

The Diocese of Ely received Strategic Development Funding for their Changing Market Towns project focused on enabling and sustaining church growth in several market towns. This includes the appointment of lay leaders, including a new lay pioneer in Downham Market.



It's 39 miles from Norwich and 30 from Cambridge.

And that is, perhaps, part of the problem. Downham Market is one of a number of market towns on the edges of the Fens which don't fit into the historic categories of places like Cambridge, or into that of the surrounding countryside. It's neither one thing nor the other. Has it, along with other local market towns, been overlooked?

Figures released five years ago showed that people in market towns in the Ely Diocese like Downham Market were simply not going to church.



‘In a town of 10,000 people, you may have a congregation of 70,’ says the Revd Canon Mike Booker, the Bishop’s Change Officer for Market Towns. ‘That doesn’t look too bad until you think about it as a percentage of the population. Then it’s serious.

‘We are not having the impact that we are in Cambridge, or the countryside,’ he says.

It’s hoped that new staff – many of them lay people – will provide the answer to the problem, working with locals in new and fresh ways.



...s workers and those involved in church planting.

One of them is 27-year-old Sarah Molyneux-Hetherington, who was appointed as a Lay Pioneer in Downham Market last year.

‘It’s an incredible town of incredible people,’ she says, ‘but they feel let down. The council tax has gone up, but the infrastructure isn’t there. We’ve only got one bank. There isn’t enough housing. So, people don’t trust institutions.

‘People aren’t interested in quick fixes. You have got to be here for a long time and show you are committed. My vision is to create a space where people can support the community, explore faith and know that they are loved by God and are OK, that there is a God who is out there and treasures and values them, even when they are not hearing that message from the community, society or family.’



So far, she says, much of her contact with locals has been through attending town events, volunteering in the town, acting as a governor, and even meeting people when out dog-walking. But she has also set up what she calls a 'build team', a small, home-based congregation of ten people aged from 11 to 40 years old.

'I want to create a space where we are all included,' she says. 'God is here. God is doing stuff. I'm getting quite excited about it.'

Find out more about [Ely's Changing Market towns project](#).

Earlier this year seven dioceses gathered to discuss strategies for renewal and reform in market towns. A full report is available on the [Diocese of Ely website](#).

Learn more about [lay ministries](#), including vocations to [Pioneer Ministry](#).



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