



The Cairn: Radical Transformation

How a declining Baptist church in Bristol transformed into a new missional community.

By Ruth Whiter

I remember meeting Phil Lawrence in 2011 to film him talking about his family's move to the Knowle West Estate in South Bristol. What stayed with me was his reference to some old songs he believed were prophecies yet to be fulfilled, perhaps in the streets around him:

*From house to house in families
Shall more be gathered in
And lights will shine in every street
So warm and welcoming*

(One shall tell another, Graham Kendrick : ©1981, Thankyou Music)

Six years later, I was invited to the Sunday lunch Phil and his wife Alice provide in their kitchen for up to forty people each month. There has already been a transformation from the declining traditional congregation that was *Knowle West Baptist Church*, to a new missional community based in the former vicarage where they now live, *The Cairn*. They're currently entering a new phase of transition, as many of the new contacts they have made are ready to move on to more intentional discipleship.

This new community has grown through a network of flexible, interconnected groups, some initiated by The Cairn and others run by outside agencies. Many of these are designed to address the social isolation experienced by men on this estate. In addition to the monthly lunch, there have been men's breakfasts, a baking group, a guitar club, and a spiritual seekers' group.

"I've started to believe in God again" one man told me. "The nice thing is that Phil won't pump it into you if you don't believe - he will talk from his own personal experience, rather than 'text book' religion. It's a way of restoring faith through friendship".

Phil uses a fishing metaphor to describe what's happening now. "It feels like a season when a lot of the 'ground bait' work has been done, a key time to ask who God wants us to 'fish' for, and disciple."

This new phase is finding expression in two ways at the moment. Phil and Alice have begun to break bread with a small group each Sunday morning, moving on from the informal worship that happens after the monthly lunch. Secondly, The Cairn is partnering with a local youth project to provide a Life Recovery Group in a central location on the estate. "It's designed for people who would be comfortable with a group like Alcoholics Anonymous" says Phil, "but who have come to believe that their 'higher power' is Jesus. It's also been designed for people who wouldn't find it easy to fit into a conventional small group, but who are exploring Christianity. We've been praying and planning this for a long time; we feel it could be a really key discipleship tool moving forward."



Phil and Alice Lawrence
in their kitchen at The Cairn

Phil and Alice are in this for the long term, but the Home Mission grant that currently supports their ministry has to be transitional. They hope that assets raised by the sale of the church's former manse will be used to build new housing in the grounds of The Cairn, providing an income for the church in a community where paid ministry has never been affordable.

I was beginning to see how Graham Kendrick's prophecy of lights shining in every street could be realised here. "But it needs God to do the radical transformation" Phil adds, "or it doesn't work."

Ruth Whiter is communications co-ordinator for the West of England Baptist Association



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