East London Near Neighbours Hub, funded an online panel discussion event

on Covid-19 vaccinations, and the inequitable distribution and take up amongst minority ethnic communities. As a result of this, Averil and her church were able to connect with Barts NHS Trust Health Community representative, who connected the church to vaccines for undocumented migrants. Eventually, working with Barts and Waltham Forest Council, the church and Leyton Library were both opened as pop-up vaccination clinics. Averil Reflected: "We were able to run this campaign because of the trust we have with local people, particularly undocumented people (some of whom were part of the congregation). Equally we could do it because we were part of the Citizens UK alliance and in relationship with other churches, mosques, schools...which has given us the recognition and relational power to make change".

Building a Relational Culture

A crucial element of the partnership with CTC was a commitment to a regular habit of one-to-one relational meetings across the congregation, which has been helpful in terms of deepening the faith & discipleship of the congregation and supporting members to develop as leaders.

Fr Salvador reflected "sometimes we don't know how to really speak to one another, to know one another, but with one-to-ones we have the tools to really see one another". He gave the example of making space after services for one-to-one conversations to happen. A monthly extended worship and reflection service called "Hour of PoWeR" (Praise, Worship and Reflection) was started by Mark, who is also the church's director of music and is now training for ordination. Through this initiative congregants have reflected on questions in one-to-ones such as "Where do you see yourself in your journey of faith?" "How am I serving in my church?" "Where would I like to be?". This has deepened their faith formation and enabled many in the congregation to share their faith more confidently. Averil notes that for some church cultures, this kind of sharing during a Sunday service would be alien, so it was important to create a space adjacent to Sunday services for this to take place.

Focussing on the needs and aspirations of the congregation through intentional listening has enabled the church to reorganise its priorities and to begin new ministries, for example developing a Wednesday fellowship for elders, a community "Warm Space" (explored in the next section), developing youth and children's ministry, and now thinking intentionally about a space for men and fathers.

The "Flow of Discipleship" that connects evangelism with leadership development, has also provided a great way for congregants to assess where they are on the scale and where they would like to be, and has helped the church as a whole be more intentional



about mission in the wider community.¹⁷ One lay leader interviewed said the tool helped her personally to reflect on her commitment to the church and her journey of faith over time, encouraging her to commit more deeply to church.

Lay Leadership Development

From the start, an important focus was developing new and emerging lay leaders within the congregation. A long-standing member of the church reflected: "historically there had been a pattern of the same people taking things on, and that can be difficult to break, but recently there has been a shift." This person, who

has benefited from lay leadership training on CTC's Olive Wagstaff programme also noted that reflecting honestly on where power lies within the church using the power analysis tool, had been helpful in enabling this shift. Together with community organiser support from CTC's Charnelle Barclay, this shift has helped develop the core leadership team of the church, so that now seven adults have taken on new positions of leadership within the church and community.

Fr Salvador added: "We are growing... not just in number, but in the number of people who are stepping into leadership in our church". Grace and Nora's stories, examples of this development, are outlined later in the chapter.

Historically there had been a pattern of the same people taking things on, and that can be difficult to break, but recently there has been a shift.

¹⁶ TELCO (The East London Communities Organisation) is the founding chapter of Citizens UK.

¹⁷ See figure 2 in the introduction to this report/ or quote appropriate page number



Nora, Mark, Fr Salvador, Averil and Grace at their graduation from the Olive Wagstaff Programme.

There has been a particular emphasis upon developing parents and children, which is translating into growth in young families. Mark, drawing on youth ministry experience from the USA, saw that strong family involvement in church with activities for the whole family meant that youth and family development was more sustainable and fruitful. “Once you take care of the families, the church will grow”.

A parent, Ronnie, has been supported to take a lead on organising events and outreach to parents and families in the church and community. This has included a special Mother’s Day lunch and family trips during school half-term holidays. In addition to adults growing in leadership ability, over 20 children have taken on positions of leadership in the church - serving regularly in church on a 21-child acolyte rota.



NEW AND EMERGING LEADERS: NORA’S STORY

Nora has been part of the church since she and her family arrived in London from the Philippines many years ago. Whilst she initially had a more passive role in church, after her children started to get older, she felt a sense of wanting to contribute more.

In the past few years she has played a key role in strengthening relationships with the local neighbourhood community association and initiating a Warm Space for the community in the church hall. Organising skills have been vital to this work, for example: she has co-written a successful funding bid, chaired several community meetings and shared testimony at a special event in the Houses of Parliament hosted by the Warm Welcome Campaign, where she highlighted the work at St Barnabas.

Crucial to building Nora’s confidence and making the Warm Space a success was the mentoring and coaching of a



community organiser (Charnelle) and more recently, formal lay leadership training via enrolling on the Olive Wagstaff programme. All this has developed her understanding of how one-to-ones,

relational leadership, power and the cycle of action can support this initiative - as well as her own development as a community leader. Nora says: “To serve my church is a privilege”.

However, this focus on families has not been at the expense of older people. Averil has continued to work on developing other church leaders - in particular the elderly who once held key roles in church (for example former church secretaries and PCC members). By engaging and developing the elderly church members, they have been supported to maintain their network using the “Healthy Walking Club” and “Memory Cafe” to engage with other elderly people in the community. Averil added: “The elders, with their wisdom, add depth to the St. Barnabas church family, mentoring the youth and parents.”

“It’s been such a joy to watch others in the church step up. When you have one-to-ones you know there is massive potential in everyone... it’s about being able to step back and allow others to find their purpose, vocation and self-interest”. (Averil)

“It’s been such a joy to watch others in the church step up. When you have one-to-ones you know there is massive potential in everyone... it’s about being able to step back and allow others to find their purpose, vocation and self-interest.”



St Barnabas Warm Space.

Relationships, Recognition & Mission in the Wider Community

Whilst St Barnabas has always had a strong tradition of reaching out into the local community, harnessing the tools of community organising (in particular the practice of one-to-one conversations and tools like neighbourhood mapping) have enabled the church to be more intentional about building relationships. Stronger connections in the community have generated more opportunities for members of the congregation to share their faith with those who are not Christians, a vital part of healthy church growth. In the words of Fr Salvador, “Organising with CTC gave us the tools and knowledge to develop our church and vision”.

In a number of key ways, the church’s Warm Space initiative, which began in Autumn 2022, built on the relationships and trust established through the 2021 Covid vaccination campaign. Nora, whose story has been highlighted, noticed a grant the council had advertised for community groups willing to offer a space for the community to keep warm during the winter in response to the Cost of Living Crisis.

Here was an opportunity to serve and connect better with the neighbourhood whilst also supporting the church practically through an external contribution toward its costs. The funding was jointly awarded to the church and

residents’ group, enabling the dilapidated and poorly used prefab church hall ‘Stafford Hall’ to receive a ‘makeover’. The hall was redecorated by a team of church and community volunteers, supplemented by donations from lampshades to puzzles. The St Barnabas Warm Space runs twice a week for anyone to come and play games, have a hot drink and conversation.

Averil felt that trust established both with local vulnerable people and migrants, and with the local council and other stakeholders has enabled the Warm Space initiative to flourish, noting that some of the people supported originally through the vaccination campaign are now coming to the Warm space. Additionally, as a result of relationships built with the council in 2021, the council then provided the church with some paid time of a member of staff to teach ESOL classes for migrants, and in recognition of the good work of the church during Covid, the church was offered some leftover money from a Covid Recovery fund.¹⁸

Crucially however, the approach of organising and OFG has supported the Warm Space to become a sustainable, relational, and missional initiative which is developing leaders, fostering action

¹⁸ Since the original interviews for this report, Averil was selected to be the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) lead and co-chair of the Borough of Sanctuary Steering Committee. Working with the local authority to secure Borough of Sanctuary status has enabled a weekly drop-in, fully staffed, community hub for migrants to support them with questions relating to benefits, housing, education, ESOL amongst others.

for the common good, and seeing new people come to church and explore faith. Mark shared about how the Warm Space has provided many opportunities for conversations about faith, in an accessible and open way. For example, a man who attends the Warm Space regularly initiated a conversation about re-exploring the faith of his childhood. He now comes to the community choir and is considering attending Sunday services. “It’s a safe space as well as a Warm Space, people want to join in and be a part of something...It’s the opportunity to open up discussion, and see what comes out of it... the Warm Space has provided the opportunity to have those conversations”. Averil also emphasised how just like the community organising mantra of “people before programme” there was “no agenda...only to offer the space as a community living room for all”.

Through being intentional about having one-to-one conversations and building relationships of trust and depth with those who come to the Warm space, this has also yielded a powerful action for the common good alongside asylum seekers coming to the drop-in.

In January 2024, 400 asylum seekers being locally housed in temporary hotel accommodation, many of whom were attending the drop in at the church, were issued with eviction notices to leave the hotel within seven days. St Barnabas together with the Waltham Forest Citizens alliance and local grassroots community groups in Waltham Forest

“

It’s a safe space as well as a warm space, people want to join in and be a part of something...It’s the opportunity to open up discussion, and see what comes out of it... the warm space has provided the opportunity to have those conversations.



Mark, Ordinand and Director of Music.

led a community organising action on the hotel operator, Clearwater Springs Read Homes, to support the 400 asylum seeking friends. As a result, the majority of all of the residents were relocated to London Borough hotels, rather than being dispersed across the country as planned – a significant win.

Additionally, organising tools like neighbourhood mapping have supported Nora and her team to think strategically about how they build relationships with other organisations in the community, leading to new opportunities and resources. The Walthamstow Warm Space has continued running through all seasons as place of “warm relationship” and has been part of the Warm Welcome Campaign, a National Campaign featuring 4,200 places of welcome around the UK.



Members of the church and Waltham Forest Citizens gather for an action to challenge the unfair eviction of asylum seekers staying in local hotels.

Other Activities

The Warm Space is not the only activity providing a “porous” entry point for those in the community who may not otherwise have engaged with church, there has also been a more conscious awareness of how the church stewards its building assets, and an ‘opening up’ to the community. Bi-monthly concerts, an art trail and a number of choirs take place in the church. The Stafford Hall space is also being used for a ‘pop up pub in the church’, and more recently, the church has initiated a community gardening project led by another lay leader named Grace.

“We want people to know that our space is your space, and whether you worship with us or not, we want to have that connection. And it’s starting to show in the growth of the church that we’re seeing”. (Mark)

Stewardship & Financial Resilience

The increased use of the church’s building assets for the wider community is translating to an increase in the parish’s financial resilience. Stafford Hall, having been renovated, is now being hired on

Youth Acolytes serve during a Sunday Eucharist.



We want people to know that our space is your space, whether you worship with us or not.

a regular basis, in addition to the main church space. This has resulted in a 40% increase in usage and significant increase in the income generated for the church and its missional activities. These changes have enabled a sensitive discussion with the PCC and congregation about a significant increase in the church’s parish share contribution to the diocese to take place - from £10,800 to £15,600 per year.

A further result of the OFG partnership, Averil reflected, was a greater sense of ownership for the church and its mission felt by the congregation as a whole, which has resulted in a 20% increase in regular plate monthly offering from the congregation. Having

the confidence to apply for funding bids and grants like that which funded the Warm Space, and an ambitious vision for what the church might do with more resource, is something that the project has directly supported.

Numerical Growth

Significantly, the changes outlined above: the growth in the faith and leadership of the congregation and their ability and willingness to reach out into the community are yielding tangible fruit in terms of numbers attending church and coming to faith - most strikingly amongst families and children, the vast majority of whom live in the parish neighbourhood. As of Autumn 2023 there were 50 adults and 20 children attending on a typical Sunday and five new families regularly worshipping at St Barnabas since the partnership with CTC began in 2022.

The leaders interviewed all agreed that the value of the community organising approach is not just about doing new things, but rather being more “thoughtful, reflective and intentional about what we are already doing and want to do”. (Mark). They also agreed that this work takes time and patience. It’s worth reinforcing that in the case of St Barnabas much relationship and trust building had taken place prior to the CTC partnership - however this work had been supported by the practices of community organising.

Reflecting finally, Averil said: “For us, the true value of Organising for Growth, is that we have started to grow the congregation’s membership and leadership in the church in a meaningful, impactful and sustainable way.”



GRACE’S STORY

Grace has been a member of St Barnabas for four years, although she hadn’t previously taken on any leadership roles. Through the process of having initial one-to-ones with Averil and the CTC organiser, Charnelle, they helped Grace to identify gifts within herself. “It encouraged and inspired me to step up, along with a desire to inspire my six year old daughter”.

Grace had some experience volunteering on a gardening initiative previously and a particular passion about caring for the environment, “I thought, maybe I could do this and share this passion with others”. Charnelle supported Grace to make connections with others in the community including the gardener at a neighbouring church that had a gardening outreach.

She and others from the church then identified a piece of land that the council had left derelict, and were able to access

in kind support from the council in the form of seedbeds etc, equipment. As well as fostering connection with the wider community, the project has also developed the children in the church, many of whom have got involved and developed a passion for and understanding of connecting with the earth. Since then, Grace has completed the Wagstaff programme, has led training sessions on one-to-ones for the wider congregation, and was a key leader in the asylum hotels action.



For us, the true value of Organising for Growth, is that we have started to grow the congregation’s membership and leadership in the church in a meaningful, impactful and sustainable way.



CHAPTER FOUR COMMUNITY ORGANISING AND NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

As well as renewing existing acts of worship, east London parishes have harnessed community organising to develop New Worshipping Communities (NWCs). Building on the story of All Age Church in Stamford Hill, this chapter will look at “Choir Church” in Tower Hamlets and “Holy Moly” in Dalston, which have enabled parishes to reach people who had not connected with existing acts of worship.

The Church of England has embraced New Worshipping Communities as a way of reaching people who are not being engaged by existing acts of worship. Questions have been raised about this strategy: not least whether this development is a concession to an increasingly atomised, consumerist society, instead of gathering people from diverse backgrounds into a single unified Eucharistic community.



Fr Richard Springer and Elizabeth Stout, Children and Families Pastor at St George's, with children from St George-in-the-East Choir Church, based at St Paul's CE Primary School, Whitechapel.

The three case studies in this chapter suggest a way of integrating NWCs into parish life - harnessing the potential of community organising to help leaders within the parish and helping its main expression of Sunday worship to become more, not less, diverse and inclusive. We end with an NWC which is renewing neighbourhood-based ministry in an area of Newham where the previous parish church closed in 1961.

Choir Church at St George-in-the-East

Choir Church came out of an innovative partnership between the Parish of St George-in-the-East (in Shadwell, Tower Hamlets) and CTC, and has been a key part of the parish's story of congregational renewal and growth over the past nine years.

In 2015, with an average Sunday attendance of just 15, St George-in-the-East faced an uncertain future. Instead of replacing the previous full-time Rector, the Diocese undertook a review to discern a sustainable future for the parish. This led to the establishment of a partnership between the parish and CTC - harnessing the practices of community organising, rooted in prayer, to renew its life and mission.

As part of this partnership, Tom Daggett was recruited as director of music for the church. Choir Church came from a request to do some thinking around how children and families could be better integrated into the life of the parish.

As Tom Daggett explained, relations between the church and its school, St Paul's Wellclose Square, though “warm”, were not “proactive” and a greater challenge was that the Sunday congregation itself was at a “low ebb”.

While the language of NWCs is relatively recent, the concept goes back a long way. Back in 1895, this account of St George's ministry appeared in a range of church publications.

Evening service has begun. The grand interior has seats for twelve hundred, and some five hundred persons are present... Sunday evening congregations in connection with the parish church are to be found elsewhere than at St. George's. There is a very good evening gathering at the sub-parish church of St. Matthew's, Prince's Square. There is a service of a mission character at Tait Street, and another mission-hall in St. George's Street. The simpler and shorter services held here are much appreciated by those who are unable to be absent long from home, or who from any cause find the services

*at the parish church too long. If we call at the three Sunday schools in the afternoon we shall see them filled with nearly one thousand children.*¹⁹

The numbers at St George's today are more modest, though at around 60 its Sunday congregation is now larger than at any time since the Second World War. The story of St George's shows that growth in number and social impact can go hand-in-hand, if community organising is used to develop the agency of grassroots lay leaders. For example, the parish has instigated campaigns which will secure around 60 new affordable homes on nearby land - with those members of the parish who need those homes at the heart of this campaign, thereby developing their agency in the process.

New Worshipping Communities have been central to St George's growth in both number and impact. In 2016, after one-to-ones and congregational meetings, St George's agreed a two-track approach to growth. As with the older ‘mission rooms’, the parish developed NWCs to meet people where they already were. Also, the congregation committed to adapting their existing Sunday morning worship in the light

¹⁹ Cited in Canon Michael Ainsworth's history of St George-in-the-East, online at www.stgitehistory.org.uk/media/1895sgite.html

of what was learnt from these new worshipping communities. The approach to renewing worship within the building and planting NWCs was “both/and” not ‘either/or’. Rather than segregating the worshippers at St George's, its NWCs helped to make the Sunday morning Mass more inclusive of people whom it was not reaching.

St George's first NWC was “Choir Church”. It was launched in February 2017, and consisted of a weekly ‘choir club’ after school on a Wednesday for children in years 3-6 and a monthly Eucharist on the first Wednesday of the month. Held in the school, with the choir singing the liturgy and anyone from the neighbourhood welcome to attend, parents were also specifically invited. Members of the Sunday congregation were also invited to attend the monthly mass at the school, and a “Choir Churchwarden” was appointed from among the congregation to work with the rector to ensure the close relationship between the two. This relationship of reciprocity between the existing congregation and NWC has manifested in the form of an annual Choir Church BBQ in the rectory garden, and regular “Choir Church” Sundays where the children are invited to sing as part of the Sunday Eucharist service and their families are invited to come along.



“ This wasn’t an act of worship for adults at which children were welcomed as passive participants, but a creative act of worship with children and their spirituality at the heart.

The decision to launch it at the parish school flowed from the fact that no children attending the school worshipped at the Sunday Mass. As Tom Daggett explained, planting an NWC “gave us the opportunity to start something from scratch which was faithful, bold, and fundamentally had children and families at its heart... this wasn’t an act of

worship for adults at which children were welcomed as passive participants, but a creative act of worship at which children and their spirituality are at the heart of the mission of the local church”.

Choir Church has had a significant impact on the faith formation of parents and adults, and is leading to numerical growth in overall church engagement

and attendance. Several interviewees reflected that Choir church provided an alternative and more accessible space for adults as well as children, who may not previously have engaged with church.

The Rector of St George-in-the-East, Fr Richard Springer, reflects that “Adults, who had children at school that wouldn’t normally have engaged with a Sunday service, might come to an act of worship during the week and then perhaps in turn go to a Sunday service”. This has led to significant growth in the Sunday congregation of St George in the East both in numbers and discipleship. A significant proportion of subsequent baptisms and confirmations at St George’s have involved children and adults who first made their connection with the parish at Choir Church. Tom Daggett recounted the story of one young man, who was part of the first Choir Church in 2017, who at his baptism shared how his faith was nurtured through singing hymns at school as part of the NWC.

Choir Church was pioneered in a missional context that presented several



“ It’s about connecting what children see in their lives and communities with what they sing, how they pray, and what they pray for - nourishing a growing person who is able to act for the common good, combining prayer, faith and action.

potential barriers to success, and yet proved to be effective despite these. The parish of St George-in-the-East is a diverse and deprived parish, home to a large Bengali Muslim community. 66.7% of the parish is not white British, with a large Bengali Muslim community from whom the majority of pupils at the parish school are drawn.²⁰

Choir Church deliberately made use of community organising approaches. Children were involved in a number of inter-faith campaigns for justice involving St George’s - singing “action” songs for campaigns around affordable housing

and food poverty. One memorable moment included a special rendition of the Disney *Frozen* Movie song “Let it Go” for a campaign with Citizens UK called ‘Don’t Freeze Iceland out’ calling for the inclusion of Iceland supermarket in the government’s free school meal scheme during the Covid Pandemic. As Tom Daggett explained. “It’s about connecting what children see in their lives and communities with what they sing, how they pray, and what they pray for - nourishing a growing person who is able to act for the common good, combining prayer, faith and action.”

The community organising approach described above allowed the deepening of faith among previously nominal Christians to go alongside a deepening of relationships with Muslims - sharing the role of their respective faiths in motivating action for the common good. Tom Daggett reflected that making the connection between liturgical seasons and Christian festivals, and Muslim seasons and celebrations (for example connections between Lent and Ramadan) had been helpful. He emphasised the importance of confident, faithful witness alongside a “holy curiosity” and mutual respect for

difference: “We are proudly evangelistic, not in a proselytising way, but as witnesses. Part of education is taking each other out of our own experience”. Over the years, numbers at Choir Church have fluctuated, with numbers currently around 10-15 as it rebuilds after a cohort left for secondary school. Another exciting development at St George’s has been the growth in teenage attendance, many from families initially engaged through Choir Church.

Two other worshipping communities at St George’s were “English, Prayer, Action” and “The Open Table”. English, Prayer, Action, was a worshipping community that gathered migrant workers on the fringe of the City of London to pray in their native languages, learn English and organise for justice. The Open Table has both engaged with homeless people of all faiths and none to build community and organise for justice - and has made St George’s more accessible and inclusive for homeless people who want to join its worshipping life.²¹

Just four years after it had faced the possibility of losing a full-time Rector and being on a trajectory likely to lead to closure, the Diocese of London designated St George-in-the-East as a “Resource Church” helping other parishes to use the same methods to renew their life. Inspired by the Parable of the Mustard Seed, St George’s model has been one of peer-to-peer sharing - helping other parishes to harness the potential of OFG. At Trinity Saints in Hackney and St Matthew’s Bethnal Green this has had a particular focus on the development of NWCs.

²⁰ cuf.org.uk/parish/230159



Members of the Open Table NWC.

²¹ The story of The Open Table is told in Shermara Fletcher, Angus Ritchie and Selina Stone, “Building Together: Catholic and Pentecostal perspectives on Theology and Housing” in Graham Tomlin and Malcolm Brown (ed) *Coming Home: Christian Perspectives on Housing* (Church House Publishing, 20). The work of English, Prayer, Action has led on to new missional work by CTC and partner churches among migrant workers, including the establishing of St Katharine Cree as a “Guild Church for Workers” in the City of London.



Rev'd Laura Luz, at Holy Moly NWC, Trinity Saints Dalston.

“We wanted to develop a different way of worshipping at Holy Trinity that was more inclusive of the local community, children and families. These were people who were not coming on a Sunday so we needed to do something that was different from the Sunday Eucharist.”

“Holy Moly” at Trinity Saints

Trinity Saints is a United Benefice in Haggerston, Hackney, formed of two previous parishes (All Saints Haggerston and Holy Trinity Dalston). Sunday worship now happens at All Saints, with around 50 people attending each Sunday.

Trinity Saints began harnessing some of the tools of community organising to support a midweek worshipping community at Holy Trinity Church in Dalston, that had originally begun in 2020 prior to the first Covid lockdown. This engaged parents and families from the Church of England primary school opposite, renewing the rhythm of regular worship and mission in a church which had stopped having its own Sunday services several years previously.

“Holy Moly, It’s Monday” takes place one Monday evening a month. The parish website describes it in this way:

The evening begins with a service where we celebrate the meal of bread and wine Jesus shared with his friends. We read the bible together in a way that never feels boring. We pray with bubbles and gather on beanbags. The Gospel Choir at Holy Trinity School leads our worship with some well-known Gospel tunes to clap, dance and sing along with.

After our service, we eat together, as a chance for families to sit together and carers to eat with their children and get to know others in the community. Guests are always welcome to come for the meal, or the service, or both. We host baptisms at this service, and love to welcome those who are new to church, as well as old friends.

As the Vicar, the Rev'd Laura Luz, explains: “I heard about Choir Church at the time when we wanted to develop a different way of worshipping at Holy Trinity that was more inclusive of the local community, children and families. These were people who were not coming on a Sunday so we needed to do something that was different from the Sunday Eucharist.”

“Holy Moly” harnessed the potential of Gospel music, rather than the traditional English choral music but in other ways it took a similar approach. Tom Daggett helped Trinity Saints secure

funding for a trained music teacher to develop the work. This investment supported a monthly act of worship on a Wednesday afternoon that is now attended by an average of 20 children and 15 adults. Like Choir Church these numbers fluctuate: at a recent service, 10 children were baptised and over 90 people attended.

Laura reflects that “if anything, I sometimes wish we’d begun with more of a community organising approach” to ensure that Holy Moly was more fully “owned” by its worshippers. Now that Trinity Saints has embraced the organising method more fully, with Laura and others on the team having one-to-ones with parents, and thinking intentionally about developing the leadership of volunteers, responsibility and agency is being shared more widely in the worshipping community.

At St Andrew’s, Stamford Hill and St George-in-the-East, many new worshippers have moved from the NWC to the main Sunday service. By contrast, Holy Moly has become a distinct community that is sustaining disciples, and has been the main focus of Trinity Saints’ youth and children’s work. In each case, the development of the NWC has sought to respond to the way faith would be best supported among those participating - and in different contexts, which has led to different outcomes.



As we will see in the next chapter, the wider OFG process has since helped Trinity Saints to develop a new project to engage teenagers - so that there is a pathway for continuing spiritual accompaniment once children have left primary school.

Choir Church at St Matthew’s, Bethnal Green

St Matthew’s Bethnal Green is an Anglo-Catholic parish in Tower Hamlets, East London, established in the 1750s. The congregation is a modest size with an average Sunday attendance of 25. The parish is small but densely populated, with around 30% of parishioners being Muslim. There are eight schools in the parish and previously a church school which closed in 2021. Mother Erin Clark, rector since 2019, described a “neighbourly, interfaith focus” to the church’s mission. In 2021, St Matthew’s began to work with St George’s and CTC to explore the potential of community organising for church growth - and its Choir Church is a tangible fruit of this partnership.

It has kept the Choir Church pillars of local school engagement, community organising and music, but established them in a way that works in a different context.

In contrast to St George-in-the-East, St Matthew’s Choir Church was started



Children and volunteers do crafts together at Holy Moly, Trinity Saints Dalston

without the partnership of a parish school. The PCC began a conversation about exploring Choir Church, in the context of a discussion around children and families outreach in the parish. This coincided with the news that the church primary school was closing, sparking a concern that the church would no longer have the same engagement with local children and families that it had previously. However, at the same time a new Ordinand, Molly Boot, arrived, bringing a musical background and experience. Choir Church in Bethnal Green therefore initially served a response to children from the school dispersing, with a desire to offer both a “touch point” and “landing space” for those children and families. In time the context evolved and it became a space for any children and families in the area.

The process leading up to Choir Church’s launch at St Matthew’s involved a year of listening, a core part of the community organising approach. Building on connections Molly and Erin had built up the previous year through school assemblies, one-to-ones with headteachers of local schools, parents and local arts charities were really important to “get the lay of the land”, build relationships and test whether there would be an appetite for something like Choir Church.

Unlike St George’s, the church wouldn’t have access to school space,

“It’s been brilliant... church is not something I would have engaged with without coming to Choir Church.”

and there was some hesitancy about whether having the sessions in the church building would make it harder to engage some children and families given the diverse multi faith context of the neighbourhood. Emboldened by what had emerged through its one-to-ones, the church decided to go ahead and be explicit that “This is a faith formation programme. Everyone is welcome but we are doing this to make music, grow in faith and build community together.”

St Matthew’s Choir Church launched in September 2021 and has been running since, with a weekly choir club which includes a theme, game, related activity and singing. Alongside this sits a monthly Sunday Evensong at which the choir sing. The service is followed by tea and cake. Numbers have fluctuated over the years but on average around 8 children aged between 7 and 12 attend Choir club, with 7 children and 12 adults attending Evensong each month.

As with Holy Moly, St Matthew’s Choir Church has a distinct congregation, rather than large numbers of families transitioning to the Sunday morning service. When we consider the different stories of St Andrew’s, St George-in-the-East, Trinity Saints and St Matthew’s, we can see that each parish has sought to focus its support where the energy seems to be. At St Matthew’s, Erin explains, “the biggest barrier to (children’s) participation is unpredictability, particularly within a more sacramental and liturgical tradition... so something more focussed on children like Choir Church makes a space for that unpredictability and strikes the balance between formal worship and liturgy and something more relaxed. A welcoming space that is great for both kids and adults” at a time when the morning congregation struggles to have the necessary volunteers for a separate Sunday school.



Children rehearsing at Choir Church, St Matthew's Bethnal Green

As one Choir Church parent explains, coming to the monthly Evensong has “come to feel a bit like being in a family - getting to know other parents. It’s been brilliant... church is not something I would have engaged with without coming to Choir Church”.

Whilst Choir Church functions as a NWC distinct from the Sunday congregation, the impact upon the wider parish itself has been striking, and there is a level of reciprocity between the two, as in the case of St George-in-the-East. A number of lay people from the Sunday congregation are now taking up regular volunteer and leadership roles within Choir Church, which has played a role in their vocational discernment. Molly described a woman in the congregation in difficult personal circumstances, who is now able to take on a leadership role with Choir Church “in a really empowering way... that’s exciting”.

Whilst acknowledging that Choir Church is taking some of the time and investment away from Sunday mornings Erin reflected “it’s building our sense of parish, and our sense of who we are beyond just mass on a Sunday”. Whilst most of the PCC attend on Sunday mornings, Erin reflected that Choir Church has expanded their understanding of parish sufficiently that they are becoming more ambitious in terms of fundraising for mission and committing some of reserves to expand staff team. “This is a huge shift for St Matthew’s, those ideas not coming from me... seeing possibilities and being willing to invest”.

Erin reflected the importance of churches of all traditions taking seriously the faith formation of children, “to think of children as human beings, not unfinished adults... to take seriously their stories and faith development, just as important as any adult”.

The community organising approach and tools are at the heart of St Matthew’s Choir Church. At St Matthew’s, children are developed and supported to co-create and co-lead sessions. This has taken different forms such as children taking the lead on teaching music that they’ve

A Palm Sunday procession with Choir Church children and families, St Matthew's Bethnal Green



learned at school or at home including songs in their own first language. At the Evensong children are invited to share their own experience in relation to the readings. This emphasis on making space for children and young people to explore and share their deeper motivations has led on to exploration of social justice issues such as the care of creation, Black history and hospitality to refugees. Evident in all of the interviews was the fact that Choir Church is an incredibly effective vehicle for nurturing the faith of children, and supporting their wider social confidence and development.

As Molly explained, “It’s about discerning and taking action as a group,

and enabling children to take the lead”. This combination of singing, formation in faith and social action has contributed to a growth in social confidence. “I’ve watched children who were extremely anxious and quiet when they first began becoming a lot more confident, socially” - particularly those age groups most profoundly impacted by school closure during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Christchurch Three Mills

As this report was being written, CTC had begun working with Christchurch Three Mills - a rather different NWC which serves a more distinct geographical area. Under the leadership of the Rev’d

Dan Scott, it has established a locally rooted congregation which currently averages around 30 on a Sunday morning and is on a continuing trajectory of growth.²² Christchurch celebrates Holy Communion each Sunday in a community space, and is named after a previous parish church which had served the area and was closed in 1961.

CTC is using the methods described in this report to support Christchurch in its mission - developing leaders, growing the congregation, acting for justice, and seeking to achieve long-term financial sustainability. Christ Church exemplifies another kind of NWC which has echoes of the congregations established by St George-in-the-East in the 1800s. Already, there are promising signs of impact, and we look forward to telling the story of this work in a future study.

Conclusions

At the start of this chapter, we described the potential of New Worshipping Communities, and some of the questions being raised about their relationship to more established models of ministry. These stories offer one small contribution to the conversation, describing how the community organising method has helped smaller, sacramental parishes to harness the potential of NWCs while increasing the depth and breadth of relationships across difference.

At St George-in-the-East, as at St Andrew’s Stamford Hill, the NWC has drawn young people and families into the Sunday Mass. In Dalston and Bethnal Green, where distinct congregations have developed, the community organising method has drawn people from different congregations to engage in shared acts of social mission - and at Trinity Saints an exciting new project has emerged which will engage both teenagers from the Sunday congregation and give children at Holy Moly a “next step” when they leave primary school.

²² The founding of Christchurch included support from All Hallows Bow (where Dan was ordinand) and St John’s Stratford (the parish within which Three Mills is set, and from which some of the initial congregation were drawn).

“It’s building our sense of parish, and our sense of who we are beyond just mass on a Sunday.”

CHAPTER FIVE STORIES FROM OTHER CHURCHES

This report has told a number of in-depth stories about parishes that are part of a growing, ecumenical movement of churches harnessing the potential of community organising to grow in number, depth and impact. This chapter offers a brief overview of the impact of community organising on the mission of six more Anglican parishes, both within and beyond east London. It also highlights some of the ways in which the potential of community organising approach is being harnessed in other denominations.

Organising for Growth - Partner Churches

ST ANDREW'S STAMFORD HILL, HOLY TRINITY LEYTONSTONE and ST BARNABAS' WALTHAMSTOW

were three of the six partner churches on Organising for Growth. The other three churches supported by the project were St Martin's Plaistow, St Paul's Old Ford and Trinity Saints in Hackney.

This project sought to replicate the experience of smaller, sacramental inner-city churches like St George-in-the-East, harnessing community organising to grow in number, depth and impact. As the statistics on page 12 indicate, the

project has helped the six have more new worshippers than initially expected, 40% of whom are under 18.

- **Prayer** was the foundation of the process. As we saw in the "Cycle of Prayer and Organising" outlined in the introduction, the process understands God to be the central protagonist.
- **People** are therefore prioritised over programmes. Trusting that God has given the community everything needed for the work he is calling it into, the community organising process is less about designing a programme of activities, and more about discerning the vocation of God's people; what their gifts and passions are, and what God is therefore calling them to do.
- **Patience** is vital, so that activities develop at the speed that new leaders have the confidence and capacity to act - rather than rushing into activity driven by the "usual suspects." Because power and responsibility are being dispersed, the action that develops is more sustainable.

As our foreword explains, we have dedicated this report to Fr Marco Lopes - an extraordinary parish priest who founded the Luso-Hispanic Mission at



A special mass at St Martin's Church, Plaistow to celebrate Our Lady of Quinche, November 2023.

St Martin's Plaistow. He led the church to grow into three Sunday congregations - English at 11am, Portuguese at 2pm and Spanish at 4pm, with regular shared trilingual liturgies. Tragically, Fr Marco died very suddenly in January 2023. It is a testament to the spiritual and relational foundations that he laid that the parish has been able to build on his extraordinary legacy.

Back in 2021, a listening campaign enabled St Martin's to re-calibrate its sense of collective purpose as it emerged from the pandemic. Aspirations included deeper engagement with St Martins' neighbours, and greater recognition and support for migrants and refugees within and beyond the congregation.

A concrete first step came with the desire for a permanent sign on the street pointing residents in the direction of the church. As Fr Marco explained (in a blog written with community organiser Frankie Webster) this seemingly small issue took on a wider significance:



Members of the volunteer team at St Martin's Food Pantry.

A sign would also symbolise a desire for recognition of the parish church, and its people. Something visible to signal we are here, all are welcome here. We heard too that the local mosque, Ibrahim Mosque, had also hoped for a public sign. What better way to be more rooted and build solidarity across the parish than to work together to win a sign for both institutions?

Through organising around this issue the church "gained strength and we gained numbers. It put St Martin's back on the map... our voice is now heard locally".

Many in the church had the sense of being part of a community that was disregarded and looked down upon. Suddenly they were being acknowledged, recognised, and they felt that they could make things happen.

Fr Marco recognised the community organising process, and specifically the "Cycle of Prayer and Organising", was vital to making the mission sustainable. He emphasised the importance of recognising the "spiritual reality" that God is the primary agent in our work - guarding against the danger of simply "sucking" leaders into "a world of actions, activities and demands."

The death of Fr Marco has left a huge gap in his community. But the foundations he laid have proved resilient. The leaders he was so key to gathering and mentoring have continued to sustain and develop St Martin's mission. In the words of one lay leader, Nuvia, addressing the congregation just weeks after Fr Marco's passing, the challenge was to build on his legacy, sharing responsibility and power so that St Martin's continues to grow as "a refuge where the hungry and thirsty can be fed spiritually, and where we interact with other cultures and build relationships within and outside the church."

“

Many in the church had the sense of being part of a community that was disregarded and looked down upon. Suddenly they were being acknowledged, recognised, and they felt that they could make things happen.



A Sunday service at St Luke's Woodside, South London.



Nuvia, Lay Leader at St Martin's.

A year later, it is remarkable how the congregation has risen to this challenge in the midst of its grief. At the time of writing (May 2024), St Martin's has just relaunched the Food Bank in its hall as a Food Pantry - with a parallel "Warm Space" in the church, a community space to help nurture relationships - and to create the possibility of action to tackle the structural issues behind food and fuel poverty and social isolation. Crucially, the majority of volunteers also use the Food Pantry. They are the leaders and decision makers for how the space is shaped and run, through the practices of one-to-ones and discerning together.

After the Pantry and Warm Space close, there is a trilingual Mass and a community meal. As well as offering food and fellowship, the community meal allows asylum seekers who are housed in local hostels to have the dignity of cooking food for themselves and for others. The move from limited handouts to creating community around the reality of the shared challenge of food insecurity is part of a broader trend amongst churches, including others discussed in this report.

A new phase of ministry and mission is now beginning with the licensing of Bishop Saulo de Barros as Vicar of St Martin's in May 2024. (From September 2022, Bishop Saulo had been Fr Marco's

colleague at St Martin's and in the wider Lusophone-Hispanic Mission.)

St Paul's Old Ford in Tower Hamlets started on the programme in May 2022, supported by Emmanuel Gotora from Citizens UK. It has also seen new connections being made with the wider community, and new worshippers joining the church, over the course of the project.

Rev'd Darius Weithers observes that the key gift of the method at St Paul's has been the engagement of grassroots leaders beyond the existing congregation, to draw the church "out of itself" into shared action with others in neighbourhood. Leaders from outside the church were central to the hosting of a community meal on Christmas Day 2022 which drew in 70 people, and this has been built on with further events across the year. The meal was such a success that it was agreed it should become biannual, and a key leader from outside the congregation is now working on securing external funding for its expansion. As Darius observes, "she sees opportunities in the church that we can be oblivious to."

Darius has also begun to harness the potential of organising for internal development. Because there had been no previous culture of one-to-one relational meetings, Darius recalls that when he sought a meeting with each PCC member, many initial reactions were

"Have I done something wrong?" or "Am I in trouble?". He sees the practices of community organising as helpful in becoming a "less priest-centric" church, and this slow process of culture change is being made manifest in worship as well as community engagement- with more participatory homilies, including a summer series on theological issues raised by worshippers. A very recent fruit of this has been a lay leader approaching Darius to ask if they can lead a daily midday time of prayer in church. In a building that has a community cafe and many much-used community rooms, it is exciting to see a 'porous' space being initiated by the congregation rather than the clergy.

A particular challenge for Darius has been that he began the OFG programme not long after his arrival - and the church has a high level of staffing and project- and building-management relative to its



Bishop Saulo de Barros.



congregation size. With the loss of some key lay leaders, it has been a struggle for Darius to carve out the space he needs to move from 'maintenance' to the identification and development of new leaders. While much has already happened, there is clearly potential for much more if this can be addressed in the months ahead.

In the last chapter, we told the story of Holy Moly - and how its development encouraged **Trinity Saints** to engage in the wider OFG project. The Vicar, the Rev'd Laura Luz, reflects on the relatively modest claims the project made - and its emphasis on patience, prayer and



It didn't feel like there were lots of big promises, it was just saying 'we're working together on something, it might be really slow and it will take time but God's spirit is in it'.



Lay leaders at Trinity Saints celebrate graduating the Wagstaff Programme with Rev'd Laura Luz.

people: "It didn't feel like there were lots of big promises, it was just saying 'we're working together on something, it might be really slow and it will take time but God's spirit is in it'".

Across the period of the project, both the Sunday congregation and Holy Moly have attracted new worshippers, and old and new congregation members have become involved in community organising campaigns around the cost of living, educational provision for children with special educational needs, and to improve the local park. In 2023, three lay leaders from the congregation completed the Wagstaff programme, and have since gone onto lead "Power Sunday"

(a special service reflecting on the theme of collective relational power), have started a prayer group and are taking leading roles in the above campaigns.

As Laura explains, the organising process is "helping people in the congregation who weren't before seeing themselves as leaders to think about their potential as leaders and capacity to bring change". This change has helped the church to grow in number, depth and impact - and some recent good news means that more is in the pipeline. Trinity Saints has secured over £40,000 of external funding for a three-year project which emerged from its community organising work. The project has a



A baptism at Trinity Saints.

strong emphasis on sharing faith - and it is hoped that it will grow the existing Sunday and midweek congregations and develop a new worshipping community with and for young people. A lay leader within the congregation has recently been recruited to work on this project.

Organising for Growth - Hub Churches

The six partner churches on the Organising for Growth pilot were supported by two larger “Hub Churches”. Like St George-in-the-East, these were churches that already had a track record of harnessing the potential of community organising for growth - but from different theological and liturgical traditions.

Understandably, there has been a particular interest in the impact of the organising approach on smaller congregations in a more Anglo-catholic tradition - because this is where dominant approaches to church growth have had less uptake and impact. But the stories of St John's Hoxton and St Mary's Walthamstow show the organising approach can be harnessed in a variety of traditions and church sizes.

When the Rev'd Graham Hunter was installed as Vicar of **St John's Hoxton**, which stands in the charismatic evangelical tradition, it would certainly have counted as a smaller church - with an average weekly attendance of 20-25 (worshipping community of 40). After completing CTC's Congregational

Development programme in 2014-15, St John's Hoxton decided to consider simple ways in which it could take the learning and foster a deeper relational culture in the church.

Graham explains: “Although we were experiencing some growth in our congregation, it was clear that we were not always able to retain and embed that growth, due to the struggle to form meaningful relationships with new worshippers.

“We undertook two simple initiatives. We declared 2015-16 the ‘year of the party’ - we dedicated more time in our calendar to organising social events at the church: BBQs, pancake parties, a ‘Light Party’ (at Halloween) and social trips out midweek. We also changed the format of our ‘Newcomers’ Lunch’. The critical change was that, instead of giving a ‘Vicar's Speech’ to explain the vision

Graham and Sara Hunter, St John's Hoxton.



“Fun at 4” service at St John's Hoxton.

of the church, we spent time listening to new worshippers explain why they came to the church, what they liked, and what they hoped for. On several occasions, this led very quickly to the identification of a team that a new worshipper might want to belong to, or a ministry they might engage in - and this process of vocational discernment enabled swifter integration and increased the number of new worshippers who continued to be long-term members of the church.”

Community organising quickly became central to St John's methodology, and continues to be so. In terms of resulting growth, around 125 attend St John's on the average Sunday. Numbers were even higher before the pandemic (Average weekly attendance was 190, with a worshipping community of 350). Graham says the organising method has helped the church to maintain its witness during the lockdowns, including the development of a Garden of Lament outside the church to help the wider community articulate their grief and prayer. It was necessary to regroup after lockdown and more recently a service has been launched focused on families where a child has special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). This commitment to a more accessible church has developed alongside a campaign around supporting SEND children and families in the Hackney Citizens community organising alliance.

The image of the mustard tree, which remains close to the ground and can seem chaotic, comes back to mind in



The paradox of Christian mission is that on the one hand the most important thing is that people come to know of the saving work of God in Jesus, and put their trust in him, and that everything else is secondary; and on the other hand, that the most important thing in the world is making the living kingdom of God manifest in every neighbourhood regardless of whether anyone comes to know Jesus.

considering St John's story. As Graham and Sara Hunter reflected on the process for this report, they were clear that the size of worshipping community which has developed at St John's is challenging to sustain and resource - in ways that are different from more affluent contexts. “When people are struggling just to keep going” it is tempting to lapse back into a “patron-client” relationship, rather than to engage in the harder work of “co-design and co-creation.”

However, ten years in - including a time of global pandemic - the impact of the organising approach at St John's has been profound. In Graham's words

“The paradox of Christian mission is that on the one hand the most important thing is that people come to know of the saving work of God in Jesus, and put their trust in him, and that everything else is secondary; and on the other hand, that the most important thing in the world is making the living kingdom of God manifest in every neighbourhood regardless of whether anyone comes to know Jesus. Community organising give you the tools to navigate a healthy tension in this paradox.”

St Mary's Walthamstow shows the capacity for community organising to help larger churches to grow, and

to become more representative of their neighbourhood. The church stands in the “open evangelical” tradition. Since its participation in CTC's Congregational Development programme in 2014-15, average weekly attendance has grown from 195 to 245.

A significant part of this growth was the development of “Vespers” as a midweek NWC. Through a community organising “listening campaign,” St Mary's identified a particular area of need around anxiety, stress at work and space for stillness - and leaders with an interest and capacity for leading an act of worship which addresses that need.

The result was Vespers, a new worshipping community offering 40 minutes of contemplation, music and reflection every Wednesday.

The service seeks to be both open and contemplative - making the riches of Christian spirituality accessible to as wide a range of people as possible. Across a month, St Mary's welcomes around 45 people to the service, with an average weekly attendance of 22. The majority of those attending are unchurched or de-churched, with a significant number of under 30s. Over time, Vespers has developed to include Holy Communion once a month and regular post-Vespers book clubs for deeper discipleship.

Like St John's Hoxton and many churches around the country, St Mary's saw numbers fall during the pandemic. They also faced the subsequent challenge of meeting in their hall while their main church building underwent a major refurbishment. However, average weekly attendance has recently risen back to the pre-pandemic level of 245, and Rev'd Vanessa Conant, Rector sees organising as a key factor in that regathering, and in establishing a continuing trajectory of growth.

Organising has enabled the development of a Ministry Hub - a team of church members who lead the various ministries of the church and work together to develop the mission and life of the church. In consequence, the church is growing in depth and impact as well as numbers.



Sunday Eucharist at St Mary's Walthamstow.

In response to a listening campaign around how the church might grow in depth, a Learning Community for discipleship was established resulting in over 30 people currently accessing courses, bible studies and online programmes. In terms of its social impact, St Mary's is active in local community organising campaigns, including for a Living Wage and Just Transition in the face of the climate emergency. It has also developed a "Warm Space" that helps visitors to access support with completing forms for things like housing, benefits and GP registration. This initiative has a team of over 20 volunteers, a number of whom are not church members. It has become well known and respected and now receives referrals from the council and local GP surgeries.

For both St John's and St Mary's a significant feature of the impact of community organising has been in the nature of its congregational growth as well as in the numbers. As with the six partner churches, almost all the new worshippers at these two churches live within walking distance of the church, and the community organising method has helped both the worshipping community and the church leadership to be more representative of the local demography.

Congregations in other contexts

As the name of the project indicates, *Harnessing the Potential of Community Organising for Congregational Growth* is bringing to birth, in a more systematic and focused way, potential that is already present in the community organising process. When it is practiced with rigour and discipline, community organising is always a process which should raise up new leaders within institutions rather than depleting the energy of existing leaders.

The work of the Centre for Theology and Community emerges from the practice of congregations and clergy in east London who were doing exactly this. Tools such as the "Hallmarks of an Organised Church" emerged from reflection on the impact of this process



Fr Sam Dennis and leaders from St Luke's Woodside at a South London Citizens action.

in our local context, and dialogue with churches in other places.

It is not surprising, therefore, that churches outside of CTC's current area of impact have applied similar methods to similar effect. Fr Sam Dennis arrived as Vicar of **St Luke's Woodside** in Croydon in 2016. The local Deanery was a member of Citizens UK, but the parish had not made any specific commitment to join.

It was through his involvement in planning London Citizens 6000-person Mayoral Accountability Assembly in the Olympic Park that Fr Sam began to see the potential of community organising - and went on to apply it not only to external action but to the internal life of the congregation. In those eight years, the number of worshippers in an average week has grown from 60 to 90.²³ Growth has been seen both on Sunday and in new midweek congregations.

Fr Sam explains that community organising has helped the church develop in "who we see as leaders". Previously, leadership had been focussed on people who had been there the longest holding power and didn't always reflect the diversity of the congregation in race or social class - or the transience in the neighbourhood and worshipping community. This change in outlook has increased the capacity for new congregants to be drawn deeply into parish life.

²³ As with St John's Hoxton, numbers were slightly higher before the pandemic, with the organising process helping the regathering and rebuilding process.

Community organising has overcome the "in-group" culture with two effects; helping those on the edge of church life to be drawn into its heart and helping the church to engage more effectively beyond its walls. This in turn has contributed to congregational growth:

"What people see when they are looking for a church...[is] a congregation that is looking outwardly, that is praying about timely issues in our neighbourhood, community and nation, addressed in sermons... to know that people are involved in listening and campaigning can be a positive draw for individuals and families."

Milton Keynes is one of the oldest chapters of Citizens UK outside of London - and **St Frideswide's Water Eaton** was one of the founding institutions in Citizens:MK. As its Vicar, the Rev'd Catherine Butt explains, the initial motivation for engagement was a sense that "although we are small, we want to be part of something bigger than ourselves." In recent years, St Frideswide's has been funded to pioneer and resource others in the Diocese of Oxford to harness the potential of community organising to grow the church.

This funding enabled the church to recruit Nudrat Hopper as a part-time community organiser supporting its work. Catherine observes that Nudrat played a vital role in ensuring one-to-one relational meetings were the foundation from which new activities developed. As she explains, one-to-ones are a method



which helps both parties to listen for what the Holy Spirit may be doing within and between them:

"There's something about having engaged with how important it is to know yourself, and make space for the other person to articulate themselves, and that there is something to be discovered in this relationship as you humble yourself through listening... what is the Spirit up to in that?"

This process has led on, as in east London, to a combination of external action and renewal within the existing



congregation. Signs of this renewal include 20 baptisms at Easter 2023, many of young people, and a NWC developing - a less formal "Tea and Toast" service on Sunday afternoons, led by St Frideswide's Curate, Rev'd Ayo Audu.

Ecumenical relationships

As explained in Chapter One, CTC emerged from the community organising work of churches in a range of different denominations in east London - and the Centre continues to harness the potential

of organising across a range of churches and traditions.

In 2010, Pastor Cecilia Dewu founded **On the Rock International Church**, in Marks Gate in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. It joined TELCO in 2014, and Pastor Cecilia joined CTC's Learning Community on Congregational Development in 2018.

From the start, On the Rock has had a vision of ministry deeply rooted in the housing estate where it meets. It has grown from an initial congregation of 15, largely living outside the immediate neighbourhood, to one which now fluctuates between 35 and 60 - with the most significant growth happening in more recent years and engaging a much higher proportion of local residents, in particular children and families.

Pastor Cecilia ascribes the locally-rooted growth to the community organising approach, and her congregation have also identified her focus on the development of lay leaders as a crucial factor in the church's development. In particular, her



Election Hustings at
St Frideswides Church, Milton Keynes.

willingness to accompany them with encouragement, training and honest feedback in their exploration of different roles both within the church and in its community outreach, to enable them to discern and to live out their vocation.

On the Rock is one of three Pentecostal churches in east London that CTC is now supporting in harnessing this method, with **Christ Apostolic Church** and **Hampden Chapel** in Hackney both at earlier stages in this same journey.

Some of east London's Roman Catholic parishes face a very different set of challenges - with attendance in an area like Newham sometimes as large as 2000 each Sunday. With clergy numbers declining, there is an urgent need to identify and develop a wider range of grassroots leaders, and to share responsibility and power.

Pope Francis' call for a more "Synodal" church is summoning Roman Catholics across the world to find ways to achieve precisely these objectives - and to ensure that the process is one which understands the primary protagonist to be the Holy Spirit.²⁴

In the **Parish of English Martyrs** in Tower Hill, which straddles Tower Hamlets and the City of London, community organising has helped the congregation to regather and re-organise after lockdown. From Autumn 2022, English Martyrs was accompanied by CTC to apply some of the key tools of the community organising approach to the life of the parish.

²⁴ CTC is currently engaged in a research project funded by Porticus Trust, exploring the potential of community organising, when rooted deeply in prayer and theological reflection, to contribute to the global Synodal process of the Roman Catholic Church.

The result of this engagement has been a commitment to deepening relationships across the parish. This has included the development of a new youth group for young people, a summer celebration for volunteers, an annual senior parishioners meal and a "Parish Listening Day" which identified the themes of mission, nurturing faith and action around housing injustice as areas to work on. Most significantly, a number of lay parishioners have been supported, in particular through CTC's Wagstaff course, to step up as leaders and become more confident in their vocational callings.

Fr Ray, who was assistant parish priest in the parish until January 2024 said, "Confidence has completely shot up in lay leaders, there is an understanding of service and engagement being part of

discipleship and faith". One parishioner who completed the Wagstaff Course, said : "I now have more confidence to say what I think — I don't hesitate anymore... I once thought that the church is the priest, now I know the church is everyone."

As Averil Bagent from the Roman Catholic Church's School of Synodality explains "For me, CTC answers the 'action' element of synodality - the conversation and discussion has to go somewhere."²⁵

CTC has secured funding to deepen its work in Catholic parishes - in particular, building on the work already done at English Martyrs and beginning a programme at the 2000-strong Parish of

²⁵ Synodality is "the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God" (International Theological Commission of the Catholic Church, 2018)

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I now have more confidence to say what I think — I don't hesitate anymore... I once thought that the church is the priest, now I know the church is everyone.

St Antony's Forest Gate in the London Borough of Newham, to develop lay leadership among migrant communities.

The project, entitled "From Mercy to Justice" will support the parish both in meeting an almost overwhelming level of need for advice and practical support with "mercy-based" projects. It will also identify and develop leaders who access and volunteer in those projects to engage in action to address the underlying structural injustices people face and enable them to develop and exercise their leadership more widely in parish and community life.

Conclusion

The stories in this chapter show that the in-depth case studies in the first three chapters are not isolated examples. Rather, they exemplify a method that is now being harnessed to help an increasing number of churches from a variety contexts and church traditions- to grow in number, depth and impact.

In the final chapter of this report, we will draw out some wider themes and lessons from this growing body of evidence, and suggest ways the wider Church might harness the potential of this method.

Pastor Cecelia Dewu
and members of
On the Rock church.





CONCLUSIONS

This report tells the story of a slow process of learning and discernment that began with the harnessing of community organising to help churches like St Mary's Walthamstow and St John's Hoxton to grow, then harnessing this method to renew St George-in-the-East whilst it was under the shadow of likely clergy cuts. From here the process moved on to the development of the pilot Organising for Growth programme to accompany another six smaller, sacramental churches on a journey towards growth in number, depth and impact.

This report has offered both quantitative and qualitative evidence for the impact of this work and has also shown how these same methods are being harnessed in other contexts and denominations.

At the time of writing, CTC and Citizens UK are beginning a new three-year project which will help over 50 further parishes across England to harness this method. It will have a focus on smaller, sacramental churches, and

on helping them to engage children and young people - precisely because the pilot showed particular fruitfulness in these areas.²⁶

We have written this report in the belief that these churches' experiences have lessons for the wider Church. We have identified five positive lessons, and two myths that need to be challenged.

²⁶ www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/community-organising-scheme-be-expanded-more-churches

Five positive lessons

1. THE HARVEST IS MORE PLENTIFUL THAN WE OFTEN IMAGINE

The harvest is more plentiful than we imagine, perhaps because we need to look at things with different eyes (cf. Matthew 9.37-38., 13.1-17)

Previous CTC reports have told the story of renewal of smaller, sacramental churches in east London which had previously been thought unlikely to be able to grow within their existing tradition. Here again, the stories of St Andrew's and Holy Trinity in particular tell of renewal which starts with the gifts and potential of the existing worshippers,



leading on to new worshippers and new leaders being drawn in from the same neighbourhood.

The encouragement is for churches to start from a place of abundance: where are we and what gifts has God already given us? The practices of community organising, when harnessed in service of individual and collective vocational discernment, can help churches to unlock the gifts and resources God has already given them. Organised money is also important – an intentional, missional and relational approach to how churches use their assets can yield financial resilience and resources for mission.

Almost all of the growth within the six OFG partner congregations comes from people who live within walking distance of the church building. The numerical growth has exceeded the targets set - and while no targets were set for either youth engagement or financial sustainability, **40% of new worshippers are under 18** and significant progress has been made in several churches towards financial sustainability. If the parishes whose congregations and buildings are able to cover their costs of ministry do so, this releases funds to support ministry in those who cannot.

2. PRAYER, PEOPLE, PATIENCE

Prayer has been central to this process of renewal. The "Cycle of Prayer and Organising" articulates our approach, which seeks to embody St Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5.16). Instead of treating planning and prayer as separate activities, different dimensions of prayer (discernment, lamentation, intercession, thanksgiving) are interwoven with the whole community organising cycle. Precisely because the action is the fruit of prayerful dialogue, the action of the Spirit is more visible to all with whom the church engages; for the congregation cannot tell the story of their action without reference to her work.

The focus on prayer is combined with an emphasis on the patient development of people. As the stories of Keisha, John, Nora and Grace show us, community organising only leads on to numerical growth when it is rooted in prayer, and in the patient process of people development. It is a process of culture change, not just of the development and delivery of new activities.



3. LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Precisely because the organising process seeks to generate a change in culture, we have found Learning Communities to be a particularly effective tool. It has been essential that the primary leader in the congregation (almost always the incumbent) is one of the parish attendees, and that they also commit to at least three one-to-one relational meetings each week. The learning community allows the primary leader and the community organiser who is accompanying to reflect honestly on where power lies and how it needs to be redistributed - and the one-to-ones are vital to ensuring the teaching in the session leads on to the identification and development of new leaders.

Because community organising is a craft rather than a science, this community of practice is also a vital space for mutual sharing and learning across contexts. A key learning from OFG is the need to develop an ongoing community of practice, drawing together the growing number of churches engaging in this work.

4. INVESTMENT IN LAY LEADERSHIP

Alongside the Learning Community with the incumbent, another key tool in OFG's success has been the depth and nature of investment in lay leadership. CTC's Wagstaff Programme has been central to the development of lay leaders who in turn have been at the heart of the actions that have grown the churches.

Feedback both from the participants and their clergy identifies four key factors in its success

- its rootedness in **prayer and Biblical reflection**;
- setting the process of **vocational discernment** for individual leaders in the context of the **wider parish and its mission**;
- the **interweaving of teaching** at sessions with **time** for it to be **enacted**, and
- the building of a **community of lay leaders** across churches

The length of the course has both been a great source of its impact and a barrier to a wider group participating. As we move forward, we are combining the continuing development of Wagstaff with shorter "Listen and Lead" courses for a wider group of church members.

5. INTENTIONALITY WITHOUT ANXIETY

A theme from this research, as from previous CTC reports, is that intentionality is crucial to harnessing the potential of community organising for church growth. The story of St Barnabas - which was already deeply engaged in Waltham Forest Citizens, but had not been intentional about growth - is perhaps the most striking. But we see the same theme at Holy Trinity, St Andrew's and in the development of "Holy Moly" at Trinity Saints.

The "Flow of Discipleship" diagram (see figure 3, p.13) has been a simple but powerful tool, encouraging churches to focus on the areas of growth which are outside their comfort zones. It helped churches to be "porous not predatory". It focused existing leaders' attention on how to ensure those who wanted to take a new step on the journey of discipleship to find a safe, welcoming and supportive environment - and encouraged the churches to cultivate a prayerful attentiveness, discerning where the Spirit might be prompting such a step.



Lay leaders from Anglican churches in Newham celebrate completing 'Listen and Lead' a course about community organising and discipleship, Spring 2024.

While the work requires this intentionality about leadership development and numerical growth, it must be done without anxiety or hurry. If corners are cut in the process, action is taken before new leaders have been developed. This militates against the sharing of responsibility and power, and increases the danger of activity that simply burns out existing leaders.



Challenging the Myths

This new research, and indeed CTC's previous reports, challenge two persistent myths about church growth

1. CHURCHES DO NOT NEED TO BE IN A PARTICULAR TRADITION TO GROW

This approach has helped a wide range of churches to grow their traditions vary from Catholic to Pentecostal, and initial congregation sizes have varied from 15 to 195. What matters is an intentional commitment to growth; a focus on the three "P's" of prayer, people development and patience - and an openness to the redistribution of power and responsibility that this process entails.

2. SOCIAL ACTION NEED NOT COMPETE WITH NUMERICAL GROWTH

It is easy to see how this myth arises; when social action is done without attention to developing new leaders, it simply adds to the burden on existing church members. Social action and church growth then become competing demands on a limited pool of time and



energy. The promise of patient, prayerful community organising is that it begins by identifying new leaders, and sees action (whether internal or external) as a process by which those leaders can be

supported in developing their gifts and confidence. Social action and numerical growth can therefore go together, when they are both rooted in the development of people.

"Pray therefore earnestly..."

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus offers a challenge as well an encouragement to our desire for growth. As we saw on page 16, it offers us an image of the kingdom which is both plentiful and humble.

Bishop Lynne opened this report by reflecting on the fruitfulness of the harvest - and the thought that we need to look at it with different eyes. Jesus declares that the "harvest is plentiful" in a context where fruitfulness was not obvious if the "field" was judged by worldly standards. He then urges his followers to pray "earnestly" for labourers. God's answer to that prayer also comes in ways that are all too often overlooked.

The stories in this report offer a glimpse of the rich harvest and the extraordinary labourers God has given today's Church - and an insight into some of the tools that can ensure they are recognised and nurtured.



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“

The powerful stories within this report demonstrate how a growing number of churches have harnessed the principles of community organising to experience both numerical growth and increased spiritual depth, as well as a broader social impact. It showcases how these practices have uncovered hidden gifts in individuals often overlooked by society and the church, recognising them as key players in the growth, reform, and revival of the Church.

Min Shermara Fletcher-Hoyte, Principal Officer for Pentecostal, Charismatic and Multi-cultural Relations, Churches Together in England.

“

Community organising is a slow and patient process which involves deep listening and deep appreciation of the gifts that God has given to his people in community. It is not ‘another initiative’ for tired churches and their leaders, but a godly approach which calls people into the practices of faith which can bring new life and new hope. I commend this report and all the work of Organising For Growth.

The Rt Rev’d Dr Joanne Grenfell, Bishop of Stepney.

“

Do our churches believe in the power of the Spirit working in ordinary people? Reading these stories it is clear that some do – and when they do, the effect is dramatic. The Centre for Theology and Community has over many years brought together the practical insights of the community organising tradition with the urgent need to develop and form the ordinary people of inner-city congregations. The result, as these testimonies illustrate, is one of the great signs of hope of our time.

Austen Ivereigh, Catholic writer / commentator, and biographer of Pope Francis.