

Snapshots Issue 1 update (December 2015)

Holy Ground has had a new baby

Canon Anna Norman-Walker writes...

The story can be told quite simply. Over the past four years *Holy Ground* at Exeter Cathedral has developed in two distinctive directions. This has been a relatively easy transition as I am now an integral part of the cathedral life as one of the residentiary canons. Rather than almost 'renting space', what is growing is part of the very life of the cathedral.

One 'direction' is that numerically it has continued to grow by attracting a significant number of regular churchgoers from across the county of Devon who find the gathering a source of renewal and resourcing.

This broadly accords with some of the 2013 research findings into cathedral attendance. John Holmes and Ben Kautzer ran an attenders survey. They found that 74% of those who have begun attending a cathedral have done so from another church. Of these only 19% did so because they preferred the cathedral worship, only 6% out of some dissatisfaction with where they were, and 6% for both reasons. The report at this point did not clearly differentiate between straight 'transfer' from one church to another and people who now 'blend' – that is, find their ongoing church identity is made of belonging to more than one church. It might be inferred from the statistics above that the majority could be blenders.

Both the cathedral, as a flexible and numinous venue, and the creative yet participative nature of *Holy Ground*, offer people the richness of a festival-type high point and a resource that empowers them to continue a different belonging in their variety of smaller local churches. Both ways of being church do different things with different strengths. Thus the mix is enabling, not competing.

The second 'direction', is about a much smaller group which emerged. These were younger adults for whom '*Holy Ground* was their church'. Not attending anywhere else, some had a history of church but they had left and had found a way back through *Holy Ground*. Others have had no previous experience of church and were attracted by the contemplative 'spiritual' nature of *Holy Ground*.

It was this second group that we felt we could respond to by planting a new congregation on the Sunday evenings, in the weeks between the *Holy Ground* monthly gatherings. It is deliberately much smaller and simpler with an emphasis on relationship building and creating a safe, yet sacramental space, dwelling in the more intimate chapter house and using a Eucharistic shape. Its postcard has chosen a strapline on the reverse side: 'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46.10).

Sundays@7 started in September 2015 and has around 25 regular worshippers, some of whom also volunteer at our Friday evening soup kitchen, and a number of whom are working through modules of the Pilgrim Course at the cathedral.

In many ways it feels as though *Holy Ground* created the context out of which a more recognisable - and in this case, more overtly missional - fresh expression of Church has been born. Like some births it was not what we expected, but it is very welcome nevertheless. Doubtless it will have effects upon its parent body, with delights, surprises and maybe challenges along the way.

