

What can our Church do to Grow?

Introduction

Welcome to my Sabbatical report, which is a culmination of the reading I have been doing over the last 3 months. My aim was to read books that focussed on what the Church can do to both build and sustain community in the long term and to try and find books that had been written relatively recently. The world is changing fast, and it can feel hard to keep up, but there are old truths and ways of being that will help us to stand even in this challenging time.

One of the ways of being is that of community. Humans need community, and that is what I aim to show in the first part of this report. I have broken the report into 3 sections. The first looks at the basic human need for community, the second addresses practical ways that we may be able to build community with others in the village, and the third reflects upon what we can do to shape our community within the church for the future.

In the first section, as I consider the need for community, I also address the ongoing tension between individualism and communal living in both society and church. I examine how individual desires, while important, must align with the wider collective needs for community to thrive. Drawing on biblical examples, the section discusses how Jesus valued individuals and communities alike, challenging the church to balance these priorities. As the section progresses, questions arise about how modern Western values of autonomy have shaped church practices, asking: *How can we create a community that balances individual needs with collective growth?*

The second section, entitled “Building Community”, moves from theory to practice; the aim is to encourage the church to engage with the broader village community. Drawing on examples from some of the books I have read, the section explores how rural churches can be pivotal to shaping the wider community's well-being. The section outlines practical steps for enhancing church welcome, using buildings creatively, and leveraging community festivals to strengthen the church's local presence. It also poses questions like: *How can we be more intentional in creating lasting relationships with those around us?*

Finally, in Section Three, “Shaping Community”, I take a deeper look into a specific concept known as “Intergenerational Church”, which may be helpful to us as we shape the current and future fellowship at HBC. It suggests that a thriving church is one that unites generations in worship, learning, and service, encouraging mutual relationships where all get to contribute and learn. The church's future lies in allowing an environment to form where young and old grow together in faith. Drawing from the book *Being an Intergenerational Church*, Section Three explores how intentional relationships across generations will help to form a strong and long-lasting community. Questions raised include: *How can we integrate all generations into the life of the church in meaningful ways?*

All in all, I hope that this report helps you think and reflect on how God may be leading us here at HBC as we move into the future together. I have intentionally aimed not to be too prescriptive so that we can plot the course together through discussion and prayer as we discern God's leading for our fellowship.

Section One: The Need for Community

Individualism vs Community

Many Christians will recognise the battle between individualism and community. What fills my immediate desires, however godly, may not be right for the Church. For example, suppose one person constantly takes on all the roles while aiming to be servant-hearted. How will that encourage others in the Church to be responsible so the congregation may flourish long into the future? Yet the tension between individual and communal priorities is not only felt in the Church but also affects the whole of our society.

Although our individualistic society is often noted as one of the Church's big challenges today, we must also remember that it is not all bad. Just look at the way that Jesus worked. Indeed, we often find him speaking to crowds in the Gospels, yet we equally find him addressing, defending, and challenging individuals.

The Rich Young Ruler was challenged about his attachment to wealth. Jesus showed the Samaritan woman at the well to be fully known and yet in no way barred from the possibility of receiving eternal life. In the case of the tax collector Zacchaeus, Jesus brought two simultaneous challenges. One was to Zacchaeus for extorting money from the community, and the second was to the community by showing that no one, even a corrupt tax collector, was beyond redemption and transformation in Christ. While the culture of the surrounding society insisted that either a blind man or his parents must have sinned for him to have been born without sight, Jesus stood up for him as an individual by claiming that ***“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” John 9:3 NIV***

Jesus brought with him the challenge that each individual has intrinsic value, no matter how they may be seen in the eyes of the wider society. In a world which focussed on the importance of the cultural and ritual observance of societal customs, he begged the question, ***“Who do YOU say I am?” (Matthew 16:15 NIV – Emphasis mine)***

Greco-Roman Belief

In his book “The Air We Breathe”, Greg Scrivener shows how it was through the “Christian Revolution” of Christ's teachings and the subsequent effect on the world that our modern Western society has come to value things like freedom, kindness, progress, and equality.

Scrivener shows that how we view these values today is not how they were viewed in the world Jesus inhabited. The Greek philosophers of old that preceded Jesus' time laid down the foundations of Greco-Roman ethics by appealing to the natural order of things. Scrivener quotes these snippets from the writings of Plato and Aristotle:

“Nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker...Justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior.” (Plato, 428-438 BC)

“For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” (Aristotle, 384-322 BC)

In his own words Scrivener comments, *“Ancient philosophers did not think of themselves as defenders or even teachers of such inequality. ‘Nature herself’ taught that some were fitter, stronger, smarter, and, frankly, better than others. There were superior races (Greeks over barbarians), superior sexes (men over women), and superior classes (free men over slaves). The deformity and inferiority of barbarians, women, and slaves was clear from their very nature. How could anyone deny that some people can govern well, while others need governing?”¹*

Compare the above thinking with that of the New Testament writers, and we can begin to see Christ's effect on the recognition of the intrinsic value of every human being and the values of our modern day.

Christ said to his disciples, ***“Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18:4 NIV***

Compare it also to the famous words of the Apostle Paul from Galatians 3:28, ***“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” NIV***

Then there is the teaching of James from James 2:2-4, ***“² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” NIV***

In short, Jesus and his first-century followers showed us the good side of individualism. They gave value to every human being, whether a ruler or a blind beggar and showed that God's kingdom is open to all. How easy it is for a person to become lost in the crowd if we label them as nothing other than a member of “the poor” or a “slave”. In contrast, Jesus sought out the individual, stopping to ask the woman at the well for a drink and noticing the woman who put all she had into the temple coffers even though it was only 2 mites. Jesus took the time and the social risk of having dinner with Zacchaeus so that his individual heart could be turned around and subsequently bring blessings to the whole community.

¹ Scrivener, G., “The Air We Breathe”, The Good Book Company (2022), page 31

A Biblical vs Modern Understanding of the Individual

This is perhaps where the biblical plan for an individual begins to diverge from some modern understandings. No one is an island. We are part of a wider picture. Take Paul's illustration of the Body of Christ from 1 Corinthians 12. Each Christian is part of the wider community of believers, and each believer has an individual role to play in that community.

In this picture from Paul, the individual and the community complement each other as God intended. Yet, how is this different from the sense of individuality we may have picked up from our modern world, and what might have contributed to that shift?

Individuality or Isolation?

In the book *Mission-Shaped Church*, a working group from the Church of England outlined some of the changes in modern life that have posed an ever-increasing challenge to the traditional model of the Church.

The book was written in 2004, and so any statistics cited are now over 20 years out of date. Still, the general factors mentioned remain relevant today, and more can be added to them. They include:

1. An increase in the number of households has contributed to higher house prices.
2. With both men and women working longer hours and with changes in family dynamics, the weekends have become a moment for family time.
3. Sunday sporting activities are now a popular pull for children and families.
4. Television was also shown to fill up our free time. It was reported that in 2000, people watched an average of just under 3 hours a day.

Out of interest, I checked the internet for updates on television statistics. On June 18th, 2024, the Independent published an article showing that we spend an average of 6 hours and 8 minutes each day on screens, whether smartphones, laptops, desktops, e-readers, etc. Teenagers can apparently spend up to 9 hours on screens per day.²

A final mention is to something we will all be aware of and which older generations will have seen happen over the course of their lives: motorcars. In 1950, there were around 4 million registered vehicles on the road, which is about 1 for every 12 people. Remember that the 4 million includes any vehicles used in public transport, public services, and businesses, so the number of private cars owned would be lower. In March 2024, there were 41.4 million registered vehicles, about 1 for every 1.6 people.³

More vehicles mean more travel, and travel allows the average person to see their friends on the other side of town rather than get to know the next-door neighbour. Travel allows people to travel to the Church of their choice which can mean that the large church gets larger while the small church gets smaller.

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/advisor/vpn/screen-time-statistics>.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/vehicle-licensing-statistics-january-to-march-2024/vehicle-licensing-statistics-january-to-march-2024>

The cumulative input of these various factors has led to a sense of fragmentation within society where we can end up experiencing those who live next to us like ships passing in the night, rather than those who might look after our children, lend us an extra chair or a bottle of milk or join us for Sunday at the local Church.

More modern advancements have generally continued to feed into these patterns. Today, we can order our grocery shopping delivered to our door, and even if we go to the shop, we may find ourselves going to the self-scan till.

The high street has also suffered from the advent of online shopping, so household names such as Woolworths, British Home Stores, and Debenhams have disappeared through the ease of the keyboard. Bookstores have taken a hit, leaving Waterstones with few big-name competitors.

Much of what we used to do in the company of other human beings has become the subject of those extra 3 hours we now spend looking at screens since the year 2000.

Consumerism also has its part to play in all this. The internet has brought with it so many new opportunities for companies to advertise their products to us that we have now coined the term “Ad Blindness” for those who have seen so many adverts that they don’t register anymore!

Consumerism has also contributed to individualism in that the level of choice it offers allows people to live in a bespoke way. My favourite product, in my favourite colour, with my chosen accessories, delivered on the day I want it. That is what consumer choice allows, and the companies are bending over backwards to give it to us in the hope that we’ll come back to them for our next buy.

It all sounds great, and in some respects, it is, yet all of these factors have contributed to a greater awareness and even fixation on the self and an ever-increasing absence of physical human community.

Although the internet offers a form of community, most people are conscious of the fact that you can’t trust what you see or hear. A person can hide behind an online persona, upload altered or carefully selected images of themselves to make their lives look happier and block you from online friendship without even having to look you in the face or explain why they are ignoring you.

“FOMO” (The Fear of Missing Out) is now a term for those who cannot put their phones down for fear a friend or celebrity will post something and they will miss it. “Doom Scrolling” is a term for endlessly scrolling through videos on TikTok or Instagram while seemingly losing consciousness of how much time is passing by. It is no surprise to me that teenagers spend an average of 9 hours per day on screens, and that is only the average!

Individualism has slowly been giving way to isolation from our immediate communities. An increase in digital connections has, in many ways, led to a decrease in genuine physical connections.

When we consider the picture of the Body of Christ again, where each individual part finds its meaning, place, identity, and purpose within the whole, it is no surprise that we have seen a rise in conversations about identity in recent years.

I think it is fair to say that the more individuals become isolated from their communities, the more they will struggle to identify who they themselves are. It seems that a rise in isolation will naturally bring about a rise in questions of identity.

In a recent interview with British Entrepreneur Steven Bartlett, Comedian Jimmy Carr said that 200 years ago, people didn't know where their next meal was coming from, but they knew who they were, what their purpose was, and where they fit in society. Today, we are free-floating individuals. We have so much, and yet we have no idea who we are.⁴

Wellbeing

When beginning our Renew Wellbeing Café in 2021 we considered the 5 ways of Wellbeing referenced by the NHS on their website and by various mental health charities in the UK. The first of the 5 ways is "*Connect with other people*" and includes the following information on the NHS website.

Good relationships are important for your mental wellbeing. They can:

- *help you to build a sense of belonging and self-worth*
- *give you an opportunity to share positive experiences*
- *provide emotional support and allow you to support others*

The charity "Mind" writes on their website about the above way of wellbeing,

"Connecting with others can help us feel close to people, and valued for who we are."

As human beings, we long for community. We long for acceptance from one another. We long for a place to be, a place to belong, and where we feel significant and valued.

It would then seem that our individual identity is inextricably connected to our place within the wider community.

Believing and Belonging

Some years ago, there was much talk in Church circles about believing and belonging. It was said that for some people, it would first be important for them to be welcomed into the Church community and then to come to faith as they experienced the faith of those around them first-hand.

⁴ Jimmy Carr interview on Stephen Bartlett Podcast

Sometimes, people need more than a theoretical explanation of the Christian faith before they can accept it. Instead, seeing faith in action will really seal the deal in their hearts.

In more recent times, I read of a similar dynamic in James Emery White's book, "The Rise of the Nones". In the book, he speaks about three words beginning with the letter "C": Cause, Community, and Christ.

While all three words have traditionally played a part in a person's conversion to Christianity, the precise decade in which they lived may have influenced the order in which the words were encountered.

From the 1950s to the 1980s an unchurched person may have had an experience of Church, and a knowledge of the basics. Having experienced the horrors of the 2nd World War, many were acutely aware of the sinful propensity of the human heart, and so evangelistic messages of those such as Billy Graham, which acknowledged that sin whilst offering forgiveness and hope in Christ, resonated deeply. It was usual in that time for a new believer to have encountered **Christ** by accepting the Gospel Message, then **Community**, by becoming part of the Church, and finally **Cause**, by supporting a missionary work close to the Church's heart.

Later, in the 1990s and 2000s it became more common for the order of entry to move from **Christ > Community > Cause** to **Community > Christ > Cause**. New Christians may have had an experience of Church when they were younger but were less ready to accept the need for forgiveness. They were perhaps brought into the Church through an interest in new worship songs, and once in, they found that the passionate Christ-loving fellowship opened their own hearts to know Jesus in a way they hadn't known him before. A faith based on relationship rather than religion. That reciprocal love between them and Christ gave them a reason to be involved in causes close to God's heart.

Finally, J.E. White mentions the typical order of encounters for those coming to faith in the 2010s and beyond being one of **Cause > Community > Christ**.

Why does a new Christian seem so rare in Churches today? Why do people seem so far from the faith we have come to know and love in the Church? J.E. White suggests it is because a commitment to Christ is now at the end of the evangelistic line rather than at the beginning, as older believers may remember.⁵

While the word "cause" in decades past may have referred to something specifically Christian, like the work of a missionary society, in these new times, the cause will often be less so. For instance, a Church may invite people from the local community to join them for a litter pick and serve them refreshments in the Church building afterwards. Through joining together in this mutually acceptable cause, a person may be brought into contact with the Church community. Perhaps they then start coming to the Church coffee morning or even a service, finding friends and eventually sparking an interest to learn

⁵ White, J.E., "The Rise of the Nones", Baker Publishing Group (2014), p99-100

more about their beliefs. People can still come to faith and are doing so, but with every new generation and cultural change comes new challenges for existing Christians to navigate.

In all three of these scenarios, over time, community has played an important role in people's journeys into faith.

In a culture where isolation and loneliness are on the rise, people are crying out for community, and even committed atheists are looking to the activities of the Church for guidance.

The Sunday Assembly

Over 10 years ago, two comedians, Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans were on the way to a gig in Bath when they discovered they both wanted to do something that was like church but totally secular and inclusive of all—no matter what they believed. Together, they began The Sunday Assembly, and the first meeting took place on January 6th 2013, at The Nave in Islington. Almost 200 people turned up at the first meeting, 300 at the second and soon, people all over the world asked to start one.

Now, there are over 20 Sunday Assembly chapters in many different countries, inspired by the original Sunday Assembly and operating independently. In these chapters, people sing songs, hear inspiring talks, and create community together in a family-friendly and inclusive setting.

When asked the question, “Why does the Sunday Assembly exist?” They answer on their website, ***“Life is short, it is brilliant, it is sometimes tough, we build communities that help everyone live life as fully as possible.”***⁶

For those of us who are Christians, the birth of the Sunday Assembly may both encourage and sadden us. On one hand, we may be glad that two non-believing comedians have found value in the church’s communal activities, yet on the other hand, we may feel sad that Christ is nowhere to be seen.

It feels almost like they have thrown the baby out and kept the bath water! Yet, no group of people who want to organise themselves can get away without laying down at least some values. For the Sunday Assembly, they have decided upon 3 things.

The Assembly says: **“We have a fantastic Motto shared by all assemblies”:**

- **Live Better:** We aim to provide inspiring, thought-provoking and practical ideas that help people to live the lives they want to lead and be the people they want to be.
- **Help Often:** Assemblies are communities of action, building lives of purpose, encouraging us all to help anyone who needs it to support each other.

⁶ <https://www.sundayassembly.org/about>

- **Wonder More:** Hearing talks, singing as one, listening to readings and even playing games helps us to connect with each other and the awesome world we live in.⁷

In short, the Sunday Assembly offers Cause and Community, but not Christ. What may the Church of Christ have to offer the world that the Sunday Assembly cannot?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born Dutch-American author, activist, and former political figure. She is known for her outspoken criticism of Islam and her advocacy for the rights and autonomy of Muslim women, specifically opposing practices like forced marriage, honour killings, child marriage, and female genital mutilation. At the tender age of five, adhering to local customs in Somalia, Hirsi Ali was subjected to female genital mutilation arranged by her grandmother. Her father, an intellectual, scholar, and devout Muslim, opposed this practice but was unable to prevent it due to his imprisonment by Somalia's Communist government at that time. Her family's journey took them across various nations in Africa and the Middle East, and at the age of 23, she was granted political asylum in the Netherlands, where she became a citizen five years later.

In her early thirties, Hirsi Ali abandoned the Islamic faith she grew up with, adopted atheism, and became active in Dutch politics, joining the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD). In 2003, Hirsi Ali won a seat in the lower house of the States General of the Netherlands.

Later, she relocated to the United States, where she made her mark as a writer, activist, and prominent public intellectual. She emerged as a pivotal figure in the New Atheism movement from its inception and was closely associated with it, alongside Christopher Hitchens, who once called her "probably the most significant public intellectual ever to emerge from Africa." Writing in a column in November 2023, Hirsi Ali revealed her conversion to Christianity, arguing that the Judeo-Christian tradition offers the sole solution to the challenges facing the modern world.⁸

Upon hearing of her conversion to Christianity, Ayaan's long-time friend, Scientist and famous atheist Richard Dawkins, couldn't believe it was true, yet after a public dialogue between the two of them⁹, he came to see that this astonishing transformation had, in fact, occurred. Significantly it seems that Dawkins has lost no respect for Ayaan, having always been an admirer of her tenacity but on the day of their meeting she challenged him with the words,

⁷ <https://www.sundayassembly.org/about>

⁸ Adapted from Wikipedia Article, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayaan_Hirsi_Ali

⁹ Dialogue between Richard Dawkins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali

*“While you and I and Stephen Pinker (another atheist writer) and all those wonderful people were locked up in our Ivory Towers let’s ask ourselves what was happening on the ground, because in the last six decades we pretty much demonized Christianity and the teachings of Christianity out of the public space, out of school, out of universities and a vacuum has occurred and that vacuum is now being filled. As GK Chesterton said **‘When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.’** and there are very awful forces today out there that are claiming the hearts and minds and souls of these young students and...you say there is nothing you offer them...nothing!”¹⁰*

In taking God away from people, Ayaan challenges Dawkins that a vacuum has been created in people’s hearts, which an atheist worldview cannot fill. Christianity was clearly offering the world more than she had previously realised. While it was offering community and the opportunity to support good causes, it was also offering people eternal meaning, a solid identity, and a source of purpose and meaning, which helped to transcend with hope the pain and suffering experienced in everyday life.

As Christians, let us be encouraged that while community is still desperately needed in today’s society, so too is Christ.

Section Two: Building Community

Becoming a Player within the Wider Community

My research over these sabbatical weeks has largely confirmed that if the Church wants to build a community, then it needs to become a player within its wider local community. To gather water, you must first take your jar to the stream. At Hawkhurst Baptist Church, the stream of people flows past us daily as the flow of village life continues apace.

In his book, “A Big Gospel in Small Places”, Stephen Witmer shows how the small places in Britain and the USA have shaped the big picture of their nation’s politics. He draws examples of the influence of small rural communities upon the outcome of both the Brexit vote and the American election in 2016. He also shows that the apparent disconnect between urban and rural perspectives is a relatively new phenomenon. In the year 1800, more than 90% of the world’s population lived in rural areas. In the modern world, this high percentage has changed, with only 3.4 billion out of the total 8 billion humans living in rural areas.¹¹

The vast increase in urbanisation in recent centuries has meant that the rural viewpoint on global affairs has been overlooked, leaving politicians and city dwellers surprised at the results when big decisions are made by the public. The rural areas in Britain are not to be overlooked and have many positive aspects to recommend them.¹²

¹⁰ Adapted from Dialogue between Richard Dawkins and Ayaan Hirsi Ali

¹¹ Witmer, S., “A Big Gospel in Small Place”, InterVarsity Press (2019) p19-20

¹² Witmer, S., “A Big Gospel in Small Place”, InterVarsity Press (2019) p19

Why small places are good

Stephen Witmer comments that perhaps the most obvious attraction to rural life is the beauty of the surrounding countryside. I was glad to live in Hawkhurst during the pandemic when I heard stories of Londoners who hadn't seen a field or any significant sign of nature during the long lockdowns. Witmer remembers the proximity of a horse farm to where he grew up and the ability to be out in the countryside in minutes. Alongside the natural beauty surrounding rural settlements, many people are attracted to the slower pace of life and, in many cases, although perhaps not in Hawkhurst, the reduced traffic congestion!¹³

Witmer notes that small places are often found to be bigger on the inside. He refers to the community feeling and local heritage. In his small hometown of Monson in Maine, there is a rich history of the slate trade, which supported the town folk for many years. The twentieth-century pioneering female photographer Berenice Abbott and the critically acclaimed landscape painter Alan Bray¹⁴ also hail from the town. I was interested in the fact that the Astronomer John Herschel had lived in Hawkhurst, and who can forget the smuggling tales of the Hawkhurst Gang? Small places have personality and a sense of identity, which larger places can often lose sight of.

In times of adversity, Witmer shows that small places tend to demonstrate a sense of local resilience, as his own town did when the slate trade began to struggle. He comments that research suggests that the people who live in rural places appreciate living there and are happier than their urban-dwelling counterparts.¹⁵ A sense of identity and community have already been shown to be vitally important for our journey as a Church, and the fact that these concepts are grasped securely in rural settings will surely be a positive overall.

How Village Churches Thrive

In June 2022, the Church of England published a practical guidebook called "How Village Churches Thrive", and although it is focused on Anglican Churches, it still has much to inspire us as Baptists serving in a rural setting.

Among some of the things mentioned in the book are:

- The importance of a good welcome
- The significance of traditional life events
- Making good use of the Church Building
- Making the most of the outdoors
- Celebrating the annual festivals
- Leading the Community Conversation
- Ministering to isolated people
- Ministering to children

¹³ Witmer, S., "A Big Gospel in Small Place", InterVarsity Press (2019) p37

¹⁴ Witmer, S., "A Big Gospel in Small Place", InterVarsity Press (2019) p39

¹⁵ Witmer, S., "A Big Gospel in Small Place", InterVarsity Press (2019) p40

As I continue, I'll provide feedback on each topic in turn, stating the basic points and adding my own thoughts on how they might be relevant to Hawkhurst Baptist Church.

The Importance of a Good Welcome

The book stresses the need for churches to create a more intentional, welcoming environment. Welcoming should go beyond smiles and coffee, involving clear signage, accessible facilities, and warm, inclusive language.

Key challenges include outdated information, difficult access, and intimidating entrances. Solutions include updating signage, improving accessibility, and offering amenities like baby changing stations or walker-friendly resources.

The chapter also highlights avoiding religious jargon and making spaces family-friendly. Suggestions include adding homey touches and interactive prayer stations. Churches should focus on welcoming newcomers, not just regular attendees, by offering inclusive services and clear communication about church life.¹⁶

My thoughts: Our Church has always been good at welcoming people at the door and inviting them through for coffee. While we already perform well in this area it is good to reflect upon our welcome all the same. The book sets a challenge by calling us to think of welcoming someone into the Church, like welcoming them into our own homes. We not only smile at the door but show them where to put their shoes, hang their jacket up, and show them where the lounge is. We ensure that they feel welcome and that they will speak well about their visit to our house to other people. How much of this can we carry over to our life in Church? Perhaps we can remember not only to point to where the drinks are but to accompany them or sit with them during the service.

We can also consider the environment we welcome people into. Are we doing all we can to welcome new people, or do we keep things the way we like them and argue that new people will need to like our ways or lump it? The book presents the challenge of ensuring that we set up our church and welcome visitors over the people we already have. This is a bold suggestion by the authors but one worthy of discussion and prayer as we move into the future.

The significance of traditional life events

The book highlights challenges in engaging communities through life events like weddings, baptisms, and funerals. Churches often miss opportunities for outreach due to poor publicity, transactional first contact, and a lack of follow-up. To address these, the book suggests personalizing interactions, building partnerships with local venues, and maintaining ongoing contact after events. Modernizing services to appeal to younger attendees and involving families in church activities are also recommended. Emphasizing warmth, prayer, and presence at these key moments can deepen relationships and bring new life to congregations.¹⁷

¹⁶ COFE, "How Village Churches Thrive", Church House Publishing (2022), p8-25

¹⁷ COFE, "How Village Churches Thrive", Church House Publishing (2022), p26-43

My thoughts: I was encouraged to think more seriously about the significance of life events at HBC, such as Dedications, Weddings, and Funerals. In particular, dedications are foremost in my mind with so many families attending our Toddler Group. Historically, couples would be married at a Church, then have their children dedicated at the Church, and ultimately, have their funeral at the Church. The Church would journey with them through the whole of their lives, a spiritual home which brought meaning to the whole of life.

Today, it is becoming very rare to see this, and even committed Christians who celebrate all their important life events in the Church may well move around and belong to numerous fellowships across their lives. Still, we have the opportunity to celebrate the births of many children who cross the church's threshold on a weekly basis. Even if we do not do it through a traditional form of dedication service, is there a way that we can help unchurched families to know that the birth of their children is significant to us and significant to God? Something for us to explore.

Another aspect of this subject which struck me from the book was that of keeping in touch with the people who experience life events at the Church. Whether through dedications, weddings, or funerals, perhaps we can find ways to check in on people and maintain contact in a natural way, which will remind them that we desire to not only accompany them in the event but also on life's journey.

Making good use of the Church Building

How Village Churches Thrive highlights challenges related to ageing, underutilized church buildings and inaccessible worship. Churches often struggle with costly maintenance and lack basic facilities, while their spaces feel exclusive to regular attendees. To address this, the book suggests engaging the wider community in both caring for the buildings and using them for varied activities like concerts or community hubs. Additionally, worship services should be reviewed for accessibility, and creative solutions like moving services to warmer venues or offering a mix of traditional and contemporary styles can help broaden engagement and foster inclusivity.¹⁸

My thoughts: This part of the book is very much geared towards Anglican Church buildings, where a warmer side-chapel may be a more appropriate venue for a service than the main church. It still gives us pause for thought as we consider the spaces in our own Church. We have made steps in recent times to address aspects of accessibility and have also been utilising the hall more during the week. Maintenance issues have also come up in recent times such as the repairs to the outside stonework and rose window.

Making good use of the building may also be relevant in other ways, though. Rewind is one way in which we invite year 5 children into Church twice a year at Easter and Christmas, but I wonder if there might be other ways we can invite children or adults in through specialised services and events. Our Church has a rich history, which may be of interest to some locals in the village or even to schools who may be learning about the differences between Church denominations.

¹⁸ COFE, "How Village Churches Thrive", Church House Publishing (2022), p44-61

Making the most of the outdoors

The book emphasizes that village churchyards present both opportunities and challenges. Key issues include declining biodiversity, burdensome maintenance, and a lack of community engagement. However, churchyards can be revitalized by creating wildlife habitats, involving volunteers, and using them as educational spaces. Clear communication and planning are recommended to address concerns about neglect, while events and signage help connect people to both nature and local history. Ultimately, the chapter suggests that churchyards can reflect Christian values through environmental stewardship and community collaboration, transforming them into spaces that benefit both wildlife and local residents.¹⁹

My thoughts: The fourth chapter of the book discusses care for the churchyard. It is very much geared towards Anglican village churches, and it is amazing how many opportunities they have to use their grounds to build community, inspire a love for the church building, and interest both schoolchildren and older villagers alike.

While we may not have a churchyard to care for or large green areas to be converted to meadows to link in with school science lessons, there may be ways in the future, with careful consideration, to offer volunteer opportunities to local residents, which will give them an insight into the life of the Church. Two ways in which this is already possible are through Foodbank and Toddler Train, but perhaps other opportunities may arise in the future. How we can make the most of our building both inside and outside in a way that builds community should be a continual subject for reflection.

Alongside the world immediately outside the Church, we also have the surrounding countryside available to us. In her book “Outdoor Church,” Sally Welch presents 20 sessions for children and families that take Church outside the building. The sessions contain activities, crafts, and food preparation, with an opportunity to celebrate God’s creation by spotting birds.²⁰

Sessions such as these are another way to use the resources around us to build community with others in our local area.

Celebrating the Annual Festivals

In its chapter on festivals, *How Village Churches Thrive* highlights the need for village churches to refresh their approach to festivals by tailoring services to the local community. Challenges include declining attendance, outdated practices, and lack of community involvement. To address these, the chapter suggests renewing worship by blending traditional and contemporary elements, involving schools and families, and using creative venues. Churches are encouraged to reclaim secular festivals with positive Christian alternatives and foster inclusivity across age groups. Empowering lay leaders and creating consistent, annual events help build community ownership and ensure long-term engagement.²¹

¹⁹ COFE, “How Village Churches Thrive”, Church House Publishing (2022), p62-79

²⁰ Welch, S., “Outdoor Church”, Bible Reading Fellowship (2016), p45-53

²¹ COFE, “How Village Churches Thrive”, Church House Publishing (2022), p110-127

My thoughts: One helpful aspect of festivals is that many are still recognised by both the Church and the wider community. Easter, Harvest, and Christmas are the obvious ones, but others, such as Halloween, can be observed in alternative ways, such as a Light Party or craft evening. Waiting periods such as Lent and Advent can also be reasons for bringing people together, as many are familiar with the idea of giving something up for Lent and waiting in eager anticipation for Christmas. New Year and Pentecost may also bring with them their own opportunities along with Mothering Sunday and Father’s Day. There are still many opportunities through the year for us to connect with the wider community at significant times, whether that is through services, events, or smaller schemes such as buying Christian advent calendars for school classes.

Leading the Community Conversation

How Village Churches Thrive highlights the need for village churches to engage more actively with their wider communities. Challenges include the disconnect between church and non-churchgoers, the decline of village life, and limited resources. To address these, churches are encouraged to foster relationships beyond Sunday services, use their buildings as hubs for local activities, and collaborate with other churches and local councils. Practical steps include creating co-working spaces, improving local infrastructure, conducting community audits, and participating in local governance. By doing so, churches can strengthen their role as central to the health and well-being of village life.²²

My thoughts: It is helpful that the Hawkhurst Community Trust currently has its AGM in our Church Hall and is well connected to our Church through the Foodbank. This gives us a helpful window into our community's needs and connections to those within the wider community who are also concerned for the village's welfare. It is through taking part in initiatives like Foodbank and Renew that we can slowly begin to dip our jar into the wider stream of Hawkhurst life as we begin to build community with others and play our role as the people of God in this village.

Ministering to isolated people

The second to last chapter from *How Village Churches Thrive* highlights the challenges of isolation and loneliness, particularly in rural areas. It emphasizes the need for churches to distinguish between isolation and loneliness, reduce stigma, and actively identify those in need. Practical suggestions include improving transport and digital access, creating community spaces, organizing intergenerational events, and collaborating with local authorities. Churches are encouraged to build trust, conduct local research, and tailor initiatives to specific groups while ensuring safeguarding and sustainability of efforts to foster stronger community connections and improve well-being.²³

My thoughts: The book describes the difference between isolation and loneliness by stating that while isolation refers to “the absence of social contact”, loneliness is “a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship.”

²² COFE, “How Village Churches Thrive”, Church House Publishing (2022), p81-95

²³ COFE, “How Village Churches Thrive”, Church House Publishing (2022), p146-163

The Church can respond to the problems of isolation and loneliness in some of the suggested ways: digital access to resources, offering lifts to those without transport, using the church premises as a community space, and organising events that cross generational boundaries.

The Church can also act as a voice for the lonely in society on a local political level.

Ministering to children

The book emphasizes the need for village churches to prioritize children's ministry by leveraging close-knit communities and collaborating with local schools. Challenges include limited resources, transportation barriers, and resistance to new ideas. To address these, churches are encouraged to use creative spaces, offer flexible worship options, and appoint dedicated leaders. Safeguarding and funding are critical, as is partnering with local organizations. Engaging young parents and providing spiritual support to children are also key. Innovative approaches like online sessions and intergenerational activities help sustain interest and reach isolated families, ensuring a vibrant children's ministry.²⁴

My thoughts: The church is familiar with the challenges of ministry to children but is also aware of the opportunities before us in this area. Continuing to deepen the connection we have with our local school and the relationships we have with local families will be vital for the future as we seek to encourage a new generation of people to follow Jesus. As we look to the future, it will be important for us to seek out new ways to build community with younger people in Hawkhurst, perhaps looking at specific services for some of the groups we have, such as the current Easter and Christmas services, which we run for Toddler Train, a second "Brick by Brick" event like the one in February, and making the most of having the School Choir with us for our Christmas Carol service.

An exciting story from the book "Mission Shaped and Rural" by Sally Gaze was that of seven young mums from four different villages who were drawn together by common mums-and-toddlers activities and a desire to find out more about the Christian faith. 5 had made a commitment to follow Christ in recent weeks, but only 1 had started to attend regularly on Sunday. There were some very good practical reasons why the others could not attend regularly at the weekend, and so, in the end, a cell church was formed where all the usual aspects of Church could be fulfilled but at a time suitable for all. Sometimes, to keep a faith walk going, another event may be required either for the short or long term.²⁵

As I move into the final section of this report, we will see how our ministry towards children will be vital to shaping the future fellowship of believers at Hawkhurst Baptist Church.

²⁴ COFE, "How Village Churches Thrive", Church House Publishing (2022), p128-143

²⁵ Gaze, S., "Mission-Shaped and Rural", Church House Publishing (2006), pxii-xv

Final Thoughts on Section Two

In this section, I have aimed to outline some of the opportunities we have to build community at HBC. It is through interacting with the wider stream of the village's community life that people will learn of the life within our own fellowship.

As we build relationships by intentionally interacting with those around us and seeking to serve them as we serve Christ, we pray that some of those people will come to see the God behind all we do.

Small places have big potential, and God is just as concerned for Hawkhurst as he is for London or Birmingham. Once we begin to build upon our current community, how can we shape it to be fit for the long term? This will be the subject of Section Three.

Section Three: Shaping Community

The Church Community

When I talk of building community in this report, I am ultimately referring to building the Church Community. As we interact with people from across the village's wide scope, we are creating one form of community, and through that, we hope to introduce them to another form of community, the fellowship of believers.

It is our calling as Christians to continue to pass on the message of Jesus to future generations and to ensure a constant witness to him remains until he returns. When we think of building our Church Community, we need to have that in mind. We don't want to live in the future, just as we don't want to live in the past. Instead, we want to live in the present, helping people of all ages and backgrounds to experience Christ for themselves and to join us on the journey of lifelong faith.

In a true community, all people are valued and recognised. In this final section, I'd like to share with you some findings that I have discovered that can help us build a community in which everyone feels a part while also being drawn deeper into their walk with the Lord and the fellowship of the Church.

The key concept I hope to share is "Intergenerational Church," and I'll be drawing largely from the book called "Being an Intergenerational Church" by Suzi Farrant & Darren Philip (2023). I also make reference to a second book called "Blended: A Call to Reimagine Our Church Family" by Eleanor Bird (2015).

Intergenerational Church and its Role in Shaping Church Community

Intergenerational Church has emerged from a desire to see children become passionate disciples who stay within the Church throughout the entirety of their lives. It has also stemmed from a conviction that all Christians will grow in depth of faith by spending time with other believers across the age ranges.

You may have seen programmes on TV in recent years where young children are paired up with older people at residential homes to see the beneficial effects it has on the elderly person and the child alike. The older people grow a new zest for life, with mental and physical aspects of their lives being impacted positively. The children grow in confidence

and kindness as they experience the care of the older person and learn to help them with their needs.

This kind of dynamic would surely be a positive addition to the Church and a faithful embodiment of the Body of Christ, where each generation contributes unique gifts and perspectives, enriching the faith of others. By uniting all ages in shared worship, learning, and service, it is hoped that intergenerational church will foster spiritual growth and community vitality.

In an intergenerational church, every generation is valued and connected, ensuring that the wisdom of the elderly, the energy of the young, and the gifts of all are integrated. This holistic approach strengthens the church, making it a true, living representation of Christ's body, where all members support and edify one another. This, the authors of "Becoming and Intergeneration Church" contend, is how it was always meant to be.

"The earliest churches... were inherently intergenerational, with whole families... regarded as full members of the community."²⁶

To support this, the authors point to the work of John Pridmore, who makes the case for children being regarded as full members of the Christian Community by referring to the way that alongside husbands, wives, and slaves, Paul addresses children directly in his letters. Citing Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21, Pridmore writes,

"Paul could hardly have addressed the children in the terms he does unless it was taken for granted that they were fully members of the Christian community. Their status as members of the Church is as sure of that of their parents for the whole Christian household is [in the Lord]."²⁷

The History of Sunday School and the Separation of the Generations

The book's flow suggests that over the last five centuries, the Church has moved from being primarily intergenerational to age-segregated, and it provides historical evidence to back this up.

The authors argue that the shift towards age-segregated church activities is rooted in historical developments beginning with the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation's emphasis on individual engagement with Scripture led to a more formal approach to education, as Reformers sought to ensure that everyone, including children, could read and understand the Bible. This focus on education initiated the separation of learning from communal worship, a trend that continued with the establishment of Sunday Schools in the 18th and 19th centuries. Originally, these schools aimed to provide general education to children, but they gradually became more focused on religious instruction, further segregating children from the main worship service.

²⁶Farrant, S., Philip, D., "Being an Intergenerational Church: Practices to Bring the Generations Back Together", Saint Andrew Press (2023), p36

²⁷ Pridmore, J., "The New Testament Theology of Childhood, Hobart: Ron Buckland (1977), p185

The book notes that *"the Sunday school became less of a missional outreach of the church, and was re-purposed as the locus of Christian education for children within the church."*²⁸ This transition solidified the division between children and adults during church activities.

In the 20th century, theories of cognitive development, such as those proposed by Jean Piaget, and church growth strategies reinforced age segregation. Churches adopted educational models that catered specifically to children's learning styles, separating them from adult worship to provide what was perceived as more appropriate instruction. Additionally, the notion that attracting young families could grow church membership led to the creation of programs tailored to different age groups, often at the expense of intergenerational interaction.

These developments have culminated in the modern practice where children are often removed from the worship service to attend Sunday School, leading to a church experience that is fragmented by age rather than united in shared faith. The book suggests that this model has inadvertently weakened the communal and spiritual bonds that can only be nurtured through intergenerational worship and learning.

In her book, "Blended", Eleanor Bird writes, *"For years, many of us have been stuck in the expectation of adding 'all age' to the existing framework of our churches. It's a frustrating and often thankless task that can regularly result in people being either unhappy about what currently exists, or dissatisfied because of what doesn't. Having church groups that are segregated by age has been a choice many churches have made in order to speed up the process of discipleship. The hope was that if the adults did 'their thing' in isolation they would see more fruit much more quickly, and the same went for meeting as kids' groups and youth groups. Splitting up held the promise of 'getting where we're going faster. These choices have meant we have stopped aiming to function as a family above all else, and instead have prioritised specific or segregated ministries, or, even worse, the 'results' of our ministries. The problem is that in trying to get 'there' faster, we've forgotten that the point was to get there together."*²⁹

My Motivation

In reporting on these historical dynamics, I'm not suggesting that we simply "ditch the Sunday School" but rather that we begin to think about how we can do more together than we may have previously done.

This vision of allowing the Church to gather across the generations was significant in beginning Café Church at HBC. The tables allow people to engage together, thinking about the same topic but in different ways. Staying together around the table, rather than separating to different parts of the room or different rooms entirely, enables an older person to help a younger person with their glueing and a younger person to say a prayer for an older person. Interacting with one another allows younger people to know that faith and church will still be relevant to them when they are older, rather than just seeing

²⁸ Farrant, S., Philip, D., "Being an Intergenerational Church: Practices to Bring the Generations Back Together", Saint Andrew Press (2023), p38

²⁹ Bird, E., "Blended: A call to Reimagine our Church Family", The Bible Reading Fellowship (2015), p26-27

church as a religious kids' club. It also allows older people to be encouraged by seeing with their own eyes the enthusiasm of youngsters seeking God in the current day.

The relationships we build in our younger years are significant, so it is good for children to get to know godly older people and to receive care and interest from them. As the years go by in an intergenerational church, it is hoped that those children will grow up to show care towards the older people who encouraged them in their formative years while also encouraging the next generation themselves.

Who's in charge? Intentionality and Mutuality in Intergenerational Church

"Intergenerational church is intentional. It is more than different generations happening to share a space and time."³⁰

The book emphasizes that becoming an intergenerational church requires deliberate action and planning. It's not enough for different generations to simply share the same space; there must be a conscious effort to foster meaningful interactions between them. The church's core activities of worship, learning, and service should be designed to bring all ages together, allowing everyone to contribute and learn from one another. This intentionality ensures that intergenerational connections become an integral part of the church's being rather than an occasional occurrence.

By being intentional, the church can create a community where relationships between generations are cultivated, strengthening the congregation's overall faith and unity. The writers also stress the importance of mutuality in an intergenerational church, recognizing that all generations have something valuable to offer and receive. The traditional model often places adults in positions of authority, with children and youth as passive recipients. However, the book argues for a shift towards mutual discipleship, where each generation learns from and teaches the others. They write that in an intergenerational Church,

"The adults are not in charge. There is meaningful relationship between generations which recognises that each has something to give and to receive from the other."³¹

This mutuality enriches the church community, fostering deeper connections and shared spiritual growth across all ages.

Programs vs Relationships

In recent decades, it has been common for churches to engage with programs such as Alpha and Messy Church. While programs are not a problem in and of themselves, the intergenerational church is about focusing on the relationships formed rather than the vehicle. If the intergenerational church contributes anything, it is to ensure that Christians from different generations interact with each other and share the journey of

³⁰ Farrant, S., Philip, D., "Being an Intergenerational Church: Practices to Bring the Generations Back Together", Saint Andrew Press (2023), p17

³¹ Farrant, S., Philip, D., "Being an Intergenerational Church: Practices to Bring the Generations Back Together", Saint Andrew Press (2023), p18

faith. The message of Intergenerational Church is, therefore, just as relevant to a Messy Church service as it is to Evensong.

The book advocates for shifting from merely learning about God to experiencing God together across generations. This means creating worship and discipleship practices that actively involve everyone, regardless of age, in the life of the church. Instead of children learning separately while adults worship, all ages are invited to engage in spiritual practices, like prayer, Scripture reading, and Communion, together.

The Meaning of a Full Disciple

Intergenerational Church is ultimately about accepting children as full disciples of Jesus alongside the adults. Yet, what do we mean by “disciple” or “believer”? I like to think about the simple faith displayed by the thief on the cross. To help me explain what I am alluding to, I will use a sermon illustration by the Scottish Pastor of an American Church, Alistair Begg.

Alistair Begg: “If I ever got to meet [the thief on the cross], I would ask him ‘So how did that shake out for you? You’ve never been to a Bible Study, you never got baptised, you didn’t know a thing about Church Membership, and yet...you made it! How did you make it?’ That’s what the angel must have said!”

Angel: ‘What are you doing here?!’

Thief: ‘Well, I don’t know!’

Angel: ‘Let me go and get my Supervisor.’

Supervisor Angel: ‘Just a few things...Are you clear on the doctrine of Justification by Faith?’

Thief: ‘I’ve never heard of it.’

Supervisor Angel: ‘Ok, well, let’s just go to the doctrine of scripture immediately...’

The Thief just stares

Supervisor Angel (Frustrated): ‘Ok...look...on what basis are you here?’

Thief: ‘The man on the middle cross said that I could come.’

Begg concludes by saying that this is the only answer that anyone can give. If we are asked the question of how we got into heaven we should not answer in the first person, “*Because I believed! Because I have faith! Because I am etc.*” The only proper answer we can give is in the third person. “*Because HE (Jesus) said I can come. Because HE died. Because HE rose victorious. Because HE has all authority in Heaven and on Earth. That is why I am here.*”³²

³² Alistair Begg, Sermon: “The Power and Message of the Cross”, Preached on November 20th 2019

Sometimes, I think we make salvation far too complicated. It's not about how much you know; it's about who you know, who you trust, and who you desire to follow, seek, and investigate.

When Jesus came into the world, he didn't teach children to have faith like adults, but instead, he taught adults to have faith like children.

²He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. ³And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:2-4 NIV

This is why Baptists practice "believers" baptism and not "adult" baptism. You don't need to be 18 to follow Jesus. You just need to be willing to trust him. Perhaps the most powerful symbol of our faith that we have is the Bread and Wine of Communion. To remember him, Jesus didn't give us a wordy doctrine but used the familiar objects of the Passover Meal to give his followers a tangible method of remembrance. One which could be partaken of in silent awe and without the need for words. The Passover Meal was taken by the whole family, adults and children alike. Adults and children were called to remember God's Salvation in a way that all of them could understand and in a way that all of them would know they were included.

The last few words about Section Three

I hope that, in some way, I have been able to show what I have learned about how we may shape our Church Community for the future. It's not about being child-centric or adult-centric, it's about being Christ-centric and about building strong intergenerational bonds where young people can grow up in an encouraging and supportive environment where they truly know their fellow adult Christians, and where adult believers may have the joy of both giving to and receiving from the children in their midst.

Some Questions from this Section could be

- How can we intentionally bring different generations together in our church?
- In what ways can we ensure that all generations are mutually serving and learning from one another?
- What changes would we need to make to encourage a more relational and experiential approach?

Conclusion

In this report, I have aimed to consider the important place that community has within Church life. Human beings need community, but even in a time when we have more methods of communication than ever, many are being left isolated, lonely, and without a sense of meaning in their lives.

In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the position of atheism leaves people lacking when it comes to questions of ultimate meaning, purpose, and identity. These are areas that the Church is more than capable of speaking into as it brings the life-giving message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Community is at the very heart of the Church as we aim to encourage each other as fellow believers in Christ. The Church invites people from all ages and backgrounds to come and encounter God and to hear his message of forgiveness and hope. Many, however, may not realise this is available or may not have a means open to them by which they can comfortably come alongside Christians, ask the questions they have, and experience the fellowship we enjoy. This is where section two is relevant.

There are many ways and methods for building community with people in our neighbourhood before they become part of the actual church fellowship. To make friends, we need to make ourselves available, and we need strategies to help us do that.

This report has been written to get you thinking and praying about how that might look at Hawkhurst Baptist Church as we journey together into the future.

Once we have met people and invited them to sample the fellowship we have at our Church, we need to consider the type of community we invite them into. Is it a place where people of all ages can truly grow in God and learn from one another? Is it a place of deep friendship which will carry people through the highs and lows that we face in different stages of life? Is it a place that will help to develop long-term disciples who will eventually take up the mantle that we hold now as we await the Lord's return?

These, again, are questions for us to ponder in the weeks, months and years ahead.

I have included another document along with this report that details what other Church fellowships are doing to serve their communities in fruitful ways. I hope that document will be an extra encouragement as you continue with me in prayer for our mission here in Hawkhurst.

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