

# HOW WE THRIVE: A PODCAST FROM 2030

If the URC's Church Life Review succeeds, things will be different six years from now.

**John Bradbury** looks forward

**A** well-known podcaster has decided to put out an episode on the strange rebirth of life in the United Reformed Church in the last few years. So they visit a few URC worshipping communities...

## Village URC

Village United Reformed Church sits on the edge of the village of Village. It has always been a chapel community, and is very much not the Church, which is a large building off the village square. Ecumenical relationships are 'OK', but that is all. As the podcaster arrives, the Regional Buildings Officer is just leaving, having signed off the installation of an accessible entry, and renewed accessible toilets.

'We had some money in the bank,' says Joan, the Church Secretary, 'but knowing where to begin sorting out the building was beyond us.' The Regional Buildings Officer planned, commissioned and oversaw the work, consulting the congregation along the way, but doing the hard work of realising the project.



**'The Regional Buildings Officer planned, commissioned and oversaw the work'**

'A few years ago we thought we'd have to close,' Joan said. 'Our treasurer passed away, and there was no one to take their place. Fortunately, the Synod Moderator introduced us to a new scheme where we only needed to deal with any local cash, and immediate local expenses. And most of that is electronic these days. We didn't need to do book-keeping or budgeting. One member who is better at computers than some of us put in a few details each week from our end, and went to the bank. We received quarterly reports, and once a year someone comes out to talk us through our financial situation. It's been a lifeline.'

'The Regional Compliance Assistant has been a godsend too. She comes once a year and goes through our insurance policies with me, and risk assessments, and health and safety stuff and so on. It helps me know we've got this stuff right, and makes it much less stressful. Because we've got all our compliance ducks lined up, we know the wider URC will back us if anything goes wrong.'

Joan continues, 'Because we're not so bogged down with the building and money and so on, we've had time to start a coffee and chat group for older people who've been bereaved. I had the energy to make tea and provide some decent cake. Another member (there were only six of us) who's not so mobile now felt able to sit and listen. Someone from one of the Resource Centres for Learning shared some useful knowledge about bereavement, and our minister (who we share with six other churches) led Bible studies on Christian hope and other topics.'

'We were tentative at first, but soon realised the main thing was to listen. A few people have come to worship on a Sunday because they felt drawn into the community. Two people decided to come into membership recently – so we're eight now. Another asked if we'd host their grandchild's baptism.'

'We're still small, and it feels fragile, but we've got the support we need, and we are beginning to grow a bit. It's made us feel that God has not finished with us yet, and we can make a difference.'

## Community of Mary and Martha

Our podcaster arrives in a 1970s estate that feels rather unloved. Most of the shops are boarded up or have been converted into flats that the occupants hate. One shop unit was taken over three years ago by the synod, and eight people gather on a Tuesday morning. A couple have just dropped the kids at school and called in at the food bank, and people are relaxing with tea and biscuits before the midweek prayer begins.

Mary, the Pioneer Minister, begins to tell a bit of her story: 'The synod wanted to see whether there was space for a new worshipping community to emerge in an area of deprivation where there was no church. They checked with ecumenical colleagues that no one else had a plan for the estate. The parish church is the other side of the dual carriageway, and the vicar had been concerned for some time that their work in this part of the parish was limited. With encouragement from the Archdeacon, they've supported our work and at times pop in.'

'A house was found for me in the estate, and I confess I was nervous to begin with. There was no real plan, I just walked the streets, listening and observing. Leaving the house on day one took a lot of effort. I found there are few places left where people can gather. The pub and post office have closed. I found my place by volunteering at the food bank, which operates out of a school. In time the school connected with me too, and I formed relationships with some of the children through assemblies and listening to reading.'

'People really welcome the chance to talk' continues Mary. 'There was no hurry, I was not taking decisions about them, or trying to sell them something. People shared their stories. Some wanted to talk about faith things. Did I really believe in God? Why do bad things happen to good people? What happens to me when I die? Does prayer really work? Who was Jesus?'

Amber, sitting at a table with a coffee carries on. 'Mary's one of the



### 'Mary helped me see that you can't really get praying wrong'

only people around here who you just instinctively feel comfortable with. When Mum died, she helped me work out what I wanted for the funeral, and was there for me. My gran always went to church and talked about saying her prayers. It was never really my thing, but I did wonder – it felt like there had to be more to life. Occasionally I'd say some kind of prayer – not that I really knew why or what I was doing.

'Mary helped me see that you can't really get praying wrong' – says Amber, 'and you just have to pray it like you feel it. She invited me to prayer time one week. I wasn't sure, but a few weeks later I did, and I felt like I connected with the memory of Mum. I've been coming back since then – I love the fact that we can just talk about stuff. Mary always manages to find some story in the Bible that just kind of fits

what we're feeling that day. Then we light candles for the things that are worrying us that day. It's definitely become an important place for me.'

Jim, the part-time administrator, comes to see if anyone wants a top-up before joining them for prayer time. 'I make sure that the shop has got what we need,' he says. 'I did my food hygiene certificate, so we'd be OK with that kind of thing, and I sort the money out. It means Mary doesn't have to worry about these things. I'm the Martha to her Mary. If the synod hadn't grasped the idea when someone first had it, and if the money hadn't been there, we'd never have made this amazing little community happen. Someone in the synod told me that the way the money used to be done meant the synod would never have felt it could afford it – but I'm glad they decided the money was there and took the risk.'

### St Mark's Under the Bridge

Our podcaster heads south, to a relatively well-off market town. A few years ago St Mark's had 60 people in worship on a Sunday, and 100 in membership. It was one of the largest churches in the synod, but people were not as young as they used to be, and finding elders could be hard. ◉

There was a couple of families, and some Sundays there might be four or five children in church, but other weeks none.

It is Sunday morning, and our podcaster arrives to find the church buzzing. Welcomers on the door introduce him to a small group of people enjoying a bacon roll and good coffee. 'We realised it made sense to do refreshments before worship,' says one of them, an elder. 'If someone new comes, we can say hello properly before we go into worship. It was a controversial decision, but we were persuaded, for a trial period, to bring worship forward to 9.30, with breakfast from 8.30. It's amazing how popular it was with people who hadn't come so often. I'm not sure when the trial period is supposed to be up – probably ages ago.'

The synod had taken a very brave decision, provoking heated debate in the Pastoral Committee: it gave the church a minister on its own, meaning that in other places ministry was spread more thinly. A new scheme allowed the synod to employ the lay workers to take care of payrolls, HR policies, line management and the like. As a result, the congregation decided to use some of its reserves to employ a full-time local community worker, and a full-time youth and children's minister. A grant allowed

them to employ an administrator for jobs it was hard to find volunteers for any more.

The treasurer recalls, 'Over time, with the odd legacy here and there, then two congregations coming together and selling a building, we ended up with a lot of money in the bank. We'd always thought it was for a rainy day – it took us a while to realise it was actually raining. We were running out of people to do things, and we decided we ought to spend it in hope – and just see what happened. The synod accessed money from the wider Church, and that made all the difference in realising the vision.'

The podcaster chats with Dave. 'We brought the kids to the holiday club, and they loved it. On the Sunday afterwards we were invited to go and see the kids taking the service. It wasn't like I imagined at all – I'd only

ever been in church for weddings and funerals. I got chatting with someone afterwards who suggested I scan the QR code so the church could keep in touch. I was surprised to get a WhatsApp from the minister a few days later. We chatted, met for a coffee, got talking. Life had not been easy and the chance to talk with someone was great. He just listened – I didn't feel judged at all. He invited me to this group exploring faith. That wasn't what I expected either – I thought it was all seven-day creation and be good or you'll go to hell. I nearly fell off my chair when someone told me a gay couple had just got married there. Something kind of grabbed me, and I realised it was rather amazing to think that maybe God is the reason for everything, and that God holds us and loves us, and helps us see the world through a different lens. I'm still not quite sure what it all means, but I've found a home here, and the kids love it.'

Our podcaster tries to count the congregation – it must be about 120. It is a bit difficult with the kids running around, but clearly the place is vibrant, alive and growing!

**'I'm not sure when the trial period is supposed to be up – probably ages ago'**

## **New Town Community URC**

Our podcaster heads to New Town, a sprawling new development which feels a bit soulless. People hope once the trees grow it might help. At the house where the Church-Related Community Worker and her family lives, they're met by a small group from the congregation and the minister of Word and Sacraments.

'It was quite a risk,' says Adam, the CRCW, 'deciding to use a CRCW and a minister post in the same place, where there was basically no church. Some folk from the nearby Methodist church had tried to start something in the school, but they were struggling. A chance conversation between the Methodist Superintendent and the Synod Moderator sparked the thought that the URC had little presence in these parts and perhaps they could do something here. Nothing much was going on. Anyone who went to church, which was almost no one, travelled out.'







Jennifer, the minister, laughs. 'You should have seen the Safeguarding Officer's face when we said we wanted to start worship in the manse! But there was nowhere else. And give him his due, once he got his head around it, he and the Compliance Support Officer were amazing at helping us get everything in place – all those things you don't think about: insurance, risk assessments, health and safety. But we got there.'

'There were only a few people – who the Methodists had had contact with initially. We spent a lot of time in prayer, and decided to fast once a week during Lent as we tried to work out what God was calling us to. The CRCW did a community audit, which was not easy in a place where people keep themselves to themselves, but it threw up some interesting needs. It turns out, even in a new development with quite expensive houses, there is quite a bit of poverty that you'd not see. Also people craved places to gather – the developers never quite seemed to get round to that bit of the development.'

Jennifer made connections with the school, and was soon helping out with assemblies and RE lessons. 'A youth group started out of that – just a couple of kids to begin with, but now the manse garden can hardly cope. It's chaos – but fun,' she says. 'We always

## 'You should have seen the Safeguarding Officer's face when we told him'

have a Bible study. I wasn't sure how that'd go – the kids have very little experience of the Bible – but actually they lap it up.'

Adam continues, 'Gradually, through the connections we made in the community, the core group grew. We tried meeting in the school hall on a Sunday. The first week, there were only ten of us – we wondered if we'd made a mistake. But Jennifer reminded me that ten was larger than many congregations these days!'

Jennifer picks up the story. 'The turning point came with the Alpha course. We did a massive round of inviting people, and only four came – but that turned out to be great.'

Dave chips in, 'We really engaged with questions of the meaning of life,

the universe and everything. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it felt like something clicked with me. That last Holy Spirit weekend was amazing. I just felt myself being so blessed. Something just changed within me – and I prayed to become a disciple and follow Jesus. Someone else had a very similar experience, and while it was not quite the same for the other two, they wanted to keep exploring.'

Jennifer says, 'Gradually, on a Sunday, numbers rose, and by the end of the first year we were regularly around 30 people. Worship is lively and exciting here – great music – we've now got our own home-grown band, and a real feeling of fellowship. God has been doing some amazing things. We're now running a soup café, a midweek café for parents, after school clubs. It's kind of tiring – but amazing at the same time. Last month we had two adult baptisms, and another three people come into membership.'

'The biggest issue we've got is now space,' says Adam. 'The irony is the URC is selling buildings all over the place, but what we and this community really needs is a church building – a space for worship, and a space that the community knows can be 'theirs'. The URC Trust is negotiating at the moment with the developer to see whether some other community space that was designated but never built on could be bought, and enable us to build a building. Who knows quite where that will go, but it's exciting to think that, from churches that have come to the end of their lives, the money is there to help fund our work here where new life is sprouting all the time.'

The podcaster concludes, 'These are not the kind of stories that people typically associate with the URC. It used to be better known for church closures and shrinking congregations. It seems, though, that the URC has had a long, hard look at itself, its mission and its place in the world, and found ways to channel its challenges into new ways of being the Church. What can we learn from that?'

**John Bradbury** is the General Secretary of the United Reformed Church