



Colin Bones

**Bulwell United Reformed Church** in north Nottingham marked the halfway point in its two-year **HOLY HABITS** journey with a special celebration in July 2019. Minister Colin Bones and youth, children and families leader Eleanor Rice are both members of the church's **HOLY HABITS** planning team and are delighted with the changes they're already seeing. With just under 100 members, the average Sunday congregation is about 60, including about 20 young people.



## THE STORY begins...

Colin first came across Holy Habits as part of the URC's national discipleship programme *Walking the Way – Living the life of Jesus today*.

'I read the original *Holy Habits* book (Malcolm Down Publishing, 2016) by Andrew Roberts and, as I was reading it, I thought he's really on to something. This is written by somebody within the historic denominations – in Andrew's case, the Methodist Church – and he understands where we're at. I liked his four themes: bless, belong, believe and behave. That's what we try to do here: bless our community. We start there, and reading *Holy Habits* it just resonated so much.

'There was a colliery here, but the main industries were hosiery and pottery. The colliery closed in 1986 and the hosiery went to Asia, so Bulwell does suffer from higher-than-average unemployment and low aspiration. What we try to do is connect with the community around us, to be part of the community and to share with them the highs, the lows, the joys and challenges of our life together.'

Eleanor's role covers the whole family aspect of church and community life, from newborns to grandparents:

'There's a huge variety in what I'm involved in, and many different ways in which Holy Habits has woven its way into what I do. A lot of it is very subtle. The thing I love about Holy Habits is that in many ways we're already doing it, but we're spending this time, using the Holy Habits resources, to help us do it better.'

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Eleanor Rice

## Baking for 'Breaking Bread'

After Colin read the original *Holy Habits* book, he got hold of the pilot materials that were being developed in the Birmingham Methodist District.

'They were really good, and I thought, "Yes, this is for us." What most attracted me was the focus on discipleship. That's the theme through all the habits and activities: us growing in our discipleship, deepening our walk with the Lord. It starts with the congregation, but then, as our own discipleship is enriched, that will bear fruit in making more disciples.'

He introduced it to his elders' meeting, and they agreed.

Eleanor was part of the planning group – six people, including Colin, who met for almost a year before they actually started doing Holy Habits as a church.

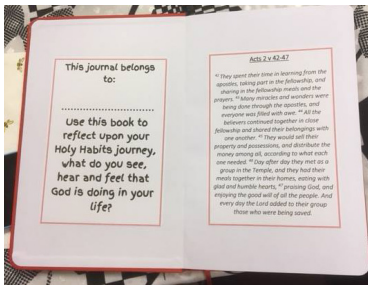
'That's really important,' says Colin. 'You cannot rush Holy Habits, either in the planning or the implementation, and you have to take the time to get the congregation on board.'

'Long before the launch we talked about it in services and in meetings. We sent a personal letter to every member of the congregation, telling them why we wanted to engage with Holy Habits, explaining that this

was a new initiative and how it would help in our journey as individuals and as a church; how it would enrich our faith journey and enrich our family life.

'As Andrew Roberts says, Holy Habits is an adventure in Christian discipleship; let's just see where it leads. We sent the same letter to the families who come to Messy Church, to the youth group and to our Sunday School. We wanted each habit to weave its way through the entire life of the church and all the different groups.'

The church produced specially bound journals, complete with ribbon marker, for people to record their journey through the habits. They wanted people to be able to look back to the start of the process and see how it unfolded in their lives.



Eleanor Rice

Bulwell URC's Holy Habits journal

'Not everyone took it up,' says Colin, 'but many people did. Some of the leaders in the church were already regulars with journaling, but we had to explain what Christian journaling was all about: how to use the journals; how to record thoughts and experiences; how to write down anything that inspired them, anything they wanted to bring to God. Some people have filled their journals, and some have used them more intermittently, but it's been an important element in our Holy Habits project.'

Eleanor adds: 'The journals linked everyone together because they were all given their own journal: adults, young people and children. As well as plenty of space for their own notes, there's printed information about the each of the habits, so everyone can keep track and feel involved.'

Another special feature of Bulwell URC's Holy Habits journey is its collection of hand-crafted banners. As Colin explains: 'One person in the church is incredibly gifted, and she made the banners. They're embroidered, appliqued, three-D mixed media designs, and they give a great visual focus to each habit when you're sitting in church.'



Banner by Nerys Fowler

'When we began, the Eating Together banner was behind the pulpit. Then as we moved on to the next habit, which was Gladness and Generosity, we moved the first banner further round the church and put the Gladness and Generosity banner behind the pulpit. Eventually we'll be surrounded with Holy Habits banners.'

Throughout the process the planning team has been asking, 'What can we do that's different? What's the added extra? What will really take us forward?' Those questions have been taken into every area of church life.

Now halfway through a two-year process, when did Colin begin to see changes?

'There are all these different things going on, and people have realised that it's giving them confidence as disciples.'

'Whatever habit they're looking at – whether Breaking Bread or Sharing Resources – if you're followers of the Way, followers of Jesus Christ today, then the greatest resource you have is yourself: your witness, your testimony.'

'It's helped people to be able to say, "I'm part of this group of people committed to living out the way of Christ today, and I get help with that. I get support with that. I can take any questions or problems to the leaders. I can ask for prayer." As people have recognised themselves as disciples on the Way, it's created a different dynamic in the congregation, which is just what I hoped would happen. And it's attracting more people.'

'Suddenly we've got a group of people who are more committed. They've embraced the habits and I get the sense – and this is very subjective – that they feel they're growing.'

'They've got involved in a new way and perhaps they're thinking, "I've been to a few things. I've learned a few things. I've understood some things better. I'm reading my Bible more." It's that sort of thing – nothing earth-shattering or ground-breaking; just slow, steady growth.' **HH**

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**We hope you've enjoyed this HOLY HABITS story!**