



From three members to engaging with 15 families

Many villagers had never set foot inside Norton Baptist Church in Suffolk - but “they’re definitely noticing things are going on here now,” says community minister Caroline Vallance.

“Last Harvest, three of my seven-year-olds literally took the service, because they wanted to do it,” says Caroline Vallance. “They stood at the front and led the whole thing.

“For me, once children are feeling comfortable and part of things, I think that attracts the adults. So, we’re working very much from the bottom up!”

Caroline is the community minister of a revitalised Norton Baptist Church, a small church founded nearly 200 years ago, in the village of Norton near Bury St Edmunds. By 2019 it had just three members, five people regularly attending on a Sunday, and an empty manse.

Caroline was invited to become their leader after a series of events which convinced her this was God’s call. Not least, the

testimony of secretary Helen Allum, who had been a part of the church since her childhood. “She’s an amazing lady,” says Caroline. “When I met her, she said she didn’t want the church to close – she knew there was something else God wanted to do here.”

Caroline has a long history of children’s and youth work, and this was a natural place to start.

She connected with the local school, a thriving Church of England School, and altered what happens on a Sunday by instigating a monthly Messy Church and a Café Church, alongside two mornings of worship. The pulpit was removed, and the congregation now gathers around tables, not benches - moves which she says has made the environment more welcoming.

“Those two services in particular - Messy Church and Café Church - are particularly attracting our families. If you are a traditional person, you may struggle with them - they’re loud and noisy. But our children feel very comfortable.

“And what’s really exciting is a number of the families are those who came as children to Sunday school, but hadn’t been in the church since.” Norton is now engaging regularly with around 15 families.

Hosting activities the village can connect with and showing the church is a safe presence has been key. For instance, Caroline set up a nativity scene and invited the school choir. The event was packed. “For me it was fascinating, as a number of people said they’d lived in the village all their life but had never been inside the doors of the church.”

Another factor is the creation of Churches Together in Norton. Caroline is now working closely with the local Anglican church and Salvation Army, and working together has helped set up an after-school club. Norton has also resurrected its youth club on Friday evenings, and both this and the after-school club attract around 20 people.

“People are definitely noticing things are going on here now,” says Caroline. “It’s slowly getting there, and we are building those relationships. People from the village will now stop and come and talk to me. God has been blessing what we’re doing.

“It’s growing ways of getting people to see that we’re safe and it’s a good place to be,” she adds, “and then praying they meet Jesus when they’re here.”

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