



“Not as difficult as you think”  
Mission with young adults

## Wolverhampton Pioneer Ministries

Mission with young adults on the margins

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*“It was about: ‘How do we serve young adults in Wolverhampton intentionally but also without necessarily wanting anything back from them?’”*



Wolverhampton Pioneer Ministries (WPM) is a fresh expression of Church for 16-30-year-olds in Wolverhampton city centre. We chose WPM as a case study because it has an interesting dual focus. About half its members are marginalised young adults from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The other half are mostly churched young adults and sixth formers who feel isolated in other churches or have a heart for mission.

This case study of WPM highlights:

- The benefits of a **chaplaincy approach** when engaging with marginalised young adults
- The need for **flexibility, not fixed models**
- The value of drawing together **young adults from different backgrounds**
- The **resource-intensiveness and cost of mission** with young adults on the margins

## Introducing Wolverhampton Pioneer Ministries

**Where:** Wolverhampton city centre

**Denomination:** A joint Church of England / Methodist initiative

**Date started:** 2007

**Target group:** Marginalised young adults with little previous experience of church and churched young adults who feel isolated in other churches or have a heart for mission

**Number of people involved:** WPM's Sunday service currently attracts about 20 people per week. Around 400 young people and young adults are engaged through WPM's chaplaincy service.

**Staffing / funding:** Two externally funded full-time staff (Team Leader and Outreach Co-ordinator). When we visited WPM in May 2017, we spoke to both the outgoing team leader (Deborah Walton) and her new replacement (Nicola Turner). Current funders include the Diocese of Lichfield, the Methodist Church and the Joseph Rank Trust.

**Premises:** Rented use of other church buildings

**Other points of note:** WPM won the gold award for the Best Project Advancing the Christian Faith at the 2016 Christian Funders Forum awards ceremony.

**Website:** [www.wpm-vitalise.org.uk](http://www.wpm-vitalise.org.uk)



## Mission at Wolverhampton Pioneer Ministries

*“We found that chaplaincy was a model which meant we could do something for individuals, really support people and agencies that were helping young adults in Wolverhampton. If them wanting to come to church - wanting to be part of community - was a by-product of that, that was really exciting.”*



One of the main ways WPM reaches out to young adults is through Bluefish Chaplaincy - a chaplaincy service to organisations working with young people and young adults.

Through its 2 paid staff and 9 volunteer chaplains (mostly Christian young adults), WPM currently provides chaplaincy to a YMCA homeless hostel, a community radio station and a city

centre youth project. This involves visiting every week and providing a confidential listening ear to anyone who might like to chat.

As Nicola explains: “We go in [to the YMCA hostel] once a week for an hour and a half, sit around in their community room, just make conversation with people and with staff. We also come in for appointments or if there’s a crisis. We’ll get called in by staff if a young person is going through something quite sudden or if they just feel someone needs support.”

Nicola goes on to say that the chaplaincy model seems to go well with the WPM strapline, which is to:

*“Worship fully, love all, serve the city.”*

The team are clear that chaplaincy is not a means of evangelism and they are careful to ensure all volunteers understand that. But equally, they do not hide the fact that they’re Christians and run a church, and they let people know “you’d be welcome to come”.

Reflecting on this tricky balancing act, Nicola adds: “There’s a lot of trust and we sort of hand it over to God.”



## Evidence of growth

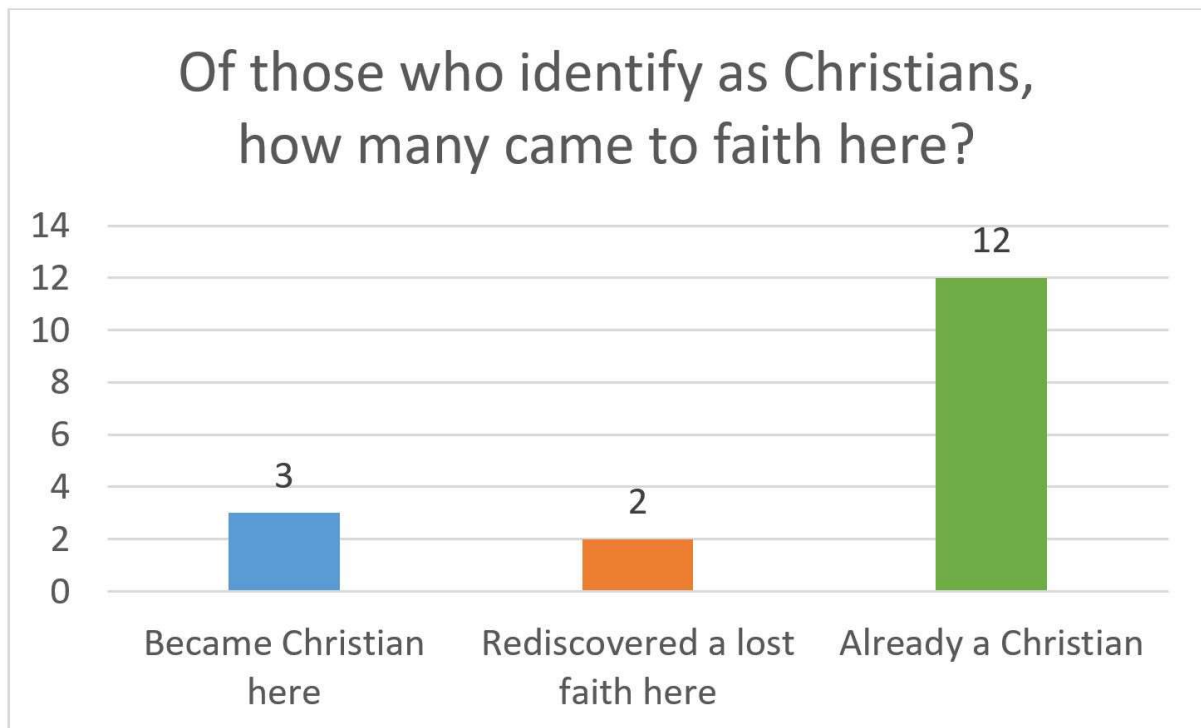
*“Whilst Vitalise numbers have reduced, the community gathering is now comprised significantly of people with no previous church background.”*

Fresh Expressions (2017) ‘Gold on Tour’ article

At one time, WPM was more of a youth project and its evening service (Vitalise) attracted large numbers of teenagers, mostly from other churches. But in recent years its priorities have changed, returning to a greater focus on mission with marginalised young adults.

In view of this, the number of people attending WPM Sunday services has reduced, though its missional effectiveness appears to have increased.

On the Sunday we came to visit (May 2017), 18 people completed our attenders survey. Of these, 3 said they had become Christians through WPM and a further 2 had rediscovered a lost faith there. There have also been 13 (adult) baptisms or confirmations at WPM over the past two years (5 in 2015 and 8 in 2016).



These figures alone do not provide a full picture of WPM’s missional effectiveness since much of its engagement with marginalised young adults takes place outside its main Sunday gathering. Nicola points to one example of this when she tells me that WPM has recently been asked to set up a prayer group for staff and residents in one chaplaincy setting.

Another important dimension is WPM's impact on the spiritual development of sixth formers and young adults from more middle class backgrounds. As Nicola explains, the experience of being part of such a diverse community has been a deeply formative one in "stretching and challenging" them, helping them to look beyond the "safe Christian bubble".

Some of these young adults have also gone on to become ordained.

## How have people come to faith?

*"With chaplaincy, it's not about offering advice or telling them how you think they should deal with the situation. It's about you listening and allowing them space. The fact that we have seen people come to faith through those conversations is purely down to God working in those situations because normally we're not saying anything."*

The stories below provide two contrasting examples of people who have become Christians through WPM.

### Michael's story



Michael was living in a YMCA hostel when he first encountered WPM. Some of the WPM team were providing chaplaincy there and Michael found he felt safe around them.

After beginning to get to know some of the team, he started attending WPM's weekly community gathering with Bev (see below) who worked at the hostel. He especially liked the friendliness and welcome and from there he started coming to WPM's midweek morning prayers as well. Michael was also invited to Soul Survivor with WPM and this was an important event in his faith journey.

The process of becoming a Christian was a gradual one for him but he was baptised and confirmed in October 2015 (after about a year and a half of coming to WPM).

## Bev's story

*“I started bringing young people along to Vitalise (it was for them, it wasn't for me). But then I got sucked into the relationships and the community.”*

Bev was baptised as a baby but didn't regularly go to church growing up. She first encountered WPM through her previous job working with homeless people for the YMCA.

There, she got to know Deborah (WPM's previous leader) who was providing chaplaincy at the hostel and, having been impressed by WPM's approach, she started bringing young people like Michael (above) along to Vitalise, WPM's evening service.

Though she originally attended because of her job, Bev found herself being drawn into the community of WPM. This led to her wanting to explore the Christian faith for herself and (though she was baptised as a baby) she says become a Christian at WPM.



“I can't put my finger on a specific moment,” she comments, “but I know my life's very different.” Bev was confirmed in September 2015 at the same time as Michael. Reflecting on what being part of WPM means to her, she comments:

*“Although it's taught me a lot about myself, its taught me that faith isn't just about myself - its about serving others as well.”*

## Conclusions

### Mission through chaplaincy for vulnerable young adults

Nicola says that offering chaplaincy in a homeless hostel and other community settings has been a great way of connecting with more marginalised young adults. She reflects that chaplaincy feels safe and non-threatening because:

*“People understand chaplaincy more than they understand church.”*

The team are very clear that their chaplaincy service is simply about building relationships through loving service (i.e. there is no overt evangelism). But yet Michael's and Bev's stories (above) show that people have been drawn into the WPM community and become Christians through it.

## The importance of flexibility



While WPM sometimes uses external resources like the Alpha and Pilgrim courses, the team joke that “we’ve never got to the end of a course”.

Many of the people they work with have very chaotic lives, so WPM have had to “rethink and reimagine” how they use external resources (which often follow a quite rigid, linear structure) in a way that is right for their context.

## Bringing together young adults from different backgrounds

A key distinctive of WPM is the way it has brought marginalised and more privileged young adults together.

While some of our other case studies highlight the benefits of focusing on a single target audience (e.g. university students), WPM’s experience illustrates that being part of a community with people who have very different life experiences can deepen and enrich the discipleship of all.

## Resource intensiveness and cost

WPM could not have achieved what it has without generous funding from the wider (Anglican and Methodist) Church and other grant-making bodies. This has enabled the employment of two full-time staff who can devote more time to vulnerable individuals. In this sense, WPM’s experience highlights the resource intensiveness and cost (as well as benefits) of working with young adults on the margins.



It is also important to acknowledge that this kind of approach is unlikely to deliver overnight ‘success’. As Nicola explains:

*“We work with some of the most marginalised and damaged young people and young adults in Wolverhampton, many of whom are very wary of people in authority. The journey of faith for these individuals is going to be hugely slow.”*

## To find out more

For more about WPM, visit

[www.wpm-vitalise.org.uk](http://www.wpm-vitalise.org.uk)

To listen to an audio interview with the WPM leaders, click [here](#).