
STORIES OF CHURCH LIFE DONE DIFFERENTLY

Redefined discipleship: Shifting the focus from programmes to relationships

High Kirk, Ballymena

Over the period of lockdown our leadership spent a significant amount of time not only considering what ministry would look like in the interim but also how long-term future ministry was going to change. Whatever happened, we knew that things couldn't simply return to how they were before.

The biggest challenge came when thinking about what discipleship would look like when restrictions on people gathering together interrupted the way we had been doing things. For many years now small groups have been in the DNA of how we carry out discipleship in High Kirk. In the early stages of lockdown, there was no way for our groups to meet the way they had just a few months before. Initially, some groups met online and others kept in contact via WhatsApp groups. However, it wasn't long before many of the groups suffered from digital fatigue and, surprisingly, it was the younger small groups that gave up on these platforms more quickly.

When the church building opened up again a few elders and staff met for three nights of evaluation and exploration with our small group leaders. There was a sense of togetherness and honesty in the conversations and a desire for more. We chatted through the options for the best way of keeping the groups together, how they might meet, reconsidered their purpose, and pondered how they might better care for one another pastorally. We also discussed the idea that some groups might want to split into temporary smaller gatherings and advocated engaging in one-to-one discipling relationships.

These and other discussions have led us to the conviction that, going forward, our model of discipleship will focus more intentionally on relationships rather than programmes with the aim of seeing believers mature in Christ and go deeper in their faith. Discipleship has moved from a department in the church to a fluid aspect of who we are as a worshipping community.

Some of our small groups continue to meet online to accommodate those who are shielding. Others have begun to meet together in the church building on designated evenings. Even under the ongoing restrictions these groups have reported the blessing it has been to gather again with brothers and sisters in Christ. For those who have been engaging in one-to-one discipling relationships, the reports have been extremely positive and much spiritual fruit has been produced with authentic friendships growing out of these times together.

While the pandemic has had a devastating effect on many lives it has also helped us to see a new way forward in our discipleship. For us, it has redefined discipleship for the better.