



In a new initiative during lockdown, two **HOLY HABITS** groups met online, giving participants from all over the country the opportunity to experience real-time fellowship and learning. The first **HOLY HABITS** online home group met to study *Sharing Resources* in the summer of 2020 and a second group met in the spring of 2021, to study the Holy Habits Lent book: *Holy Habits: Following Jesus*.

Peter Clarke is a minister in the Methodist Church, previously in active circuit work for 34 years. He retired from active ministry –

‘though never from ministry’ – in 2017 and returned to live in Kinver, where he’d been minister from 1990 to 2006. It’s a large village on the very southern tip of Staffordshire, and it’s also home to Holy Habits founder, Andrew Roberts.



THE STORY begins...

‘Before the pandemic, we had a regular series of short Bible study courses, held in church on Tuesday evenings, and they were very well received. They drew in people not just from the Methodist church but also from the two parish churches in Kinver and the neighbouring village. Twenty-five to thirty people came to those studies and really appreciated them, but when lockdown started last March, obviously that all had to stop.

‘As soon as we found out about the Holy Habits online group, *Sharing Resources*, taking place over the summer of 2020, a number of us were keen to be involved, and we really appreciated the opportunity to share in something in a very different way to the regular Bible study held in church.

‘It was a helpful way of exploring some of the issues – particularly the practical sharing and caring that the church is called to be engaged in. Then, having shared in that group in the early days of lockdown, when we found out that Andrew was writing an online Lent course, we were keen to follow it.

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‘The online group is no substitute for a group meeting in the same building and sharing and interacting around a table, but nonetheless it was really good to see and hear Andrew – most of us knew him, and he’s always very engaging in his presentation and his themes are always well illustrated, so that was the real positive. Sharing in the comments that came in via the chat was really useful

and interesting – not the same, as I say, as sharing face to face around a table, but it was still very valuable and worthwhile for that brief half hour to feel as if you were part of something bigger and something more connected.

‘I don’t think the online group last summer, nor the online Lent group, has attracted anyone who wasn’t already within the church circle, but we have recently started broadcasting some of our activities on YouTube, so that might bring new people in. It’s important for us to be out there – people can see what we’re about online and get a flavour of who we are, what we’re saying and what we’re offering, before they take that scary walk up the steps and into church. But also, for those who for various health and mobility reasons can no longer get to church, online services and Bible study groups will be really useful – so we’re committed to maintaining those opportunities.

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‘Our awareness of Andrew and who he is, and our long friendship, obviously predisposes us to welcome Holy Habits, but it goes a lot deeper than that. When I was 16/17 and studying A Level RE, the



Easter cross

New Testament study focused on life in the early church as reflected in Acts and some of the letters. I know Luke is a great synthesiser, but nonetheless that description of life in the early church at the end of Acts 2 was so compelling; even as a teenager I thought, 'Wow!' So to be able to pick up those themes, as Andrew does in Holy Habits, is really helpful. It seems to me that what Andrew has done is to take that description and unpack it in ways that folk in local churches in the 21st century can look at and say, 'Okay, if this is church life – community life – what does it mean in practice?' Not all habits are bad habits, although bad habits are much easier to pick up than good habits. Good habits need work and practice, so to focus on that is just a really good thing.

'We had our Lent group meetings on Monday evenings and started the Monday before Ash Wednesday. I preached yesterday on the week 4 theme, Jesus' prayer and praying – I really enjoyed it, but it is weird preaching to an empty church. There were five of us in there – two socially distanced singers and a keyboard player, me and our technical person. When I watched the recording of my first online service, I was very aware that I was looking down at my notes because there was nobody in front of me, but now the camera is placed on a shelf at the foot of our one stained-glass window. It's a spectacular window, created in the 1960s, and it contains, very discreetly, three children's faces looking upwards, so now I preach to those three children – I have an audience, and that makes a huge difference.

'I'm a storyteller and normally I volunteer at the Black Country Museum, where I tell the story of the chapel and its impact on the life of Victorian people at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. But I also volunteer here in Kinver at the famous National Trust Rock Houses and tell the story of the ordinary working people who lived in those sandstone caves and turned them into homes. I really missed that during lockdown, so to be able to carry on preaching was great for me, and using Holy Habits is a real joy. For preaching, Holy Habits is Godly, it's rooted and grounded in the life of Christ and the activity of the Spirit, and it's amazingly practical – and that is so important at the moment because so many folk are really struggling with the isolation and lack of community. To be able to preach on those themes is a real gift.

'During the period up to Pentecost we found ourselves in a time of continuing caution and, though easing, ongoing



© Peter Clarke

Peter, storytelling volunteer at the Black Country Museum

restrictions. The first Easter witnesses were also constrained, but their fellowship together was vital in their waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. So we have been sharing in worship that focused on the holy habit of Fellowship and the Methodist Way of Life theme of learning and caring together. We hope it will prove to have been a timely series, not only helping us to remember who we are and what we are called to be and do as we slowly emerge from the restrictions and sorrows of the past months, but also to be ready as a church to respond to the more outward-looking opportunities for service and evangelism that greater freedoms will allow.' **HH**

We hope you've enjoyed this HOLY HABITS story!

You can buy *Sharing Resources* booklets and *Holy Habits: Following Jesus* from brfonline.org.uk.

