



## The Way

Young adult mission through university chaplaincy

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*“We are trying to reach young adults who are very much off the radar. We’re not trying to go for the low hanging fruit. Our vision is to connect with those young adults who would never dream of being part of a church.”*

The Way is a fresh expression of Church that grew out of the University of Cumbria chaplaincy in Carlisle.



In 2012, Matthew Firth was appointed to a newly created dual role, jointly funded by the University of Cumbria and the Diocese of Carlisle. As part-time (0.5) chaplain to the university, he was responsible for the pastoral care of students and staff. But as (0.5)

pioneer minister, he also had a remit to plant and grow a new church for non-churched 18-30-year-olds in Carlisle.

The new church that emerged from his work is called The Way. Though Matthew has recently moved on to a new post, The Way continues to meet under lay leadership.

This case study highlights:

- The importance of simply **'getting around the table'** with **non-churched young adults**
- The benefits of **dioceses and universities working together** to reimagine university chaplaincy
- The challenges of sustaining young adult mission initiatives **when the founding leader moves on**

## Introducing The Way

**Where:** Carlisle (a small city) - university campus and city centre

**Denomination:** Church of England

**Date started:** 2013

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

**Number of people involved:** Weekly student dinners attract 40 people per week. Around 20 attend The Way's weekly service. Many more have had some contact with the university chaplaincy and 'Lost on a Mountain' café.

**Staffing / funding:** Up till summer 2017, The Way had 1 full-time minister

/ chaplain (jointly funded by diocese and university on a 50-50 basis), as well as various interns over the years (supported by local fundraising). It is now led by lay volunteers.

**Premises:** Key venues until recently included the university chapel and 'Lost on a Mountain' café (which was run by The Way on a commercial basis). These venues are no longer used and The Way now meets mainly in members' homes.



## Mission at The Way

*“When I came to Carlisle, the sense I had was that the church needs to go back to basics... I also had this sense that we needed to just get round the table with students - that was the first port of call in terms of how do we even make a start...”* Matthew Firth, founding leader

The Way’s strapline is ‘Sharing Life in Carlisle’. Its core values are summed up through the acronym LIFE, which stands for:

- Love
- Invitation
- Friendship
- Explaining

Over the past few years, The Way’s approach to mission and evangelism with students and young adults has involved:

- A university chaplain with an active presence on campus and on social media
- Providing weekly student dinners for £1 - a place for ‘getting around the table’ and beginning to build relationships
- Running a commercial café with various spin-off activity groups (e.g. a ‘Knit, Sit & Dream’ craft group)
- Meeting up one-to-one with those who are interested in further exploring Christianity
- Offering student Alpha and other short courses
- Inviting people to experience The Way’s Sunday gathering and missional communities



When asked whether The Way’s approach had been informed by models of young adult mission from elsewhere, Matthew Firth commented: “It’s only relatively recently that the leadership team has started reading case studies and other contemporary books about fresh expressions or church planting.” As such, “there was no model”.

But looking back, Matthew suggests that The Way's experience loosely mirrors the 'serving first' fresh expressions journey summarised below.

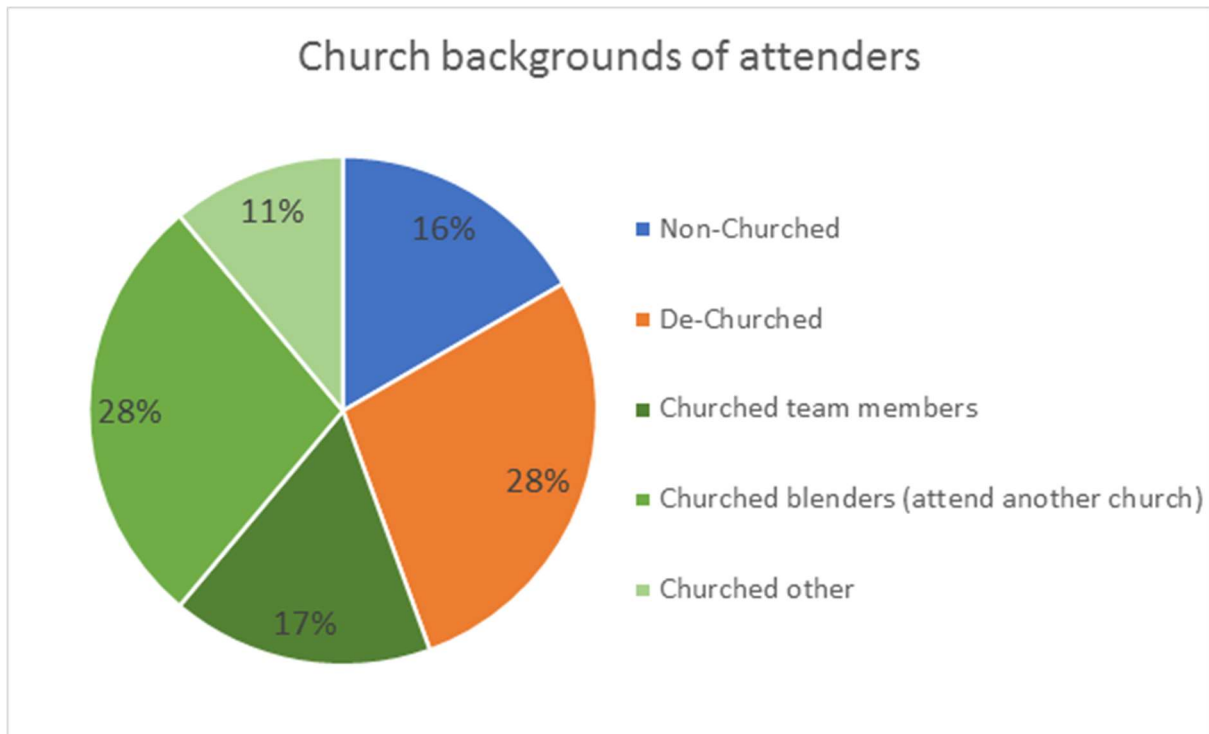


## Evidence of growth

Since 2013, 6 people have either come to faith for the first time or become disciples for the first time through The Way. And attendance at The Way's main Sunday gathering has grown from an initial group of 5 to a core group of about 20.

Of these, Matthew estimates that "about a third are established Christians who came to be part of it, a third are de-churched who have come back to a track of discipleship, and the final third have had little contact [with church]".

As the pie chart below indicates, the results of our attenders survey suggest that these estimates are broadly accurate, though there are more 'churched' attenders and fewer 'non-churched' attenders than estimated.



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.

As Matthew points out, these figures are only part of the story since focusing only on average Sunday attendance “doesn’t necessarily represent the sum total of things we want to celebrate”.

For example, hundreds of students have attended The Way’s student dinners project over the past four years and become part of the community associated with that.

Although there is usually no explicit Christian content at the student dinners, many of those attending have ended up “hearing the gospel in all sorts of different ways” through relationships formed there.

The impact of all this is hard to quantify, particularly because there is a large turnover of students each new academic year.

But our interviews with some of the people who have found faith through The Way suggest that this community’s mission and evangelism is enabling significant numbers of non-churched students and young adults to have a positive experience of Christianity and church, often for the first time.

## How have people come to faith?

*“I couldn’t really say for definite. But there are things about lack of community, and a sense of ‘hang on, what is life all about?’”* Matthew Firth, founding leader

The young adults who have become Christians or are exploring Christianity with The Way report that the following factors have influenced their faith journey:

- Attending **student dinners** or the **‘Lost on a Mountain’ café** and getting to know the people involved
- Following The Way (and associated initiatives) from a distance on **social media** before gradually getting more involved
- **Meeting for coffee** with Matthew (the university chaplain) or other members of The Way’s leadership team
- The experience of **being drawn into a community** - social activities with others from The Way



## Jim's story

*"It was the community sense that hooked me in. I became part of the community and explored the Christian faith as part of that."*



Jim did not really have any experience of church and Christianity as a child but at university he got to know Matthew, the university chaplain.

"He did an introductory talk and I spotted him on campus. Then I met him again, having not seen him for a while, at (what is now) the student dinner project. We used to have dinner every Wednesday and just started chatting."

Jim and some friends then attended an Alpha course that The Way ran on a Wednesday evening. And after a while, he started attending The Way's Sunday service.

"I didn't go immediately," he stressed, "I came when I felt ready to go."

Jim tells me he became a Christian while attending The Way. He can't "pinpoint exactly when" but an important part of the process was studying the 'Uncover Luke' and 'Uncover John' books (Christian Union Bible study resources) with Matthew and Andy (previous intern) over coffee every week.

## Conclusions

### What from this case study is reproducible or transferable?

The principle that 'getting around the table with people' is often the best place to begin is relevant and transferable to many other contexts. The Carlisle student dinner project has already been reproduced / adapted in at least one other university context. See our case study on Red Church.

The intentional linking of university chaplaincy with church planting may also be reproducible, particularly in universities that have a church foundation or are otherwise receptive to church involvement.

## The downside of this approach

The Way's model of mission is quite resource intensive, with much hinging on the employment of a full-time minister / chaplain.

Now that the founding leader has moved on (and not been directly replaced), it will be interesting to see how this fresh expression of Church continues to develop under unpaid lay leadership.

This approach has only yielded fairly modest growth to date. This is a reflection in part of The Way's decision not to aim for 'low hanging fruit' (attracting existing Christians), but to patiently build relationships with non-churched students and young adults.



## Top tips

The leadership of The Way offer the following two pieces of advice for anyone wanting to start similar initiatives elsewhere:

1. Try to **develop a team as quickly as possible** (though often that's easier said than done).
2. You need a way of **getting around the table with non-churched people** in a meaningful way.

## Lessons for the wider Church

In other university towns and cities, there may be opportunities for dioceses to partner with universities in reimagining chaplaincy by linking traditional pastoral care with the establishment of fresh expressions of Church.

But the wider Church also needs to have realistic expectations about the level and pace of growth that is achievable in this kind of context. Much of the impact of this type of ministry is likely to be fragile and unseen.





## To find out more

For more about The Way, visit

[www.thewaycarlisle.co.uk](http://www.thewaycarlisle.co.uk)