

Building hope-filled communities



It's official: good relationships keep us happier and healthier.*

Rural churches play a key part in enhancing the well-being of local communities. As well as encouraging social connections, churches help local people to find an eternal perspective in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Building deeper relationships

For one group of churches in Somerset, working together under the banner of HOPE Frome and Villages has enabled them to significantly develop their capacity to enable those in their communities to build deeper relationships. Their connection with HOPE began in 2008 when they began to use a caravan for regular outreach in the village of Frome. Every two weeks since then, volunteers have offered free teas and coffees to passers-by from 10pm to 2am, giving them a place to stop and chat on their way home from a night out.

'We know an amazing love from God in Jesus,' says the HOPE van coordinator Gary Lee. 'We want to share that, so we are compelled to reach out to others.'

The Frome churches also make the most of key calendar moments to bring the community together. In 2018 they live-screened the wedding of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle and provided tea and cakes to villagers who came together to watch the wedding.

Revd Anthony Dickson, the parish priest in Nunnery near Frome, is one of the clergy who has worked under the HOPE banner with Revd Clive Fairclough, who chairs Frome Area Churches Together. He says, 'In a village it is easy to feel isolated, that you are trying to work on your own. The idea of HOPE Frome is to connect the villages so we share experiences and also try to see how other churches do things that maybe we can put into our own church. As we share ideas we can show how church can be done differently in different places.'

Churches in Frome were among the thousands of churches using HOPE's Remembrance 100 resources for the centenary of the end of the First World War. The *Silence* gift book was an easy conversation starter as people reflected on the sacrifice made by so many.

A rhythm of mission

Roy Crowne, HOPE's executive director, says, 'HOPE helps churches to reach out to their communities by making Jesus known at these key calendar moments when the country is celebrating or commemorating national events. Having a rhythm of mission through the calendar – Easter, Summer Fun Days, Harvest festivals and Christmas – helps us to be intentional about mission without getting burned out.'

Lent

In the coming year HOPE is inviting churches to pray together through Lent as together we ask God how we can bring hope to our communities.

Easter

This Easter, HOPE will again offer churches a *HOPE at Easter* magazine to give away as a gift. Churches that visit home-by-home and give away the magazines with an invitation to guest services, find that it is an effective way to make lasting local connections.

Churches in the New Forest area have worked together as part of HOPE for several years. Offering a shoe-shine stall in the village centre was one Easter outreach idea that helped them to open conversations about Easter and Jesus washing the disciples' feet. They have also pooled resources to run a massive summer festival to bring local people together.

Summer

Roy Crowne says, 'Churches have musicians, choirs and DBS-checked children's workers to run amazing events when they work together. Whether it is a one-off summer Fun Day or a week-long festival with children's clubs and concerts, summer is a great time to bring the community together to make Jesus known.'

Harvest

Eating together helps to build on connections made at events. Harvest is the traditional season to share a meal, putting the church at the centre of community life. HOPE works with World Vision to provide the 'Share A Meal' pack which includes invitations, recipe ideas and quizzes to help churches run harvest events.

Christmas

Christmas brings the year to an end with a host of activities which also enable churches to serve their communities. Winter night shelters, Foodbanks, Street Pastors, senior citizens' friendship clubs to combat loneliness, debt advice centres and other chaplaincies all work at maximum capacity in the festive season.

'It is possible to run these services without mentioned Jesus,' says Roy. 'But then what makes us distinctive? Let's be intentional about pointing people to Jesus, with sensitivity and respect.'

Christmas HOPE is designed as a gift from churches to local residents as it is delivered home to home with an invitation to Christmas events.

To help Christians make the most of every opportunity to share our Christian faith naturally and effectively, HOPE, the Church of England, and KingsGate Community Church in Peterborough worked together to produce *Talking Jesus – The Course*. It includes six practical, video-based teaching sessions with real-life examples from people who are talking about their faith in Jesus in everyday life in villages, towns and cities. There are also short parable-style films designed to get groups thinking, and a 44-page course booklet with helpful discussion questions and challenges. Copies of the course booklet can be ordered in bulk with discounts for large quantities.

'Churches have the ability to build hope-filled communities,' says Roy. 'Let pray it happens.'

Catherine Butcher
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Find out more about *Talking Jesus – The Course* and other HOPE resources at hopepublishing.org.uk.

* Harvard Study of Adult Development (adultdevelopmentstudy.org)

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