



St Mark's MK

Attracting young adults almost by accident

Elspeth McGann, Church Army's Research Unit

January 2018 (from research carried out in 2017)



St Mark's MK isn't a young adults church, so you might be wondering why we're talking about it here. Since it began 5 years ago St Mark's has aimed to engage with the whole community, and yet nearly 75% of those who attend on a Sunday are under the age of 35.

Why? The leader believes St Mark's has attracted lots of young adults because:

"It's loud and it's messy, it's [social] justice orientated, it's community focused and it's relationship heavy; it's honest, it's conversational, and all those things I think work for young adults."

This case study highlights:

- The power of involving non-churched young adults in social action
- The need for a gracious and creative outlook
- The value of including all in community

Introducing St Mark's MK

Where: Milton Keynes, a modern town or city (it's a point of contention) that's just celebrated its 50th birthday

Denomination: Church of England

Date started: September 2012

Target group: Everyone, but has mainly attracted young adults

Number of people involved: Average of 40 people on a Sunday

Staffing / funding: Paul Oxley (full time minister) and Nina Castree (part time co-ordinator for f1VE). Both roles are funded by donations from St Mark's and sponsorship from wider circles.

"When we were first starting, we contacted all our Christian friends and asked if they would treat us like missionaries."

Premises: It's a nomadic church - they have met everywhere, including an old bus station

Other points of note: St Mark's has a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) that allows it to operate outside the traditional parish system. Paul won a competition to be one of the regular contributors on Radio 2's *Pause for Thought*.

Website: www.stmarksmk.com



Mission at St Mark's MK

"The people who aren't in your church need to be at the centre of your decision-making." Paul Oxley



St Mark's doesn't have a specific mission or vision statement. Their ethos is all around discipleship. As Paul describes it: "Our mission is not massive evangelistic events or a lot of 'invite to' things, but most of it is helping, resourcing, encouraging people to be disciples... whatever stage they're at, whether your faith is 5 minutes old or 50 years old, if you're a disciple, you're gonna be on mission."

St Mark's is very social justice-orientated and runs lots of community projects in which Christian and non-Christian young adults can volunteer together. As Paul explains:

"People want to do things to help others because it lets them feel good. So to make this easier, we arrange opportunities for people to do stuff."

Many of these projects are delivered under the banner of f1VE (1 in 5 children in Milton Keynes live below the poverty line, hence the name) which aims to run initiatives and projects that work with and help families affected by poverty.

Just some of the things they're involved in are:

- **Make Lunch** (serving meals during school holidays for children who normally get free school meals);
- **MK food bank**;
- **creating pamper parcels** for a local women's refuge;
- and most recently, **outfitting an entire house** for a refugee family moving to Milton Keynes.

St Mark's is also very big on community - not just the church community, but the whole of the Milton Keynes community. 'Cheer on MK' is just one example of this - the idea of the campaign is to spread positivity and cheer people on for the things that often go unnoticed or unappreciated.

One thing that St Mark's always keeps in mind is that the church isn't for them: "The people who aren't in your church need to be at the centre of your decision-making." We noticed this when we attended the Sunday service. Everything happened in bite-sized chunks, there wasn't any singing and there were opportunities for anyone to contribute from the front if they wanted to.



Evidence of growth

St Mark's began with just Paul and his family. Now a typical Sunday gathering will see around 40 people meeting together. About double this number are involved in midweek socials and hangouts as well as initiatives run as part of f1VE.



On the Sunday we visited and surveyed the congregation, nearly 75% of those attending were under the age of 35. The majority of people said they were already Christians before they started attending St Mark's, but just over a quarter of attenders were 'de-churched' - that is, they had attended a church at some stage earlier in their life (often as a child) but had a significant break from church before coming to St Mark's.

St Mark's would say that most of their growth has come through relational contacts or initiatives run as a part of f1VE. Indeed, two-thirds of Make Lunch volunteers are not Christians. Reflecting on this, Paul comments:

“Every time we do something that’s justice-orientated and is easy for people to get involved in, we always see a spike in attendance. There’s so many people that want to help, but they’re stuck on where to start.”

Paul is modest when asked about the number of people who’ve come to faith at St Mark’s. He says there’s no one who’s made ‘the full journey’ with them yet. However, when we conducted our attenders survey, a significant number reported they had either come to faith (10%) or rediscovered their faith (10%) at St Mark’s. And in the past five years 9 people have been baptised. In view of these figures, it may be that Paul is being too modest.

St Mark’s has a large community beyond those who come together on a Sunday. Many people spoke about their partners, family and friends who wouldn’t consider themselves Christians (if you asked them) but would happily consider themselves a part of St Mark’s.

In one of our focus groups, a woman commented that her husband wasn’t a Christian and everyone else was surprised; they hadn’t realised as he was such a part of the community.



Reflecting on what constitutes growth, Paul comments: “It’s not about whether you’re ‘in’ or ‘out’ - there is no in or out - it’s about your direction of travel. Are you travelling towards Jesus?” He then goes on to say: “I think we’ve turned a lot of people around and inspired a lot of travel in a ‘Jesus’ direction.”

How have people come to faith?

“We’ve seen people with faiths that were dormant or dead or given up on that we’ve helped to resurrect.” Paul Oxley

St Mark’s are modest about the number of people who have become Christians while at the church and say that they often see themselves as part of someone’s longer story. Milton Keynes is a highly mobile place, with people often moving there for a new job and just as easily moving on again. St Mark’s have seen people arrive who are almost ready to become a Christian, while others have joined them at a much earlier stage in their exploration of faith.

In each situation, their aim has been to help people move along in a ‘Jesus’ direction while they’re with them, before they move on again.



Community and family are themes that often come up when you speak to members of St Mark's. They told us that Milton Keynes is a place where you can feel very isolated when you first arrive, so St Mark's is very deliberate about being open, welcoming and accepting to

all. Their community is much larger than just those who attend on a Sunday.

Alongside this openness to all, St Mark's also seems to be characterised by an emphasis on honesty and accountability. As one member commented:

“In our culture we're lacking connection - when someone comes to a church, what they're wanting is that connection. Not to just turn up on Sunday and then the next they hear from anyone is the following Sunday.”

Young adults we spoke to said they really valued the sense of honesty and accountability that is part of the culture of St Mark's. Paul also observes that the “intensity” associated with this seems to have been particularly attractive to millennials. But he also says it has been a turn-off to some older existing Christians.

Conclusions

Inclusive community

“It's not about whether you're 'in' or 'out' ... it's about your direction of travel. Are you travelling towards Jesus?”

Although it was never set up as a church for young adults, St Mark's MK has attracted large numbers of under 35s. Its inclusiveness as a community and emphasis on honesty and authenticity has been a key reason for this. These are things that many young adults value and seem to find particularly attractive.

Involving non-churched young adults in social action

While some churches insist that all of their volunteers are committed Christians, St Mark's have keyed into the fact that many non-churched young adults want to help others and are looking for community. Inviting them

to volunteer with church-based social action projects provides a way of Christians getting to know them and journey alongside them.



An outlook, not a model

When asked whether St Mark's approach could be reproduced in other contexts, Paul tells me he thinks anyone can do it:

“All we’re doing is trying to be engaged in the town around us, take ourselves with very little seriousness and take everything else with a lot of seriousness and be gracious in as many creative ways as we can.”

This approach is more of an outlook than a model. Paul also goes on to say that the biggest barrier to developing this kind of outlook is having a ‘religious’ mindset. In this sense, “The only thing that makes it difficult to repeat is that it’s gotta be a heart thing. I can’t teach you not to be religious, I can’t unlearn that for you.”

Potential downsides of this approach



Though lots of non-churched young adults have got involved in social action initiatives like Make Lunch, our attendees survey found that it is mainly existing Christians who attend St Mark's Sunday service. Furthermore, about a quarter of the people who completed our survey indicated they had moved to St Mark's from another church because they felt it was “better for them”. Similar sentiments were also expressed by some of the members we interviewed.

While it is encouraging that these young adults have found a home at St Mark's, churches that become a magnet for young adults need to make sure that this doesn't become a distraction from the (arguably) harder, yet more important, task of mission to the non-churched.

To find out more

For more about St Mark's MK, visit

www.stmarksmk.com

To find out more about the work and projects that f1VE support, visit

www.oneinfive.co.uk

For more on the national Make Lunch campaign and to find the kitchen nearest you, visit

www.makelunch.org.uk



Further food for thought

As part of helping people move along in their faith journey, St Mark's thought about the question: what are the ingredients that go into a self-feeding disciple? This led them to develop creatively designed discipleship journals that anyone in the church can use, featuring key elements:

- **Food** - meeting round a table is important so the book includes simple recipes
- **Family** - being a disciple isn't a solo activity so there's activity suggestions to do as families
- **Bible** - regularly reading and engaging with the Bible, knowing that other people are reading the same things as you makes it easier to discuss and ask questions
- **Journalling** - keeping track of your thoughts as they develop; sometimes writing stuff down just helps you process what you're learning

