



Red Church

Reaching young adults through community

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"Small churches that do community well can attract a certain group of people that big churches can't attract."



In 2013, Ben Dyer was appointed to the role of pioneer lay minister with Ormskirk Deanery. His task was to develop 'something for young adults' in a predominantly rural area that also included a university campus.

The original expectation was that Ben would help the 18 existing Anglican churches in the deanery to become better at reaching and keeping young adults. But after a period of listening consultation in Ben's first few months in post, the deanery agreed that it would be better to plant a new young adults church instead.

This case study of Red Church highlights:

- The need for the wider Church to embrace the principle of **‘dying to live’**
- **The importance of community** in reaching young adults
- The benefits of having a strategy for engaging with young adults at **different stages of their exploration of faith**
- The challenges of **starting completely from scratch**

Introducing Red Church

Where: Ormskirk, Lancashire

Denomination: Church of England

Date started: 2013

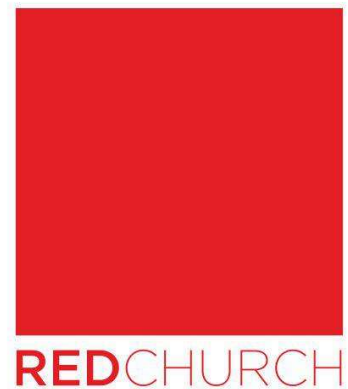
Target group: Students, recent graduates and other 18-30s

Number of people involved: 35 regular attenders

Staffing / funding: 1 full-time lay pioneer minister (locally funded by Ormskirk Deanery)

Premises: Red Church meets in a school (Sunday service), church hall (student dinners) and members’ homes

Other points of note: Deanery sponsored initiative

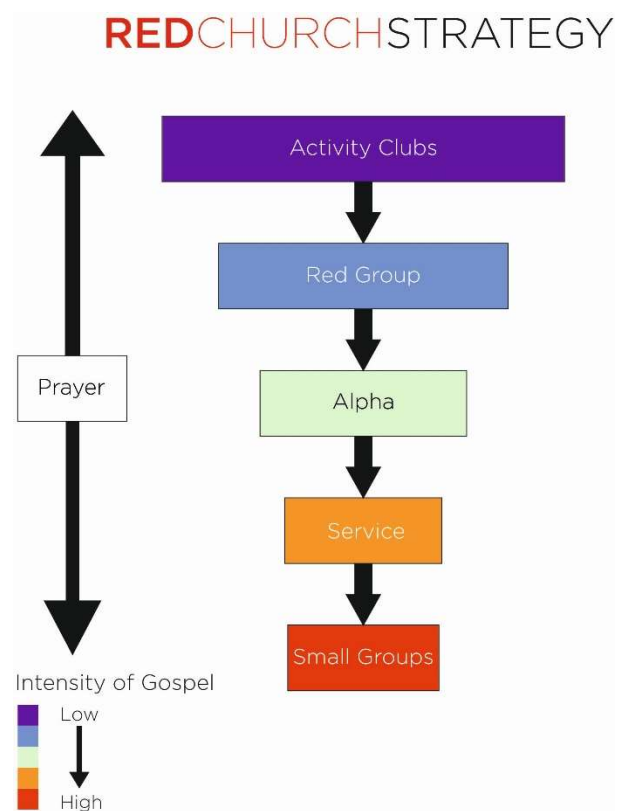


Mission at Red Church

“Fundamentally at the heart of Red Church, it’s all about community and it’s all about relationships. We want anyone we come into contact with to belong somewhere in Red Church. And from that belonging, we can try to help them move further along in their journey with God.”

The diagram below describes five different levels or areas through which Red Church tries to engage with young adults and help them explore the Christian faith.

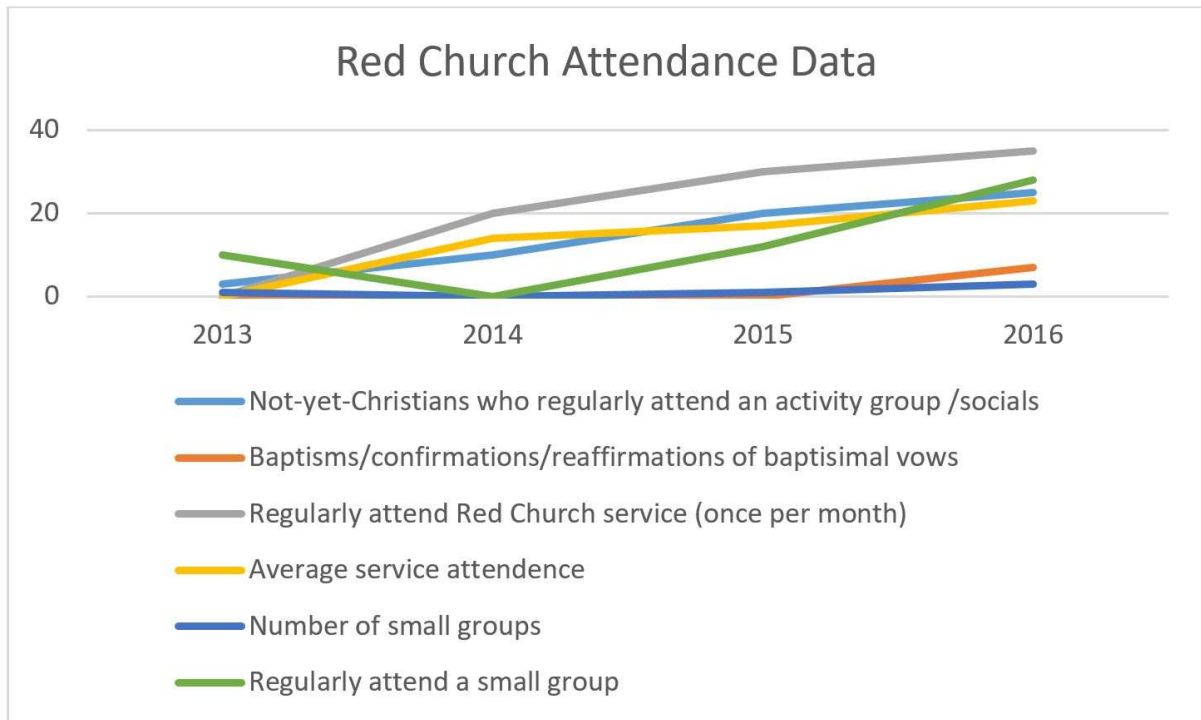
- **Activity clubs** (e.g. the Red Church football team, film club or girls'/guys' nights) often provide an initial point of contact with non-churched young adults, a way of bringing people together and building relationships.
- People who attend these are invited to **Red Group** (a place to gently introduce ideas about faith and God to people) or **Alpha** (a chance to explore these issues in more depth).
- Those who want to continue exploring faith can attend **Red Church’s weekly Sunday service** or **small groups**.



While acknowledging that this diagram might look like a funnel or conveyor belt, Ben stresses that no one is forced to go down a certain funnel or path. “Even if they are an atheist, we want there to be somewhere to belong within what we do... If you want to play football your whole life and not come to Alpha, that’s okay.”

Evidence of growth

Data supplied by Red Church shows that the number of people attending Red Church activities has increased year on year.

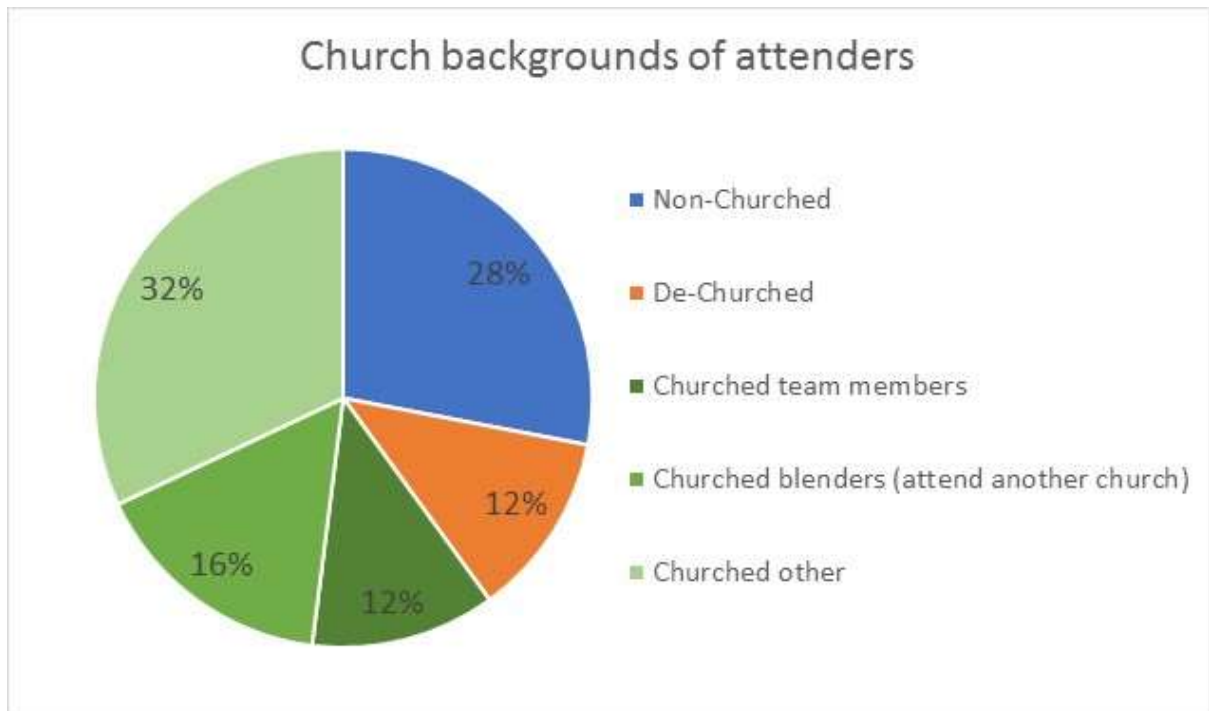


Ben Dyer estimates that there are currently about 25 'not-yet-Christian' young adults who attend Red Church socials or activity groups at least once a month.

Our own attenders survey found that a significant proportion of those attending Red Church's small groups and Sunday service come from non-churched backgrounds.

Our attenders survey also found that (of 25 respondents), 2 people had become Christians through Red Church and 3 had rediscovered a lost faith there. A further 4 were still exploring Christianity with Red Church.

In 2016, there were also 7 adult baptisms / confirmations / reaffirmations of baptismal vows.



For a further explanation of the categories in the pie chart above, please see appendix 2 of our main findings report, available from the **Mission with young adults** home page.

Ben acknowledges that, to date, Red Church’s growth has been relatively modest.

But, reflecting on the above figures, he explains that planting a new church in a semi-rural context like Ormskirk is very different to mission with big city churches (Ben used to be on the leadership team of a St Michael le Belfrey church plant):

“Life is at a different pace. People have different priorities. Things are less fast-moving. Discipleship is slower, but I’d say deeper.”

Ben also reports that Edge Hill University has been quite a hard mission context for Red Church. He attributes this to the fact that Edge Hill is a very ‘secular’ university which is less open to an active Christian presence on campus than some other universities (particularly those with a church foundation).

A further challenge is that Ormskirk is a place where students tend not to stick around after graduation. Consequently, “each year, our congregation is 50% new”.

How have people come to faith?

“Mostly, it’s a friend or someone else inviting them along to stuff that’s friendly to people who aren’t Christian. The first step in someone becoming a Christian is generally becoming friends with a Christian.” Ben Dyer, founding leader

When we spoke to young who have become Christians or are exploring Christianity with Red Church, several common themes emerged:

- **Being invited by a friend** - “I had a couple of friends here who told me about it and I started coming” (Ben)
- **The social / community dimension** of Red Church
- **Acceptance** - “People weren’t shocked or put off by what I’d done before” (Danny)
- **A chance to ask questions** - “I’ve had these thoughts and questions for years but never had the confidence to say them out loud before” (Amy)

In explaining that most of Red Church’s growth has come through friends’ invitations, Ben says “we rarely get random people turning up”.

But he also points to exceptions to this, telling me about two people who enquired about the Alpha course completely out of the blue and have gone on to become part of Red Church. In each case, a non-churched or de-churched young adult has reached a stage of thinking “there must be more than this” and found out about Alpha by a trusted friend or colleague.



They then visited the national Alpha website to find the nearest course and, from there, got in touch with Red Church.

Callum's story

"I came to make my girlfriend happy but it was completely different to what I expected."

As a child, Callum's only real experience of church was attending nativity plays at the church next door. But in 2016 his girlfriend invited him to a Red Church service. "I came, enjoyed it, then started coming to small group," he says.

When asked about his first impressions of Red Church, Callum comments that sometimes you expect churches to be all "do this, do that", but Red Church wasn't like that. It didn't come across as "weird" and the people were easy to talk to.

After attending Red Church for a while, Callum was invited to an Alpha course and somewhere along the line (he can't pinpoint a precise moment) he says he became a Christian. In October/ November 2016, he was baptised in a lake on a Red Church weekend away in the Lake District.



Conclusions

Dying to live

When the churches of Ormskirk Deanery appointed a pioneer lay minister, they hoped to attract more young adults into existing churches. But after a period of reflection and discernment, they concluded this was not realistic and that it would be better to release Ben Dyer to plant a new young adults church instead.

This was a courageous yet painful decision that illustrates what the *Mission-shaped Church* report (pages 30 and 98) calls "dying to live".

Attractive community

“If people find community, they will naturally share that with friends.”



Ben tells me that one of his biggest encouragements has been seeing Christians invite other people who aren't Christians along to Red Church activities like football and student dinners. “That's when I know we're doing something right.”

This observation demonstrates a point that George Lings makes in a 2006 *Encounters of the Edge* booklet: In increasingly non-churched contexts, building community is often the most appropriate mission starting point.

Varying degrees of 'God input' across different groups

Red Church are clear that they want “anyone we come into contact with to find somewhere to belong within Red”, regardless of whether they are a Christian or not. For this reason, the different types of activity from the 'Red Church strategy' diagram have varying degrees of spiritual intensity.

At football and other activity groups, the main focus is simply building community. But from there, young adults can be invited to various other spaces where there are opportunities to explore faith in greater depth.

As Ben himself acknowledges, this is not a completely new model (in our interview, he showed me a diagram of a similar approach in Bob and Mary Hopkins' book, *Evangelism Strategies*). But the basic principle appears transferrable to many other mission contexts.



The challenges of starting completely from scratch

Although there have been many encouraging developments at Red Church, the lack of a leadership team has been a persistent challenge. This is partly attributable to the challenging nature of the mission context, but the way Ben's church was originally set up (with its emphasis on drawing young adults into existing churches) also seems to play a part.

In this sense, there may be valuable lessons for the wider Church (especially those responsible for creating new posts) to learn from Ben's experience of "moving with no team to somewhere I didn't know".