



Sara 'Siggy' Parratt-Halbert works for the Methodist Church's Learning Network and is based in Sheffield. She is part of a team working across the whole of the Yorkshire Plus Region, helping circuits and districts on their learning journey.



THE STORY begins...

'Some of the things we do, like safeguarding, are compulsory,' explains Siggy, 'but a lot of our work is bespoke. So, for example, maybe a group of churches will come to us wanting to look at discipleship, and that's where HOLY HABITS comes in.'

'I first came across HOLY HABITS when I was preparing for the interview for my current post, about four years ago. I read the report *Fruitful Fields*, which was all about how to improve our mission and make our churches more healthy, and read about early versions of HOLY HABITS then. I didn't start working with the resources until some time later, but by the time the Sheffield churches got wind of them I was quite an advocate.'

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So what was it about HOLY HABITS that made Siggy think, 'Yes, I can use this'?

'Churches so often ask me, "How can we improve our mission?" and I'm convinced that the only way for a church to improve its mission – its evangelism with a small 'e' – is for its members to deepen their discipleship, both individually and congregationally. That's so important. People often struggle to plan their own services when there aren't enough ministers and local preachers and these HOLY HABITS resources are absolutely perfect to help with that: they provide so many ideas and so much material to help people create services or learn and grow together in home groups. They're hugely accessible for people.'

'What we wanted to do as well was to bring the churches in our circuit together. The circuit is really big, both in terms of the number of churches and the area it covers. It's also not very well connected, because it started life as three smaller circuits. People still tend to

think in small-circuit terms, so we thought this might be a really good way to help bring the churches and the circuit together. They can study HOLY HABITS together; they can come together to share their experiences and their ideas.'

Preparation and planning have been key to Siggy's work with HOLY HABITS, both at the local circuit level and in the wider region.

'I don't think it would have worked without a really good set up – we had a good six months, at least, of preparation and planning – and without people really driving it at circuit level. You do need your champions, definitely.'

Although Siggy's Learning Network team covers a vast area, she and her colleagues have aligned themselves to particular districts in order to build up relationships locally. Siggy lives in Sheffield and worships in one of the more than 50 churches in the Sheffield Circuit.



Getting to grips with Holy Habits in Sheffield Circuit

'We feel that's really important if you're going to learn together. It meant that I could say to others who do my job, "This is how we did it, this is how we rolled it out, this is how it worked for us, these are some of the challenges and this is the impact it has had." The ability to pass on our experience to other circuits was the

premise on which I based my involvement with HOLY HABITS in the local circuit.

'The first time we all got together was after churches had signed up to HOLY HABITS. We had a kind of speed-dating day. The churches moved round one another to find out what resources they all had; for example, there might be a church in north-west Sheffield that had a fantastic photocopier or an excellent quiet garden that a church in the south-east might not have. So resources could be shared or facilities created.'

What I do see is churches becoming more community-minded as a result of HOLY HABITS, more focused outside their own walls, and that's really important.



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Holy Habits banner – a work in progress in Sheffield Circuit



Siggy's churches are now just over half-way through their two-year HOLY HABITS journey. They've had individual launch services for each habit, circuit learning days and a big summer celebration day to bring everyone together.

'Churches brought posters showing all the things they'd done with HOLY HABITS, and there was a bring-and-share lunch. We had a learning session on "local arrangements", so that by the end of the day they'd designed a whole service based on the next habit, that they could use for their next launch service.'

'They were able to share all the ideas that had come out of the habits they'd already done, and many of these ideas were transferable to other habits, so this was an incredibly useful chance to talk to each other and learn from each other's experience. And it wasn't related to the size of the congregation. Some of the smallest churches were coming out with some of the most original, most daring ideas. It was really brilliant.'

But did Siggy encounter any resistance in her work with HOLY HABITS?

'We did get a bit of "Oh, so this is the new best thing, is it? The new fad?" So we had to try to persuade some people that, no, this wasn't a new add-on; this was something to embed, to integrate, in the whole life of the church. We weren't asking them to do anything extra.'

'Some of the churches did do extra on HOLY HABITS, but only because that's what they wanted to do. Others just stuck to using the resources in their normal services or in their Bible study groups. What we did try to do in those cases was encourage them to find ways to share their learning with the rest of the congregation, because not everyone goes to a Bible study group. We tried to make it so that, in whatever way, HOLY HABITS seeped into the worshiping life of the church, and that's what seems to have happened.'

So how does Siggy plan to move forward with HOLY HABITS now?

'Within the circuit, we're halfway through. The day events, when we get all the churches together, aren't new as such, because we had them before, but now people are much more interested in coming. We've learned that if you put on a day that isn't actually going to benefit the individual directly, they're not going to give up a Saturday, but if we do it as a HOLY HABITS "how to" day, and people know they're going to get lots of information that benefits them directly, they come. We had 50 people come to the last learning day, which is a good turnout for Sheffield. We actually ran out of resources, which was really encouraging.'

'So I hope that after two years the habit of attending those days will stick, because people have come and they've begun to form relationships as well as to pick up information and ideas. People are always looking for ideas, and you can find yourself a bit isolated just in your own church, but if you know that you can go somewhere for the day and have the opportunity to nick some ideas and make some new contacts and friends, that's very appealing. That's the momentum I want to maintain throughout the second year of HOLY HABITS and beyond. For us that would become the eleventh habit! **HH**

We hope you've enjoyed this HOLY HABITS story!

