Prayer has been the bedrock

Called to pray about being used in the community, Headland Baptist Church has developed several partnerships with community groups. Interview with Fiona Preston

on't get me wrong, we've had some difficult moments," says Fiona Preston, the minister of Headland Baptist Church in Hartlepool. "Particularly with people having really serious illnesses.

"But the way the church building has gone from not being used much to all this stuff happening, well, it has been unbelievable.
And we believe it's come from God."

Fiona has led Headland since January 2020. Prior to that the church, without a minister since 2013, opened its building just a couple of times a week. Fast forward two years and it's now a hive of activity, both with its own groups and other organisations such as Slimming World, a history club and others using its premises.

One example is its partnership with The Bread and Butter Thing, a national charity which receives surplus food from supermarkets to provide affordable weekly groceries through a membership scheme. The charity approached Headland Baptist Church to see if it could be one of its distribution hubs in Hartlepool.

The area has high levels of social deprivation, and Fiona said the church wanted to do something to help. Similar to a pantry, but without the start-up expense, it costs the church nothing apart from time and effort. Volunteers from Headland and the nearby

Anglican church help unload the van, pack the bags and then distribute the food.

Around 65 people use the service each week.

Fiona says she and the volunteers have been able to build relationships - a couple of children have started coming to the church groups, and people have been prayed for. The partnership is meeting a practical need, developing community, and showing the love of God in action.

"It's just been amazing really," says Fiona, "and God just put that on our doorstep."

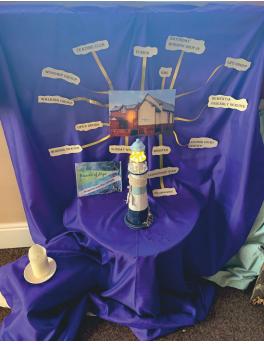
Fiona left a career as a professional musician after sensing the call to ministry at Headland. "It was a big drop in income. But the way I explained it to people was, it's not that I fell out of love with music – I just fell in love with God more." The fellowship strongly backed her call and are supporting her through ministerial training, including through a Home Mission grant.

At the outset she sensed a powerful burden to pray, and had soon set up a regular morning prayer meeting. The church opened its building for prayer, and the prayer stations Fiona created are still on show and being used primarily by the church community but

are also seen by those from the wider community who use the church building.

"Prayer has been the bedrock of everything, really. We prayed about being used in the community."

Its youth and lunch clubs have grown and are thriving. A Christmas carol service was hosted outdoors for the first time, and with much prayer, saw more than 200 people come,



including many representatives of the different groups now using the building.

ITV even filmed in the church building there for *The Thief, His Wife and the Canoe*. It gave Fiona the opportunity to chat faith with actor Eddie Marsan, who played John Darwin in the production. ("I didn't actually know who he was beforehand. I said 'Are you one of the extras?" But we had a really good chat about God for about an hour.")

"At the start of my ministry here I prayed about us making a noise outside our building, being of use to the community, sharing God's love," Fiona continues.

"It's been two years of being shocked."



