

North Avenue Mission Project
Walking the Way
Holy Habits with Our Community
Chelmsford Project: Maria J.Y. Lee

How would you feel if your church closed? If you had attended the church for over thirty, forty or sixty years and your serving in the community may have finished as the church closed?

This kind of emotional roller-coast happened to North Avenue United Reformed Church (NA URC) in Chelmsford. After serving the community for over ninety years, NA URC closed on 30th September 2018. The church has had no leadership since December 2017, and the remaining six members struggled to maintain function as a feasible church. Two meetings involving representatives of the Oasis Church (i.e. a member of the Evangelical Alliance) who uses the church premises on Sundays for worship, URC members of the NA Youth Centre Management Committee and the Mission & Training Officer at the Synod, decided that NA provided the ideal base from which to operate a Mission Project. With this context, I joined the ministry of Church Related Community Work (CRCW) in Chelmsford in July 2018, and NA Mission Project launched on 1st October 2018.

In fact, despite all the emotional ups and downs with the closure of the church among the previous URC members and the local people, most of the community activities have carried on as before: Oasis Church meets weekly for Sunday worship with about 100 people attending, including 40 children. Jubilee Community Café (which was originally set up as a joint mission between NA URC and a local parish church) operates twice a week, providing wonderful and reasonably priced home-made food for local people (e.g. two-course meal with hot drink for £3.50). Tuesday fellowship meets weekly in the afternoon with guest speakers and is a broad ecumenical group led by a local leader couple. Above all, NA Youth Centre carries out various activities for young people in this socially deprived neighbourhood three evenings a week during school terms and occasional special programmes.

North Avenue is within the poorest and most under-privileged area of Chelmsford. According to a Public Health England report in July 2017, life expectancy is 6.7 years lower for men and 2.9 years lower for women in the North Avenue area.

Our Mission Project statement is: ‘Working together in the love of Christ and reaching out as church in community’. The church premises are used for community purposes and most of the community activities are well supported by local residents. The Chelmsford Project is willing to build partnerships for the wellbeing of the local people and to serve the community with a rich mix of biblical material and inspiring social resources.

In this regard, as a part of the community project, 'Walking the Way- Holy Habits with Our Community' was started in December 2018. It is a monthly gathering using Andrew Robert's book *Holy Habits* to focus on lifelong Christian discipleship in our local context. In December, we had an introduction day with light refreshment, and we walked around the table tour of each habit from Acts 2:42-47.

We considered the first habit, biblical teaching, in January and February 2019. We used local newspapers to explore living the life of Jesus today and shared the meaning of the Christian journey with our neighbours. One ex-URC member said that it seemed to be a different way of worshiping God, and one local person came to join the discussion and commented: "I shall find my Bible which my aunt gave me when I was sixteen (she is over sixty years old now) and I will read the Bible". We also examined the importance interpretation of the Bible text whilst reflecting on our context of our daily lives.

Discipleship is about a relationship with God, as well as with others. Relationships are developed through encouraging each other toward transforming, and with being Christ-like in our daily lives. To fulfil Jesus' discipleship, I would like to borrow Morisy's phrase; venturesome love (Morisy, 1997, 14-19). It's the expression of active love and discipleship, which is not only for private faith, but it should also lead to creating opportunities for Christians and others to engage in public action.

I pray, that although the church has closed, the URC's exciting focus on Christian discipleship, 'Walking the Way – Holy Habits with Our Community', will continue to engage with Christians in North Avenue, who will be able to express a more trustworthy discipleship by expressing a venturesome love, moreover, the ministry of church related community work empowers local people to develop from personal faith to engage with social issues, which may help the community to become involved with issues relating to the Kingdom of God.

Bibliography

Morisy, A. (1997) *Beyond the Good Samaritan* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

