

For such a time as this

How can the church at large best respond to the unique moment we are in, and to everything our communities experiencing, ranging from trauma and hardship on the one hand, to a rebirth of community spirit on the other? How to help bring closure to the negative and longevity to the positive?

Gaining traction in many parts of the country is the As One vision, which is bold, large scale, tried and tested (based on Birmingham's 2018-20 'Permission to Smile' campaign) and yet finds its best expression through the ordinary parish church. This is an outreach which, experience shows, will be responded to with open arms, even by people who wouldn't normally be open to the local church, because the church is acting as the local arm of a high profile partnership including schools, GPs, council and others. And it gives church members the opportunity to be 'salt and light', long term, through building relationships with the people they live amongst.

There are several steps. Initially, the partnership displays hundreds of locally-customised two-metre banners ("you see them everywhere") across the town, city or county, looking like this:

<https://as-one.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/As-One-animation4.gif> (link to animated image of banner)



These could go up in the Spring, the high profile message - supported up by a social media campaign - reaffirming the best of the 'Lock-down spirit'. There's a village version, too.

Then, when the pandemic allows, dozens of churches in the partnership prepare to invite local people to two key events, perhaps in June, September or even next year (we need to be flexible, but ready). The first of these is an outdoor Community Memorial Service with a leaflet going to every home, using the well-known As One brand, inviting residents to come and 'stand together', to comfort those who mourn, and to recognise and remember the suffering, the isolation, lost livelihoods, anxiety and fear, frustration and stress from a year like no other. Each church has the precious opportunity sensitively to minister to its community helping them to find peace (suggested formats will be provided).

The second, perhaps a week or two later, is a 'Back Together Celebration', with a mission to create a positive legacy. Local people are again invited using the As One brand and, when they get to the tea party put on by the church, they are welcomed with, "lovely to see you. Now, which street do you live on?", and then guided to the table reserved for their own street. As these near-neighbours get to know each other, from the front the vicar explains (suggested talks supplied) what a Street Association is and how it works. It's an informal, resident-led group which looks to put on a few events a year (quiz night, kids' party, BBQ, coffee morning etc) just for their street, to bring people together. With an agenda of 'friendship, fun, belonging, a helping hand', friendships are formed, isolation is addressed, practical help flows, the generations come together and the street really is 'filled with friendliness'. Each table grouping is encouraged to discuss how they could be the nucleus of starting a Street Association on their own street (much easier if there's a group of residents proposing it together).



The tea party pictured (left) was put on by a small, elderly congregation in Birmingham and was a great success, with Street Associations formed as the table groups invited the rest of the street to join them (pictured, right), often in someone's home. Most churches have the tables, chairs, tea urns, cake-bakers and so on and can use a community hall if they don't have their own building. Any church can do this!

Through the Back Together Celebration, each church is able to bless its neighbourhood with the precious gift of community long-term, mobilising church members to be part of building community spirit and friendship on their own street, praying for their street and becoming fruitful in a new way where they live.

How does it get going? Well, that's the difficult bit. But if church leaders network together and – with signs of growing support – contact their council and suggest a partnership, the council (as is being seen) will respond enthusiastically to this tried-and-tested model and will bring in other local stakeholders, raise a budget, with the partnership benefitting from the support from As One UK, which provides all the advice and materials needed for their campaign.

As we (finally!) come out of the Covid emergency, there will be a 'moment' to catch – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do something really special. The key is to put in place the partnership and the church networks so as to be ready when that moment comes.

For further information or to arrange a Zoom meeting, please contact Martin Graham, office@as-one.uk; 0121 459 8400; 07931 282716;

Links: 2-min. video from Churches Together in England co-president Hugh Osgood: <https://bit.ly/3e9thE2>; www.as-one.uk; www.permissiontosmile.org; <https://www.local.gov.uk/permission-smile-campaign-boost-friendliness>.