



Gathering is life together

What does it look like to gather as the church, when you don't have a building, a stage, or even a Sunday service? That's the context for Ocean Church in Poole, one of the newest members of our Union. Minister John Good explains more.

I've always been suspicious of the idea that church is something you 'go to'.

Not because I'm against gatherings – far from it. But because the more familiar model most of us inherited was: turn up, sit down, sing, pray, listen, chat, leave. And somehow, even when the music is beautiful and the preaching is great, it can still leave you wondering – is this *it*? Is this what Jesus meant when he said "Come, follow me"?

Ocean Church began as an attempt to rediscover gathering, not as an event, but as a way of life. We meet on beaches, rivers, paths and around fire pits. We've baptised people in the sea and cooked bacon sandwiches in the rain. And in all of it, the question we keep circling back to is: what does it *look like* to gather as the church, when you don't have a building, a stage, or even a Sunday service?

For us gathering is less about attendance and more about alignment. We're trying to live out a kind of 'sodal' expression of church – a scattered, mobile movement that complements the more 'modal' expressions people may be used to, like Sunday services. We're not trying to replace the gathered

congregation. We're just asking: what if discipleship happens when church shows up where people already are – on beaches, in back gardens, during school runs, or over shared meals? What if gathering wasn't a break from life, but a deeper dive *into* it?

We meet twice a month all together at Ocean Church, and a lot of preparation goes into food, resources and curating thoughtful gatherings. But those gatherings aren't the main event. They're scaffolding for something deeper: a shared way of life. We believe that's what Jesus meant to leave behind – not just services, but rhythms and relationships that shape us. So we say we're not interested in being an event people attend – we want to be a community that people *belong to*. That means we're trying to build our lives around a few simple but radical habits:

- **Invite someone to dinner each week.**
- **Connect with God outside.**
- **Worship as a household.**

Not all the time. Not perfectly. But often enough that these habits begin to *form us*. Because the church is people – and people are shaped not just by what they say they believe,

but by what they *repeatedly do*. Each time you do a habit, however small, it is a vote cast for the identity you want to step into. Gathering, for us, is about patterning our lives around Jesus- shaped rhythms.

These kinds of gatherings don't always look 'religious'. Sometimes it's paddleboarding in silence. Sometimes it's clearing litter from a riverbank. Sometimes it's a meal where someone says something vulnerable and everyone pauses and you all know – in your bones – that God is here.

This isn't new ground. Theologians have spent decades dismantling the divide between sacred and secular, reminding us that all ground is holy ground if we have the eyes to see it. And yet – that old divide still clings on. We have lost potential members and leaders because of it. Ocean Church is one small attempt to live out what we already say we believe: that God is not confined to buildings, liturgies, or official spaces. He's out here, in the natural and the ordinary.

It's now 20 years since *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*¹, by

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Graham Cray, came out. We have the words. We have the theology. What we need now are structures – calling, money, placements – to help more of this come to life. The balance is still out at the moment. For every sodal expression of church, there must still be dozens of modal ones. We still have a job to reclaim the word ‘gather’ – not as a fixed calendar slot, but as a living network of relationships held together by Jesus.

Faith gets formed in kitchens and on coastlines. And my prayer is that the church could be something you don’t *go to*, but something you *become*.

John Good is a pioneer minister in Poole, Dorset

¹ A report from a working group of the Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council (2004)

