

Tis the season... to make connections!



How can a handful of people from a little 'shabby chic' chapel in a small village on the edge of the Cotswolds Way even think of mission? Well I suppose the answer is... we don't! Call it mission that is. What we do is try to make connections; connections with each other, our communities and with God.

There are various communities linked to Upton Cheyney Chapel; those who live in the village, folk who used to live in the village and people who work in the village. There are the visitors who happen by on a visit to the farm shop or village inn: the walkers, horse riders, cyclists, campers and Geocachers. All of these give the chapel an opportunity to make connections.

So when we are planning our chapel calendar we keep in mind the people we need to connect with and try to work out how to do it. Often this will focus around the seasons, the special times when people expect to have a more spiritual focus: Christmas, Lent, Easter, holiday time, Harvest, Remembrance Sunday, celebrations.

Take Christmas: people love singing carols but not necessarily at the chapel, so we took the carols to the community and had Carols in the Barn with the support of the local farmer. Music was provided by the local brass ensemble and the Christmas message was shared by interactive storytelling and Christmas crafts. Add in soup and roll, with the inevitable raffle and we had a thoroughly enjoyable community Christmas event. It has now become a fixture in the village calendar and more residents from the village are helping to run it. Connections made!

At Lent we share study groups with the local Anglican church. Perhaps it's the pancake lunch at our monthly coffee afternoon, or the open fire, or the relaxed approach, or the tea and cake; whatever it is, we regularly get locals coming to the Lent studies who we don't often see at other times.

Easter connections can be a challenge when families travel away to be with loved ones living elsewhere. One year we tried an Easter bonnet-making coffee morning on the Saturday with an Easter Bonnet parade on Sunday. It seemed a good idea until the chicken on Val's hat laid an egg during the first hymn! Since then we have done egg painting instead! Families come and join in with crafts, getting to connect with chapel folk in the process. Our Easter Sunday service is family-friendly and it is always good to see extended family visitors.

While people can meet with God at any time and in any place, sometimes a sacred space invokes connection. Our chapel and grounds are set in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and we registered with the Quiet Garden Movement (quietgarden.org). The whole setting can draw a person to think of 'the one' who is bigger than me, recognising that God is present. The garden is always available for prayer and reflection and in the summer the chapel is open at weekends. We have also put our chapel on the National Trail website (nationaltrail.co.uk/cotswold-way), just to let people know we are there and invite them to drop in.

Being part of a farming community means that Harvest has a particular relevance to the village. We have family fun on Sunday morning making the harvest loaf for the harvest display. Kneading bread together gives an opportunity to thank God for everything we can think of that goes into the bread: the sun and rain, farmers, lorry drivers and even oil wells (for the fuel for the lorries). We shape the bread into a traditional

sheaf which often contains an abundance of mice – much more fun to make than ears of wheat! The harvest loaf then has to be processed to our neighbour's house to be baked as the chapel has no oven. No one really knows how it will turn out but everyone is happy to tuck into it for our afternoon tea after the family service!

Meanwhile, down at the pub there is the annual harvest auction, a fundraiser for the Royal British Legion. Tradition says that the landlord has to provide the harvest loaf, buy it back at auction, and then serve it with soup. It is a gift he gives three times. Local lads take great delight in bidding wars, raising the price enough to keep the landlord poor. This is typical of village events where the chapel can take the opportunity to connect with the local community.

Our church anniversary is a lovely opportunity to reconnect with old friends and make new ones through our church exchange visit programme. Old friends come and share memories, new friends come and make new ones.

Remembrance Sunday is a poignant day for many and we plan the service with visitors in mind. Our service starts with an act of remembrance at the war memorial with a representative of the Royal British Legion. Last year we had the Bristol Evangel Male Voice Choir leading the service.

Publicity is key to making these events a success. Our friends at St Mary's in the neighbouring village generously include our events in their seasonal door-to-door leaflets and parish magazine. Posters are put up around the village and we send out information and invitations by email. We also have a Facebook page and a website although it is a challenge to keep them up to date.

Something we don't need to advertise are weddings. The village farm and local inn both offer a lovely venue for wedding receptions and sometimes the couples will come to the chapel to be married. What an amazing opportunity to encourage a couple to connect with God as they start out on their life journey together, a privilege to share the joy of their families and friends. How lovely it is to then meet couples occasionally in the Quiet Garden or at afternoon tea remembering their special day.

So there it is: a handful of people doing the best we can with what we have. Do drop in to our little 'shabby chic' chapel if you are passing and make a connection with us, our community and God.

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