



We are activists held together by contemplative prayer

with Sally Mann and Bonny Downs Baptist Church

A foodbank. A community food club. A debt advice centre. Supporting dozens of homeless and vulnerably housed adults with job search support, life skills courses, showers, laundry facilities, advocacy and signposting.

A family hub, sport and fitness sessions for all ages and abilities, a community garden, and wide support for the over 65s - the Bonny Downs Community Association (BDCA) is a busy place.

The charity was set up by Bonny Downs Baptist Church in 1998 to share God's love and blessing with the Newham community, and remains closely linked to the church. Its chair is Baptist minister Dave Mann, one of five ministers to share a stipend there.

"We're very much activists in a missional community in the middle of a crisis of poverty," says Sally Mann, another of the co-ministers at the church, and

who is married to Dave. "We live in an overwhelming context of need, and we are attempting to deal with these very traumatic needs in our community and in our church."

Yet despite, or perhaps more accurately, because of all this activity, the prayer life and practices of the team at its heart have taken an unexpected turn: they are now rooted in silence, contemplation and stillness.

It happened when the team began to explore different spiritual practices to develop greater resilience. In the months before the pandemic they introduced centering prayer at the start of the day, focusing on breathing to return to a sense of stillness as a prayer.

"Every day we'd spend at least 20 minutes in contemplative prayer, before we went on to do anything else together," explains Sally.

"You're saying to God, in this space that we're creating for silence, this is our prayer to you."

At the time this was just the leadership team. But when Covid hit - and the BDCA became the emergency food hub in the community - they began to extend the practice, which involved starting a morning online office.

Here they used a mix of centering prayer, Lectio Divina - a prayerful approach to Scripture - and an Examen, an Ignatian form of prayer. They developed a pattern of doing this every weekday morning at 8am - and haven't stopped since. When restrictions began to ease, Sally could welcome people to her house 'for porridge and prayer' alongside those online. It's broadcast through a private Facebook group (though the group is open to those who want to join it).

"It is actually the foundation of all the activity: we start our day waiting for God to direct us,

Photos | BDCA



which is a different sort of prayer," says Sally. "It's not intercessory prayer, which happens at other times in the day.

"For me, it's been an essential tool in discernment because there's so much we could do.

"My sense is I start the day really quietly, like a spiritual taking your shoes off, coming with nothing, just silence and stillness. It's all about new monasticism and sort of discovering old ways and taking bits of those traditions."

The practice has mushroomed, Sally introduced it when she became co-director of Red Letter Christians UK, and now her community's prayer calls go out to hundreds of activist Christians each day. A number of Baptists participate, including Sandra Crawford, who leads the session on one of the days. Given it is both calming and helps discernment, Sally believes such a daily office is 'the best way to prevent burnout'.

"Prayer isn't a trite thing to say, it's a necessary reality. So I think the effect has been that we've been able to stay in situations that are really very, very demanding emotionally and spiritually – and still have a really good time. There's not a heaviness about my community, despite the fact that we live with a lot brokenness. I'm sure prayer is being able to stay really joyful and hopeful."

Bonny Downs Baptist Church is working with Bonny Downs Community Association (BDCA) and NewWay project to redevelop the old Bonny Downs Church Hall into an 'Urban Abbey'.

The new building will provide a small number of housing units for community living above a ground floor community space.

This will be used in the daytime for services to those facing homelessness or food poverty. The studio flats will welcome vulnerable single people, who have experienced homelessness. Sally and Dave will live in the building, which received planning permission earlier this year.

Sally adds: "I feel like God has us on this journey of leaning into regular spiritual practices to make us resilient enough to go on the journey that God's got for us.

"We live out of our depth. We are all out of our depth, all the time. And I think that makes for a much healthier prayer life."

Search BD Virtual Church on Facebook to find the daily morning prayers [facebook.com/groups/911415119293421](https://www.facebook.com/groups/911415119293421) They use Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community, by Pádraig Ó Tuama.

As part of her involvement with Red Letter Christians UK, Sally helped launch a book in February called *Jesus and Justice - Stories of radical Christian living*.

The book documents 25 authors from the UK writing about their lived experience of seeking Jesus and justice in their communities. Many of those who share their stories participate in the daily morning prayers. Copies of the book are available from our online shop www.baptist.org.uk/shop

Red Letter Christians UK is a relational network for those who want to live for Jesus and Justice. Its focus is connecting and supporting Christian activists and community leaders across the UK redletterchristians.org.uk



"Powerful knowing Dave prays for me" - Mayor

Late in 2023 Dave Mann was presented with the Honorary Freedom of the Borough award at the Newham Civic Award Ceremony – the highest award Newham Council gives to residents.

In presenting the award, Newham Mayor Rokhsana Fiaz (*right*) thanked Dave for his support - including his prayerful support. She said:

"David has made an impressive long-term commitment to our borough. His work epitomises what it means to give back to your community and inspire change.

"I want to convey my personal thanks and gratitude to David because he has provided so much wisdom and sound counsel in the daily struggles and challenges of life.

"When you occupy positions of leadership you are inevitably challenged and it's especially powerful knowing that someone in our community keeps me close to his heart and prays for me and for my uplifting, and also prays for me to succeed."

Photo | Newham Council