

# The clean comedy club that helps spread the Gospel

The idea to set up a "clean humour" comedy club came to Birmingham Diocesan Youth Officer Helen Tomblin in the middle of the night. "I'd been studying the relationship between humour, God and the Bible," she explained.

In the harsh light of day, Helen says that when she shared the idea with others, they warned her about all the potential troubles. "But so many people have bright ideas and don't do anything about them because of all the possible problems. I decided to go ahead anyway."

Having a new idea and the tenacity to follow through with it—that's the kind of pioneering spirit that the Church Mission Society is hoping to cultivate through their new Pioneer Mission Leadership Training Course, in which Helen, along with eight others, are currently participating.

Around the country, there are encouraging signs that traditional forms of Anglican ministry are creatively adapting to the needs of people with no experience of church. Those leading these 'Fresh Expressions' have different skills and experiences than conventional ordained or lay ministers. To equip and encourage these pioneers, The Church Mission Society is launching their Pioneer Leadership Course, with students now being recruited for the autumn.

I just decided to go ahead anyway and because I work for the Diocese I was able to put a paragraph in a press release which the national press went mad for. It got picked up on Radio 4, The Heaven and Earth Show, Daily Telegraph, etc. They really liked the angle of 'can clean comedy be funny?' A crew from BBC1 even attended the opening of the club. I could have sold out the venue three times over. It was fantastic and continues to be fantastic. This high profile really helped to get us on the map. I describe it as run by Christians but it is not a Christian comedy club. The vibe is more of an Arts centre audience in a pub and it feels very safe. We have brought live stand up to a whole new audience."

Comedy is not the extent of Helen's pioneering initiatives. "I have been going to the gym for about two years now and by just being there, listening and asking questions on the deeper stuff of life, I have had so many pro-



found conversations." Having looked around for models of a Christian presence in health and fitness clubs, Helen came across 'Fit Lives', a small Christian charity that encourage churches to adopt their local gym. She is now their representative at her club.

'Fit Lives provided Helen with training and a brand to be identified with. She says she's had plenty of positive feedback from staff and members, "I go to class, hang out and chat in the coffee area and have just started a lifestyle

library with books on everything from self esteem to money management. It is a totally holistic approach to fitness". Doing the Pioneer Leadership course gave her confidence, "It put into words the direction my heart and soul is travelling in. I would still be doing this stuff because I am determined, but it is really encouraging to be with people who understand without having to explain it."

Andy Morgan is employed as a Pioneer Minister in the West Midlands. "The pioneering post itself is the outcome of many years of work within the Church of England to seek to address a huge challenge that exists in West Bromwich of many generations that are missing from the church." Andy re-engages these lost generations in a variety of ways including running a games club for young people, an open prayer/worship event and what might best be understood as detached youth work, but with people in their 20s and 30s. He is extremely grateful for the CMS course, "The people I have met and the teaching I've received have challenged me to push the boundaries of my thinking. It has given me a fresh insight into God, the Bible and the Kingdom of God. I think it's the best fit because it sheds light on the day to day realities that I face."

The Rt Rev Colin Fletcher, member of the project's advisory committee and Bishop of Dorchester, sees CMS as uniquely placed to provide this training, "Pioneer Ministry is a bold and imaginative response to the mission challenges confronting the Church today and the need for new approaches and strategies to training. CMS with much experience in cross-cultural mission is well qualified to partner with the Church of England in this."

Course Director, Jonny Baker, highlights other benefits, "It's very participative, on-the-job training, leading to a validated foundation degree. It enables people who want to lead the way in mission to learn, practice and reflect in context – with experienced pioneers."

It would seem the recommendation in the 2004 Church of England's Mission-Shaped Church report that the "lens of cross-cultural mission to shape training in pioneering ministry in the UK" is finally being fulfilled.

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