



In a place such as ours, it becomes incredibly important you retain a Christian witness

Interview with Tim Lovejoy, who works part-time for Fulmerston Christian Fellowship, a Baptist church in Thetford.

Tim Lovejoy has led Fulmerston Christian Fellowship in Thetford, Norfolk, since 2000. He started working for the church when it was at a low ebb, reeling from a split and reduced to a handful of members.

"I had an optimism about the future, and wasn't concerned we were small, because I could see the strengths we had," he says. "With any small church, that's really important - you look at what you have. And our strengths included a small group of dedicated people who had different skills. Three of these people are still here and their dedication and skill is one of the key reasons why we can keep going. So even after we'd had the split, nobody really thought for long about us not carrying on. I certainly had a faith God could take us forward - it wasn't a faith in me; I had faith in the calling."

The church, like any small fellowship, has faced its struggles in the ensuing years. Nevertheless after about 25 years without any baptisms, the church has had three in three years, with one being witnessed by more than 100 people in the sea at Sizewell Hall. Still, Fulmerston remains a small church.

"We are praying for a big enough squad of people, so that we average 20 every week, and this year we are very close to that" explains Tim. "That would be a landmark for us. Some people might say, 'Oh for goodness sake, for 25 years, is that the best you can manage?'" But it would be a step forward for the church. It's not about numbers but about how, with this committed group, we lay down good foundations and really disciple people, so that the church is sustainable in the future and continues to be a presence here."

The impact a small church can have is not to be underestimated. Tim is part of the national Small Church Connexion Team, which exists to support smaller churches across Baptists Together. "You don't have to be big to do significant work," he says. "I think that's the message we're sold sometimes, subconsciously. And I think some small churches can feel that. But the Bible is full of God using the small or unexpected in incredible ways, simply because it's about his power at work. Arguably that is a normal way of working."

Fulmerston is an example. It has been something of a community hub, including hosting toddler groups, a pre-school group, youth clubs, the Meeting Place (a bi-monthly event for older people), an arts and well-being group, a coffee morning, and being a base for the local residents group which has been a vital part of regeneration work on the estate.

Tim shares this reflection on the importance of a church like Fulmerston Christian Fellowship:

"We're on an estate. Thetford has three London overspill housing estates, built in the 50s and 60s and, in terms of statistical levels of deprivation, they are in the top 20 per cent in the country.



"In a place such as ours, it becomes incredibly important you retain a Christian witness, a place that physically represents God's presence in the community that really needs it, a symbol of hope.

"We're right next to the shops. If there's anti-social behaviour, it's going to happen near us, and might include the church. One way we can respond, is when any graffiti appears we get rid of it quickly. By this, we're not adding to any visual message of neglect, but are saying we care very much about how this area looks.

"So we do not want to give up this precious gift of being a presence, a place that brings people together in an area of need, where the Lord needs to be represented now and where he is at work in and amongst the local community."

Stepping stones to Jesus

Tim is clear on the strengths of smaller churches: close-knit community and personal connections, opportunities to be flexible and creative, and to foster participation. As part of his preparation for this article, he invited his congregation to respond to why they value belonging to the church community. A number

highlighted that sense of community; for one lady it's part of her grieving process following the death of her husband; another mentioned the shared lunches and opportunity to learn about different cultures.

Tim's overall approach, that he increasingly senses is in tune with God's real heart, is that every one he and Fulmerston work with in any way, counts. And that when we meet someone, we never know how God will bless and use that encounter, where it will lead.

He says: "I could tell you hundreds of stories of how God has taken one meeting and used it in the most incredible ways, over time. And hundreds of others, where we were simply able to help in some small way for a time. The key is to always be providing invitations; easy stepping stones which enable people to draw closer to Jesus.

"It's peeling off layers of the onion," he continues. "You want people eventually to realise there's something profound about the gathering, that goes beyond those immediate things. When we have the bring and share lunch, we all bring something to eat. The resulting collection of food is far richer

and greater than the individual contributions as they are. In other words, there's something profound about getting together that's greater than just 'it feels nice' - there's something sacred about it.

"And you want people, by being here, and over time, through our prayers and by God touching their hearts, to discover that. It's about people falling in love with Jesus and by them suddenly realising just how much he loves and cherishes them.

"But you need that genuine welcome, and the practical acts of love and acceptance, because if they are not here and experienced by anyone who comes, there will never be any opportunity for people to discover more, to encounter the living, loving Lord Jesus."

There is a section of the Baptists Together website dedicated to smaller churches, sharing stories, events and different ways smaller churches are being supported: baptist.org.uk/smallerchurches

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