



# Connecting in coastal communities

Barney Barron introduces Coastal Expression, a network helping to bring together those ministering on the margins in our coastal towns

**M**y wife Sara and I have long had a sense of call to stand in solidarity with those who are often treated by society and systems as less important, less powerful or less worthy, whether that be socially, economically or politically. This led us in 2002 to move to Leigh Park, a low-income community and large housing estate near Portsmouth. We spent 16 formative years there, where we bought up our four children.

We came to a point however we were ready for a new adventure and we certainly felt God was unsettling us. Having been commissioned by Urban Expression to explore towns and cities along the south-coast of England I had something of an epiphany on a train journey through Cornwall.

It was the realisation that this beautiful county, where I had enjoyed many family holidays, had far more of a story to tell than the perceived idyll of coastal life. There is an undercurrent of isolation, economic injustice, addiction, limited employment opportunities, lack of housing/unsuitable accommodation for local people etc. This is coupled with the decline and closure of churches in coastal communities where anecdotally it seems many denominations are divesting resources from these more isolated communities to

invest in larger towns and cities inland. Increasingly old church buildings and chapels on the coast are being repurposed into private housing and holiday accommodation.

This epiphany led us to move to Looe a small fishing town in Cornwall in 2018.

I soon started to connect with other pioneers in coastal communities around the UK and although every story is unique, I was beginning to pick up significant common threads. I also noticed while there were other networks supporting mission in rural and urban contexts, there wasn't anything that I was aware of supporting coastal pioneers. As a result, there was a feeling of general isolation and lack of connection with those who could resonate with the unique challenges and opportunities of incarnational ministry in coastal areas.

Coastal Expression was formed. There are now 80 people from around the UK on our mailing list, 30 of whom are regularly connecting, encouraging, learning from and praying for one another. We are spread across the UK with a creative variety and means of embodying and sharing the good news.



## COASTAL PIONEERS

Sandra and Tony are Baptist pioneers in Jaywick, Essex. According to statistics Jaywick is the most economically deprived ward in the country. Sandra and Tony are not there to plant a church or start a project but to be present in love and solidarity with their community. What they have discovered is a community that certainly has its challenges but is so much more than its statistics.

Ocean Church was innovated and is led by John Good, a Baptist pioneer in Poole, Dorset. They are opening up opportunities for people to explore faith through fun, food and using nature to explore the Christian faith. You will usually find them gathering outside by the water.

Esther Day based in Lowestoft trained as a Baptist pioneer through the Light College. Esther offers creativity, wholeness and wellbeing rooted in Christian faith.

Graham is a Baptist minister who retrained as a barber to help fund his pioneer ministry in Hartlepool. "I've been a Baptist minister for more than 25 years but I'm having some of my most substantial and valuable times of ministry since I started barbering three years ago," he says. "It's nowhere near a church building or gathering, but it most definitely is ministry."

### COULD IT BE MAGIC?

It isn't just about the activities being hosted by the pioneers, it is most importantly the relationships being made. Many of the coastal pioneers have joined sea swimming groups which often have a very deep sense of community. My wife recently met a lady sea swimming whom she'd never met before. The lady told her of some "magic" she had experienced. When she was staying on a campsite, she had told the owners in conversation of a problem she had with a frozen shoulder.

The site owner asked if she could pray for her and she agreed. The lady experienced the discomfort lifting and movement returned to her shoulder. She was perplexed as she never experienced anything like it before, but her husband and friend were cynical. When she shared her story with Sara and found she affirmed her experience, she wanted to know more and asked if Sara would stay in contact so they could meet again.

### ENGAGING WITH 'THE SPIRITUALLY OPEN'

There are many different and exciting stories of God at work as we connect with people in coastal communities. While these pioneering activities and shapes of community might be different, the common thread is they are connecting with and engaging people who are often spiritually open but probably wouldn't, for a whole host of reasons, enter a church building.

And Coastal Expression is helping us. We are grateful for the prayerful and financial support given to us by the Mission Forum Grants Committee that has made it possible to develop and grow Coastal Expression.

**Barney Barron is an experienced Baptist pioneer who has planted and revitalised churches, founded youth and community charities, and built networks to support pioneers. He is a Baptists Together Pioneer Ambassador**

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