



## It was very hard – but we felt God was at work

For years, South Ossett Baptist Church in Yorkshire struggled to reach its community. There were many times, according to minister Tracy Shields, when she would put on services and activities ‘and literally nobody came’.

“It’s really, really hard in situations like that,” Tracy explains. “You think you’re not listening to God right, or you’re doing something wrong. I had visions of hands on the plough, going up and down the fields, one by one removing the rocks, the stones and the weeds. Of it just being a real slog.”

Tracy joined the church eight years ago as a children’s and families worker when there were 14 members – and no children. “It was an absolutely huge step of faith and vision of the then minister,” she notes.

Following her arrival, the church set up a community café that was only supposed to last for six months to gauge what the community wanted. But within two weeks the local Sure Start Centre had closed, and organisers wanted somewhere for baby weighing.

Tracy had a connection and offered the café each week.

“And that was the start of God just bringing families,” says Tracy. She’s always had a big heart for young families, and through the café was able to build strong and trusted relationships. Indeed, it remains open to this day, having extended both its hours and space.

But this didn’t initially translate into people directly connecting with the church. Her children’s worker contract finished, the minister was due to retire and the church faced a decision about whether to close. “But the previous minister, the treasurer and I all felt God was at work, and we needed to partner with him and to honour the people that had worshipped there for decades,” Tracy says. “So we persisted.”

During the pandemic she met with people in ones and twos.

She was also introduced to Peter Dunn and the Discipleship Making Movement (DMM)/Biglife ministry. Peter is the former Director of Mission at BMS World Mission, who became Biglife European Director in 2019.

His role is shared between Biglife and the Yorkshire Baptist Association (YBA).

The teaching style made sense to Tracy, and she began to introduce it.

It meant when the restrictions lifted she was able to gather together in bigger numbers. Two Bible discovery groups were created and have thrived, providing a space for people to explore God, sometimes for the first time, with others re-connecting with faith. Run predominantly for mums of young children, one takes place in the afternoon (where the children are present) and another in the evening, which explore God through the DMM material.

“It’s all about genuine relationships, genuine love, and a genuine walk alongside people,” says Tracy.

“When that happens and something crops up, you’re able to say, “Oh, well actually it says something in the Bible about that. Did you want to look at it?”

“So there’s definitely an element of stepping out of the boat and asking people. But it’s letting people discover God’s word for themselves – you’re facilitating not teaching.”



There has been an impact both on the lives of those attending, and the life of the church.

Tracy set up a Messy Church which has proved so popular it's been full ever since it started a year ago last September. There has been a growing interest in Sundays.

"We thought that everything was going to go to these new things – Big Life, Messy Church – and we would be entering a transition period of phasing out Sunday. But we've seen Sunday congregations double and they're bringing their children and families."

The church held its first new believer's baptism 'in decades' in November. There are others on the fringes who are 'deeply seeking, really trying to live their lives as disciples of Jesus'.

Tracy adds: "The Spirit is just at work among them. I've seen reconciliations with family members and partners.

"How do you describe that sense when you know there's a peace within somebody?"

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**Big Life groups adopt a Three-Thirds format when they meet:**

- 1 Look back:** expressing your love for God, picking up on how folk have been able to put into practice learnings from the previous meeting.
- 2 Look up:** a Discovery Bible Study where you look up to God and listen to him speak through his word as you reflect on four simple questions.
- 3 Look forward:** ask God what we need to do as a result of reading his word and listening to him.

