

Partnering Together on the Isle of Wight

BRIAN HARLEY

Brian Harley shares about the growing partnering initiatives with Christians across the island

I spent the first 30 years of my life in and around London and found myself going here, there and everywhere for Christian activities. Having now been on the Isle of Wight for over 30 years, I am very aware what a difference that stretch of water makes! You really know who you should be partnering with, as it is not practical to travel further afield on a regular basis even to Portsmouth or Southampton, although some do for work.

The island is home to over 140,000 people and is served by well over 100 churches of all different flavours. It is a highly tourist-dependent economy, so we have the added joy of welcoming many visitors to the island and to our worship services. I find this a source of great encouragement and some folks keep in touch online. It has generally stayed as quite a 'white' community, but things have been changing over recent times, and some congregations are now becoming more diverse.

I moved here in the mid 90's and soon made a connection with others in the immediate area and with like-minded folk across the island through Evangelical Alliance links and local Keswick Bible gatherings. In 2001 a group of us invited Walk of 1000 Men for a week of outreach which got groups working together in

various towns. Where I live in Shanklin, this awakened a fresh sense of unity and shared activity. Rob Whillier from the Community Church in Cowes had also begun to create a website and e-news service bringing together information about all the churches and events on the island.

Things developed further with the HOPE 08 initiative, when mission events and acts of kindness took place in a number of locations around the island. We organised one big celebration on Pentecost weekend with thousands gathering at Newport football ground with music and worship and displays by around 80 organisations and local ministries. The team that put this together then decided to get behind Rob's vision and we morphed into the Wight Church Network team. This is an informal group made up of around 15 people from various church backgrounds and from different parts of the Island. This has actually involved five Methodists, including Marian Izzard.

Over the years, we have organised various events and prayer initiatives, one regular feature being an All-Island Worship Gathering at the start of each year where we often invite a speaker to bring some inspiration and encouragement to the island Christian community. This January, we welcomed Patrick Regan (co-founder of Kintsugi Hope) to speak on mental health issues and well over 300 gathered to worship together and to hear his heartfelt and challenging message. We were led in song by a talented band of young people drawn together from various churches, which was very special. Nearly 40 leaders came together the next morning to hear Patrick's thoughts about wellbeing for those in leadership.

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Visiting speakers in previous years have included: Gavin Calver (Evangelical Alliance), Roy Crowne, (Hope Together), Andy Frost (Share Jesus International), Pete Greig (24-7 Prayer), Malcolm Duncan (Kensington Temple) and Rachel Jordan-Wolf (Hope Together).

There have been several leaders' breakfasts over the last couple of years – meeting on a Saturday morning in a church on the island. Some of us meet in more local networks but it is good to bring people together from across the whole Island - it is only 25 miles across. I feel it ought to be possible to know every Christian minister here, but this never quite happens with all the comings and goings!

We have done a number of things to bring people together over the years, such as putting on several

musicals with Roger Jones and team from Christian Music Ministries with a local united choir. We are about to welcome LICC again to run an evening on whole life discipleship and to share with leaders over another breakfast - we know the way to pastors' hearts!

Prayer gatherings have been a significant focus, and we are delighted to have recently appointed a recently retired couple, Revs Richard and Rajinda Buxton, as Prayer Mobilizers. They spearheaded a fabulous, united prayer initiative on the afternoon of Pentecost Sunday last year, called 'Free the Wight' with over 40 groups meeting around the coast and on high places at the same time to pray for the island. Free the Wight involved an hour of guided prayer where each group followed the same 12 topics in five-minute slots so that we prayed simultaneously with one voice. This was a

cause of great encouragement and blessing to many, and we trust that it has helped change the spiritual atmosphere on the island. Plans are afoot to do something similar this year.

We learned to pray on Zoom over the lockdown period and have just completed a 24-hour online prayer time made up of 48 half hour slots led by a range of people from across the churches. This was a brilliant thing to do in the winter period when people are less inclined to go out, and we had powerful times of prayer for many different aspects of island life and Christian ministry. I'm sure we'll be doing it again.

It has been great to serve together over the years and partner in the work of the gospel, as we seek to advance the Kingdom of God in this little breakaway corner of England's green and pleasant land. We don't have any desire to control what goes on here; we are simply here to serve and help facilitate shared activity, prayer and mission. There are plenty of good joint initiatives that we are not responsible for because things have naturally evolved as needs have been recognised. These include some long-term projects like Street and School Pastors, IOW Foodbank, IOW Youth for Christ, and more recently a local CAP Debt Centre, 24-hour events such as One Body Worship and a Creation Matters group (which seeks to encourage and inspire creation care on and around the island).

We pray that the coming years will see even greater cooperation among local Christians and that this growing sense of unity will lead to further blessing from the Lord, as Psalm 133:1 indicates: 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!'

REV BRIAN HARLEY



Rev Brian Harley is a United Reformed Church Minister and former Chair of GEAR, the URC's Group for Evangelism and Renewal. He serves as Chair of Wight Church Network Team, wightchurch.net

