

## The role of a Pioneer Minister: Prophet or Pastor?

An interview with Julie Bryan, Pioneer Minister, West Craven Baptist Church

During our recent Rural Mission Hub gathering at Scargill House, we as a team were intrigued to hear a little more of Julie Bryan's story, and particularly what she was seeing and experiencing in the church and wider culture, that may shape the further development of West Craven Baptist Church.

I began by asking Julie to describe a little about her context and calling into pioneer Ministry.

Having trained as a teacher, Julie was actively serving the local church, and in 2015 she completed the Arthur Rank Creative Leadership in the Rural Church course. During the course where she met Roy Searle amongst others, she was able to discover more about herself, her gifts and how to serve the church more effectively in the rural context. She was however at this point resisting any sense of call to formal ministry within her own home community, and the Baptist Churches of Barnoldswick, Earby & Salterforth on the Lancashire, Yorkshire border.

Julie was keen to emphasise that the sense of place and relational networks she's developed in her context were important, and in 2018 after being invited by Roy Searle to attend a Baptist Pioneer Gathering at Scargill House, she began to sense that perhaps pioneer ministry was where God was leading her. Back at home, the church was in interregnum, and seeking to develop a team ministry, it was then she realised 'I think I might be part of that team!' Four years on and Julie is now completing her third year of ministry formation at Northern Baptist College and will be ordained as a Pioneer Minister in September as part of the team, with Leader Stephen Keyworth at West Craven Baptist Church, which is now becoming a formal amalgamation of Barnoldswick, Earby & Salterforth Baptist churches.

From that point our conversation moved on to consider what Julie observed happening in her local community and wider culture, which might shape the development of her future ministry.

It appeared clear to Julie that the Covid 19 pandemic had highlighted issues surrounding mental health, economic difficulties and much emotional stress linked with those issues. She spoke of sadness, grief and anxiety as being widespread in culture. Coupled with that she saw the growing need and opportunity for the church to make a difference where they are. In her ministry she seeks to encourage partnership with other agencies, and ensure any initiatives are undertaken with and alongside others – ministry that is done with other people; not done to them, or done for them, but first earning the right to tell our story; the story of hope we carry in Jesus.

The crucial role of earning the right to share our story was further developed as Julie spoke of a valuable insight which was forming in her thinking after she'd spoken with her tutor at Northern Baptist College recently. For many years, in traditional ministry a church leader's role is seen as being a pastor to the church and a prophet to the world. Typically the pastor would care for the flock and bring a challenge to the world as a counter cultural lifestyle is lived out, and the need for change implied. However, Julie was noticing a shift in this model as her pioneer ministry was developing along the lines of a pastor to the world and a prophet to



the church. Pioneer leaders may on occasion find themselves bringing a prophetic challenge to the church as they model a different, more relevant contextual model of ministry, whilst implying the need for the traditional church to embrace change. At the same time, pastoral ministry in a pioneering context is often being offered to those outside the church, and regularly through the local food-bank or playgroup for instance.

Julie partly sees the call of the pioneer as a kind of 'prophetic agitator,' and most encouragingly the people of West Craven have embraced that call, as the traditional model of church operates in a mixed ecology setting alongside her pioneering role. She did however add two notes of caution. Firstly, she was keen to emphasise that she did of course still offer pastoral care to the traditional congregation,

and secondly she explained that this was not as clear cut as it may seem, and there are blurred edges. For instance, when pastoral care is offered to someone outside the church, that in many senses is a prophetic act, as we love those who aren't part of the Christian community and show a better way.

**Finally we spoke of where Julie sensed the church at West Craven and throughout the UK was heading in these days, and we asked what should be our priorities?**

Although very much dependant upon context, Julie commented that this largely surrounds our values as Christians. Perhaps we should hold more lightly our aspirations of big attendance at Sunday morning gatherings, and place a greater emphasis on our daily lives; living in a way that makes a positive difference whatever that looks like in our own context. This should be coupled

with the church offering different, varied spaces where people can discover God. Julie firmly believes that people are still interested in the spiritual dimension of life, they have questions about life and its meaning, and as Christians we have something to say to that. God is the Author of Life and we need to create spaces where people can discover Him for themselves.

One example of this being modelled is the monthly Sunday Stroll at West Craven which takes place at the same time as the traditional church service. It offers the opportunity for those who would rather go for a walk to connect with God and with each other in an outdoor setting. There is a five minute thought for the day, which has recently focussed on the fruits of the Spirit. Some people who usually attend the

traditional service now choose to go to the Stroll, which has led to a smaller attendance in church. However, instead of bemoaning the fact that less people are now attending, they have decided to use the opportunity for a monthly small group conversational style of service instead of continuing with the traditional model.

Thus, it appears the whole church is being revitalised through elements of pioneering ministry, not railing against it or stopping it happening (as sadly occurs in some contexts). Julie views her role as having a foot in both camps, a genuine valuing of both traditional and pioneering ministry amongst the communities which she serves as both prophet and pastor.

**Alistair Birkett**

