

The Grantham Wellbeing Café at Church of the Ascension

In 2019, Rev Sam Parsons packed her bags and moved to the lovely town of Grantham in Lincolnshire, famous for being the birthplace of Sir Isaac Newton and Margaret Thatcher, to take up leadership of The Ascension, Harrowby in the north-east of the town.

Sam reflects on the first few months; *“When I came to this church, there were around 15 people in the morning service, and very little was happening in the church. I knew when I came here that this was a pioneer post, so I was ready for that. I'd only been here 8 months and then COVID hit.”*



As the pandemic receded, Sam was very aware of the twin issues of loneliness and economic hardship. She'd heard of Renew Wellbeing and took the idea to her church.

“We started our Renew Wellbeing space, which we call a Wellbeing Café, in 2021. We were coming out of the pandemic and we could see the loneliness and the isolation that people had suffered. We wanted this space where people could engage with one another and meet new people - a safe space where it's OK not to be OK.”

Dominoes

Almost immediately, the Wellbeing Café took off. Far from original expectations of perhaps a dozen attendees per week, the café welcomed between 30 and 60 people right from the start. An enthusiastic group of guests were the men who would make a beeline straight for the domino table. This attracted other men to the café.

Recently, a man came who had had an accident leaving him with memory loss many months before. This led to him leaving his job, and he began suffering from extreme loneliness. Sam takes up the story:

“So he can't work and he's found that he's very lonely. And he'd heard about the Wellbeing Café. So he came in a bit nervous last week. As soon as he came in, I went to welcome him... I showed him the table with the games, the colouring sheets, word searches, crosswords, the craft activities and I showed him the cakes, the tea and the coffee. And then I said, “and this group of gentlemen here play dominoes”. Well, his face lit up and he said, “Oh, I used to play in a Domino League and there's nowhere where you can play dominoes anymore! Can I join them?”

She took him over to the table and introduced him. *“I said, well, this is Tom. and he's really looking for a space where he can come and get out and meet others and he loves playing dominoes. So they said, “Oh, yeah, sure, come and join us next week”. So sure enough, as soon as the doors opened, Tom was the first one in the door, and he sat and played dominoes today. He absolutely loved it and plans to come back each week.”*

Welcome

There are so many stories of this kind – of people suffering from isolation, from anxiety, from feeling cut off from their community, who heard of the Wellbeing Café and became part of a wonderful, accepting and caring group. One lady, Anna, came in recently after having had an entire weekend without a single conversation with anyone.

“I went to chat with her and I told her what we do. We went and got a cup of tea and I sat with her on a table of ladies that I know are really friendly. Well, by the end of the morning, she knew somewhere to go every single day of the week... One by one the ladies went to Anna, and said, “Anna, why don't you come to this group happening tomorrow?” Or, “This is happening at this place on Wednesday. I'll be there. So when you come in, I'll

be there to greet you.” Anna has gone from having nothing to having potentially something she can now do every single day of the week because she walked through the door of the Wellbeing Café.”

Partnership

In the start-up phase, Sam and her team began to look around for suitable partnerships to support the café, as per the Renew Wellbeing model. She contacted her local surgery, outlined the church’s plans and asked if they were interested in learning more. *“And remember, this is the NHS, right? And they said, ‘are you free **today** for us to come round?’”*

Since then, the café is a regular destination for social prescribers – professionals who are supporting people to recover their wellbeing and health through community participation. *“Because they know it is a safe space.”* This may include those with learning disabilities, severe anxiety and one person diagnosed late-in-life with autism. Sam chatted to them and showed them the activities, and helped them find a space that wasn’t too overwhelming, being a little bit away from the ambient noise and chatter.

“They took what they wanted from the table and spent the whole of the rest of time just doing some colouring and some word searches... It's just getting a sense of what different people need as they come in and it is a space that embraces hugely differing needs.”

Prayer

Sam has always been supported through her church congregation and team. Some members of the congregation come to the café as part of their routine, and there is always a simple, peaceful prayer time which guests can join in with if they would like to. Often the prayer time is based around a verse from a psalm, and the Lord’s Prayer.

“So it's literally just 10 minutes, and the people that come to it say it's so lovely to have that peaceful time. They can just sit and be or they can say something if they want. So there's no pressure either. And we have found that to be really effective.”

Transformation



The Wellbeing Café happens on a Monday –this was highly recommended by their contacts at the NHS surgery - but Sam sees the transformation in her church congregation across the week.

“The church began to see this space come alive, they saw all these people coming in to a church activity, they saw the needs that it was meeting and that they were part of meeting that need. It encouraged them so much.

“Part of my joy is not just seeing people come into this space and find welcome, joy, companionship and to a certain extent, healing; part of my joy has been the joy of seeing the church feeling like our church has come alive again.”

George’s story

Another of the domino regulars was George, an older gentleman, who had been coming every week but then had to take some time out for a hospital operation. Unfortunately, the treatment involved amputating one of his legs; it took quite some time for him to recover, to get his house adapted, and to get hold of a motorised wheelchair. He was away from the café for about a year, and after the first day he was able to return, he was so moved by being welcomed back to this space, he wrote this heartfelt poem.

The Wellbeing Café

*I may be old and disabled,
and even going grey.
But going to the Wellbeing Café,
has been a happy day.
It was over a year since I'd been there
The friendship of all the happy people
I could not wait to share.
Inside the café my heart did melt,
With so much happiness I felt.
With hugs and kisses all around,
It made my heart really pound.
The joy of seeing friendly people
Will always be with me and make me smile.
So thanks to the Church for the use of the hall
Vicar and staff, I appreciate you all.*

George Harrison



*The Domino players at the Wellbeing Café,
with George centre, at the head of the table*