

NEARER The Story So Far

How did it start?

In Feb 2015 I was appointed as Pioneer Community Worker with the vision to establish a missional Christian presence on the Hallam Fields estate. What that might eventually look like was left completely open.

It was understood that Sharon and I would quickly move into a home on the estate from which we could naturally reach out to neighbours, make contacts, start to build community etc.

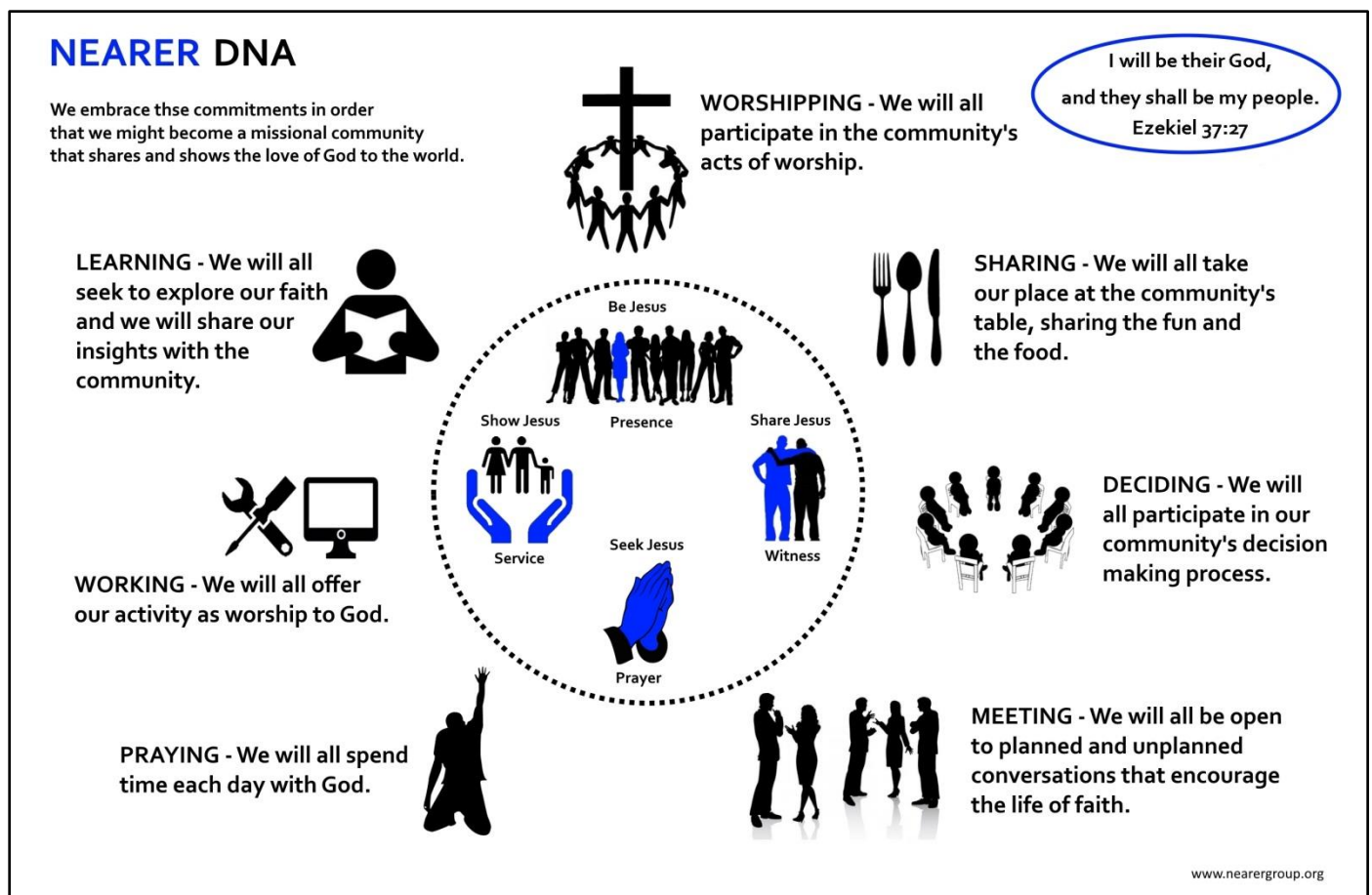
What has happened?

The house move never materialised. Eventually it became clear that the diocese were unwilling to make that purchase for a variety of reasons, only some of which related to the needs of the project.

Given the absence of any meeting place on the estate, the focus then switched to creating a missional group. This group would seek to become a community, and ultimately a Fresh Expression of Church (FXC). This missional community would be able to work together in Birstall and Wanlip, (including on the Hallam Fields estate) and then make the move to Hallam Fields once circumstances allowed.

The project started with concerted efforts in prayer. We have prayer-walked many times all over Birstall & Wanlip and in particular the Hallam Fields estate. We have had seasons of prayer praying for friends and neighbours. We make prayer as central aspect of all that we do. Every time NEARER people meet up they are encouraged to pray together.

What is NEARER's vision?



Over the years we have developed this graphic to represent our core values and vision of what we want NEARER to be. At the centre is the missional expression of the group – being Jesus, sharing Jesus, seeking Jesus and showing Jesus.

This missional involvement is expected to be a part of the normal everyday life of each NEARER member – this is what it means to be a member of NEARER (and I would add, to be a disciple of Jesus).

There are times when NEARER corporately carries out these missional activities, but the most significant element is individual missional living.

Supporting this missional life are the Seven Sacred Spaces of monasticism. Each NEARER member is expected to embrace these as a way of living, and corporately we seek to express these in our communal life together.

How has NEARER grown?

From an initial 8 or so, this group has grown to around 19 with others on the periphery. Of these 19 we have two who had no prior regular contact with any form of church before coming to NEARER. On our periphery there are a few others for whom NEARER is their sole 'church' contact.

Where are NEARER present in the community?

We seek to be a positive and specifically Christian presence wherever we can within the local community. This involves attendance at Parish Council meetings, Cedars Academy Stakeholders' meetings, village events such as the Birstall Gala and the Rugby Club BFest event.

At these events we seek to be a positive presence, but also a specifically Christian presence. One way in which we do that is through using the Jesus Deck. Using this deck of cards, where each card represents an incident in the life of Jesus, we have conversations with people helping them to see where the Jesus story and their story connects. Nearly every one of these interactions leads to the opportunity to pray for the person we are working with.

We have also had a presence in the Café on the Corner – this started informally – NEARER members just using it as their local café and popping in for coffee; but it led to an invitation to come and sing carols at Christmas. From that relationships are deepening.

Recently the new Care Home on Hallam Fields has opened its doors to us and we now hold our Wednesday meetings on its premises - these meetings are open to all. We have also set up a monthly morning's presence in the home where we can speak to staff, residents, and their families.

We have given free Bibles to each staff member and resident and placed them in communal areas and we have been involved in parish activities there such as the Carol Service.

We also support the Care Home's own Coffee Mornings and Events, such as a recent Comic Relief event.

One of our members has joined their group which is seeking to raise funds for an Admiral Dementia Nurse for Leicestershire.

An Ecumenical focus

One thing NEARER has sought to embrace is a large vision of the church. As such we have sought to work with and encourage the other churches in Birstall and Wanlip.

Our involvement in the Birstall Sheep Trail community outreach activity was done under the auspices of Churches Together. We also are involved in all the ecumenical activities that take place – the Good Friday Walk of Witness and the Frugal Lunches for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

One of our members is a practising Roman Catholic and many of the others have had contact with a broad range of Christian spiritualities.

This variety is very enriching and something we celebrate but it also makes the journey to becoming a FXC and, in particular, celebrating sacraments more problematic. However we are determined to find a way of doing this that will not undermine our unity, nor contravene the C of E canon law.

How do people join NEARER?

People join NEARER in the same way that they join any other church group – 99% come through personal invitation. The pattern we have noticed is that firstly, people attend our monthly social events at which there is no specifically Christian content. From this they come along to our monthly Sunday events - interactive and imaginative sessions in which people can explore the Christian message in an accessible way. As relationships build they come along to the Wednesday sessions and start to go deeper in their engagement with the Christian faith and with the communal life of NEARER.

How is NEARER developing its members?

This year we have seen 3 NEARER members licensed as Pioneers by Bishop Martyn. These three have now become part of a leadership team with Sharon and I.

This is a clear sign that NEARER as a community is helping people to grow in their faith, discover their gifts, and respond to God's call. It is a very exciting stage in our growth.

We have also seen two of our members undertake training in using the Jesus Deck in evangelism.

One other member is about to start an MSM course with the diocese.

The Transformational Index figures from the Growth Fund report for 2016 show the trend clearly; that NEARER members are growing in all areas – Authenticity, Hospitality & Engagement, Flexibility & Collaboration, and Empowerment. This is a great sign that we are headed in the right direction, very gratifying.

What is NEARER's wider influence?

NEARER seeks to be a positive part of the life of the parish and seeks to be supportive. This is evidenced in the recent Holy Week Meditations when NEARER took responsibility for organising and leading these three evenings.

NEARER has also been involved in the Mission Partnership, I helped develop and run a Lent course with Rev David WHITE on the Acts of the Apostles last year.

NEARER also has a profile in the diocese through our involvement in delivering training. Sharon & I helped deliver some training on Holy Hospitality for Readers and Pastoral Assistants last year and we are helping to put together and lead a Mission Spirituality training day for Curates in May.

NEARER's profile is also raised through us both being invited to run one of the Quiet Days at Launde Abbey last year, and we will do so again this July.

Where is NEARER going?

NEARER's goal is to become a FXC. For that to become a reality we will need to develop a rhythm of a worshipping life and to find a way of including the sacraments within that.

As a way of moving towards this goal we will, starting in the summer, look at 'the marks of a Christian' – what does it mean to be a Christian, what does that need to look like in order to be authentic?

The point is to answer the question together, 'How can NEARER express these essential elements of Christian discipleship in a way that fits our context?'

How might NEARER change going forward?

One big element on the horizon is the opening of the new Primary School on Hallam Fields. Sharon has been designated Chair of Governors and one member of NEARER and two parish members have already been appointed as community governors.

The Lionheart Multi-Academy Trust that runs the school is very positive about faith groups being involved with the life of their schools and in allowing them to meet on their premises – they will have a Community Room in the school which will enable this.

This puts NEARER in a fantastic position to be actively involved from the very start. We will need to see what 'open doors' God presents us with in order to see how this might develop and grow.