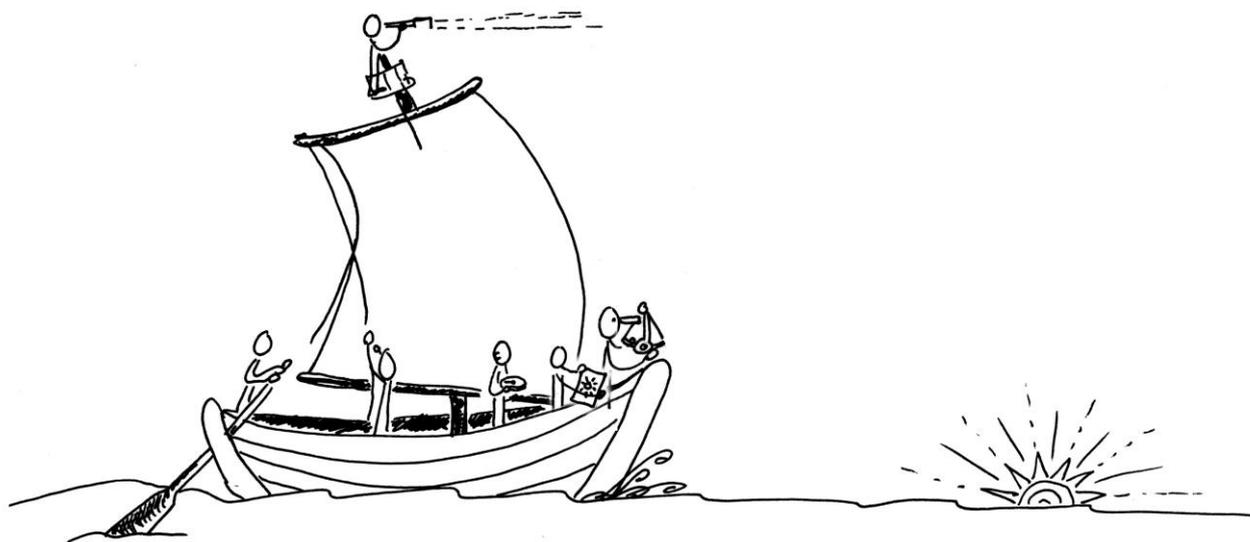


# Where Are We Now?



## **Partnership for Missional Church Discovery Report**

Stranton Church and Burbank Community Church

# Introduction

In 2015 Stranton Church began a 3–4 year process called **Partnership for Missional Church (PMC)**. This is a tried and tested way of partnering with God, one another, a dozen other churches in the Diocese of Durham, and people in the local community, in order to discern the people and calling God is leading us to as a church. In a nutshell, the journey looks like this:

- ✓ **Year 1 Discovery** – Learning to listen to and be mindful of God, each other, and our community to create our PMC “road map”.
- ✓ **Year 2 Experimenting** – Within our community, using our “road map” to set out on a missional experiment with God to see where it (and he) leads.
- ✓ **Year 3 Vision** – Taking stock of where – and how – we find ourselves and embedding our vision of God’s preferred and promised future for us.

This booklet summarizes information collected by members of the PMC Steering Group in the **Discovery phase** of this first year, with the aim of providing a helpful overview of Stranton Church and our congregations, the connections we have in and around the parish, and the community within which we are based in Hartlepool – in short, to answer the question: **where are we now?**

We wish to thank everyone who has been involved so far. Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet; please reflect and pray as you go through it. This is intended as a starting point: there will be opportunities to share your thoughts and comments over the next couple of months, and an **away day to which everyone is invited on Saturday 1 October 2016**, at which we will be discerning together what our missional experiment will be.

The PMC Steering Group

Ann Courtenay, Diane Greenwood (chair), Pam Harkness, Nick Moore, Lynda Parvin, Alan Robertson, Mary Robinson, Norman Shave, Kath Webster, Rachel Wilson

*“The Lord sent them ahead of him to every place where he was about to go.”*

Luke 10.1

## Part 1: Our Church

*Understanding our church – its locations, buildings, size, finances, and leadership – is important as we seek to know who we are. We have gathered **data from church records** to give a picture of the starting point from which we will step out with God into his preferred and promised future.*

### **Locations and Activities**

The centuries-old **All Saints Church** dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, and is currently used for two regular services and Youth Fellowship on Sundays, morning prayer on three weekdays, “Prayer & Praise” and baptism preparation once a month, bellringing, and other meetings such as church council. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals welcome people from the wider parish and town community. The church is open twice a week for visitors, with English classes also now taking place in the Fulthorpe Chapel once a week. There is disabled access via the rear car park but currently no accessible toilet facilities. There is car parking to the front and rear, and a bus stop 5 minutes away, but transport connections across Hartlepool are poor. The dual carriageway cuts close to the South of the church, with no thoroughfare; pedestrians walk past the church steps in both directions. The church and tower are clearly visible landmarks; the notice board can be seen only when close by. The Camerons brewery, two pubs and the row of shops and businesses along Vicarage Gardens are in close proximity but currently there is no established link with church.

**St Matthew’s Community Centre**, originally a church building, then from 1945 St Matthew’s Hall, is on the corner of Elwick Rd and Arncliffe Gdns in the heart of the residential area in the West side of our parish. Since 2010 it has become a thriving local Community Centre, with IT facilities, 3 meeting rooms, games/sports activity areas, an office and two kitchens. The Centre is managed by a committee, with several church members involved. There are some 20 different activities available each week, including drop-ins, coffee mornings, Burn Valley North Residents Association events, community socials and weekly leisure groups. Our church office staffed by Trish Playfor is based here. Uniformed Brigades, Toddlers, children’s and youth groups, Messy Church, Mothers’ Union, and a weekly Holy Communion service are also held here. The

Centre is visible, well-used and known in the neighbourhood, although there is perhaps less direct connection and use by some members of our church.

Started in 1994, **Burbank Community Church** built on the earlier work of the Burbank Street Mission. This congregation aims to connect with and witness to the Burbank Estate. The role of our Burbank Community Worker, Clive Hall, has been vital in reaching and supporting local residents, and networking with Burbank Residents' Association, Hartlepool Borough Council, and other organisations such as the Foodbank. The Burbank congregation has used several community buildings within the estate over two decades, moving to Ward Jackson Primary School hall in 2009 (before it became a Church of England school in 2010, strengthening links with the church). Burbank is led by the Halls with the Burbank Leadership Team; joint worship with the congregations that normally meet in All Saints takes place several times each year.

### ***Attendance***

Figures for **usual Sunday attendance** (uSa) were 147 in 2013, across all Sunday congregations. This represented a 5% decrease compared with 2008, a 5-year period spanning Mike Gilbertson's departure as vicar, the 2-year vacancy, and Norman Shave's arrival in summer 2012. By comparison, uSa in 2015 was 173, which suggests that numbers have stabilized or even begun to grow.

Although **Electoral Roll** numbers have seen decline, in recent years they too have stabilized (145 in 2013; 139 in 2014; 135 in 2015; 140 in 2016); in practice such stability is a sign of vitality, with similar numbers joining the register as leaving (for example, 11 left and 12 joined between 2014 and 2016, a change in composition of 8%), and the majority of names removed were due to death or leaving the area. While numbers attending Messy Church fluctuate, it connects with a large number of families and has seen growth in the past four years. Recent developments in attendance include lower numbers at Burbank, and a growing contingent of asylum seekers and refugees at the 10.30.

Despite decreasing numbers in the population at large identifying as Christian, Hartlepool (like much of the North of England) still has a strong cultural Christian affiliation, reflected in a steady flow of occasional offices, that is, **baptisms, weddings, and funerals**. The numbers of baptisms taking place in

Stranton reveals the broad decline across the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: from 427 in 1900, to 108 in 1970, to 33 in 2001. Figures since then suggest a levelling off or even an increase in baptisms: 2014: 33 baptisms, 15 weddings, 32 funerals; 2015: 62 baptisms, 10 weddings, 34 funerals; 2016: 31\* baptisms, 17 weddings, 11\* funerals (\* = figures for half year). The baptisms figure in 2015 reflects increased requests for infant baptism, whereas in 2016 it reflects a large number of adults professing faith.

## ***Finance and Leadership***

We have managed to break even in recent years, creating a situation of **financial stability**; this is possible only through generous and sacrificial giving – both regular and one-off – from within our congregation. Planned giving members dropped from 154 in 2010 to 95 in 2014. Total income for the past few years from all sources reflects this drop but also, more recently, stabilization: £228.3k in 2010; £137.4k in 2012; £145.7k in 2013; £193.7k in 2014 (this includes a £50k grant for work on St Matthew's); £161.9k in 2015. Our outgoings include a part-time secretary, a Community Worker, ministry expenses, and an annual parish share (£52k in 2013, £53k in 2014, £54.5k in both 2015 and 2016) which contributes to clergy costs, diocesan support, and the needs of poorer parishes; we also give to mission at home and abroad (£8,772 in 2015). With significant numbers of employed congregation members nearing retirement, however, there is no space for complacency. Grant applications have been and will continue to be an important source of income.

We have reaped the benefit of strong **leadership** and congregational stability through recent vicars and leaders staying with us for 10+ years, as well as a willing and able community of lay members across the congregations, serving in a variety of roles both formally recognized (Wardens, Readers, Authorized Pastoral Assistants, Burbank Leadership Team) and more informal. Many lay people are involved in the planning and delivery of services and music. As both the statistics above and the timeline event (see Part 2, below) reveal, however, transitions between leaders can be times for significant anxiety, conflict, and even decline. A commitment to shared ministry and lay leader development to foster sustainability will be essential as we go forward.

## Part 2: Our History

*Understanding our past is important as we consider our future. On 16 January 2016 we held a well-attended **Timeline Event** to hear from one another and learn about the collective memory of our church's history. Further information was gathered one Sunday during a Burbank service. It was encouraging to see a number of lay leaders emerging. We wrote our memories on coloured post-it notes and attached them to a timeline of the history of Stranton. We grouped our memories under three headings: Red Letter Days (things to celebrate from the past); Blue Days (things that give us cause for regret or sadness); and Green Days (events in the past that give us hope for the future).*

We noted first the **long history** of the church. Christian worship has taken place on this site in Stranton since at least the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and probably back to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century and the time of St Hilda. The timeline of our church revealed the following highlights:

The importance of **personal events** to many people. Sometimes this was something to mark a life event. Other times members described times of personal renewal or growth in faith. We noted the importance of the personal in building the fellowship and missional working.

We were encouraged by comments about **working together** and a sense of fellowship or unity and also partnerships. Working together included support for each other in difficult times and pastoral care around family events. One partnership that featured several times was with mission teams from Nassau Bay Baptist Church.

The importance and significance of **leaders** to the community was expressed using all three colours: celebrating various leaders arriving, hope from the stability generated, but also a deep sense of loss when individual leaders have moved on or even talked about leaving.

The timeline gave an honest and realistic sense of loss and disagreements around the **times of vacancy**: the last two vacancies have been described as difficult.

The green notes revealed a sense of **emerging hope** around 2014–2016: this included a variety of subjects, young people, PMC, new leaders, Food for Thought (a local discipleship course), support for those who are ill. We were encouraged by the contribution that read “empowerment and encouragement of many, young and old, to develop gifts and calling”.

There is a history of **spiritual renewal**, especially seen in openness to teaching about the Holy Spirit and use of charismatic gifts. We felt there is continued need for the Holy Spirit’s leading and good discernment. The Steering Group wondered if we should emphasize the ministry of healing more than we do.

We noted a longstanding desire to **make disciples** including children, in Burbank, discipleship groups and to serve and engage with the community in the Parish. In this discussion we reflected that our “community” is fragmented, that in reality we are dealing with a series of multiple small villages, and this means it is a challenge to be outward looking. The church’s long-held priorities of Burbank and children and youth remain; for example, one note highlighted the ongoing involvement with the Ward Jackson CofE School in the Burbank area.

## Part 3: Our Congregation

*Understanding the perspectives of people across our congregations and with a range of involvement is important as we seek to know how our church is really perceived. Between December 2015 and February 2016, a team of six listeners conducted **Congregation Interviews** with 24 people associated with our church. The interviewees represented a cross-section of core, insider, and fringe members, as well as a cross-section of our different congregations (8.30, 10.30, Burbank, Messy Church). Each interviewee was asked the same 8 questions in the same order, with answers recorded anonymously by the interviewers. These responses were sent to an external PMC team, who read them closely and returned a thorough 15-page summary with further questions for reflection. The findings are summarized here.*

A number of positive themes came through loud and clear. These include several areas that we as a church actively seek to promote or display, three of which are discussed below. There are also a couple of themes it was helpful to have highlighted to us (“worship” and “family”, below), which are hugely significant, but which we might not previously have recognized as such.

Across all its congregations, Stranton seeks to be a **welcoming** and inclusive place, and responses suggest that people experience it as such. There may be ways in which we as a church could be more visible within our community, but once people are across the threshold they are warmly welcomed.

The various activities that reach and serve our local **community**, especially the uniformed brigades, children’s and youth groups, and community activities at St Matthew’s and Burbank/Ward Jackson, came through strongly as a significant part of our ministry. These are important “bridge communities”, through which several of the respondents came to join the church. The dual carriageway dividing Burbank from the other half of the parish is a potential barrier, yet is also overcome by the efforts of some people and ministries. Ongoing effort needs to be made to connect all parts of the church, and to raise the profile of activities in St Matthew’s and Burbank through good communication.

At Stranton our **worship**, and primarily our music, is incredibly important to us. This is largely positive: people describe having significant encounters with God through the diverse worship that takes place in Stranton. But there are potential pitfalls: because it is so important to us, music and worship is a key place where conflict emerges; there is also a danger that we become inwardly focussed on our worship, and do not seek or expect to encounter God in other ways.

Like any community, Stranton experiences **conflict**. Those who had arrived at church more recently, or who were not part of the core, were unlikely to have observed significant conflict. Where conflict had occurred, it seems to have been addressed in healthy ways, although avoidance and leaving the church have also been responses. In part, conflict in our church is tied up with the questions of worship (see above) and family (see below). Although we do not currently face significant conflict in our day-to-day church life, it is important to try to make our church an open and safe space where differences of opinion and grievances can be aired and discussed.

At several points the report uses the picture of **family** to summarize how our church is seen and operates, at one point wondering whether we see ourselves as “one big happy family”. Family is an important part of our self-identity, and has many possible benefits, including the difference and diversity – yet also relatedness and connectedness – of the different congregations, locations, and groups associated with Stranton Parish, and the way we relate to one another within each grouping (celebrating birthdays in Burbank and 10.30 would be one example). There are however dangers to this image, including (unintentionally) excluding people who do not have families, or who have negative experience of families; the family image might also suppress conflict, as people do not want to disturb the surface impression of a “happy family”. Through our new vision statement, another important image for our church has emerged: the tree that is rooted in God’s love, growing with Jesus, and branching out in the Spirit. While there are possible downsides to both of these images, they are helpful ways of viewing and assessing our church; they have in common a dependence on God, an openness to the world, and an organic responsiveness to the Spirit’s leading.

## Part 4: Our Community

*Understanding our community – Stranton Parish but also the wider town of Hartlepool – its past and its present, is important as we look at what, where, and who God might be calling us to. We have **gathered information and data** from a range of sources including local knowledge, the Church Urban Fund, 2011 Census, and Tees Valley Unlimited.*

### **Local History**

In mediaeval times, Stranton (“the town on the shore”) was a small village which covered a large area at the heart of what is now Hartlepool, excepting the Headland and Hart village, and was close to the sea. Visible from the hill on which it stands, parts of our church building date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Originally gifted by Robert de Brus to Guisborough Priory in 1129, the lands were sold to the Bishop of Durham in 1189. In the 1830s, thanks to the advent of the railways and exploitation of the Durham coal field, and through the entrepreneurship of Ralph Ward Jackson, rapid development of what would become West Hartlepool began from Stranton, with its industry and growing wealth attracting increasing numbers of workers (navvies to build the railways and docks), tradesmen, and new residents. From 371 in 1821 the population had grown to over 4,000 by 1851, with the census showing incomers settling from every corner of the British Isles as well as Scandinavia and Germany.

The two towns were amalgamated in 1967, although the separation that has its roots in this historical development can still be felt today as a division by some residents of the two areas of the town. In some ways the dual carriageway separating Stranton from Burbank creates a similar effect, with effort (or a vehicle!) required to go from one to the other. The church building still provides a central, visible landmark in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The strong maritime connection dating from the town’s beginnings continues today, with beaches and promenades, the emblem (Hart crest), the Napoleonic monkey hanging legend, the still-functioning Docks, the Marina, the Trincomalee and the newly established Navy museum and ships.

## Stranton Parish

Stranton Parish is located centrally within Hartlepool (see map below) and has a population of 8,537, of whom:

- 35% have no formal qualifications;
- 37% of children under 16, 30% of pensioners, and 27% of working-age adults are living in poverty;
- 40% of family households are lone parent households;
- between 66–70% put their religion as Christian in the 2011 Census (national figure 59%).

These and other figures from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) place Stranton as the 448<sup>th</sup> most deprived parish in the country (out of 12,599) – in other words it is in the most deprived 4% of parishes. Tees Valley data on IMDs on a council ward basis show that Hartlepool, including our parish, is a town of two halves with some very deprived and some more affluent pockets. One third of Hartlepool neighbourhoods are in the top 10% most deprived nationally; on this indicator the town ranks as 10<sup>th</sup> highest local authority area in the country.



## ***Community Interviews***

*Similar to the Congregation Interviews (Part 3 above), these involved asking 12 members of the local community 7 questions about the church and the area.*

1) People generally know where **the church building** is, something of its history, and that it is a target for vandalism; a quarter knew nothing about the church. 2) There are **connections to church** through occasional offices, Harvest services, and schools, though one third had never interacted with the church. 3) Half of the interviewees were unsure of or had not seen any **church involvement in the community**, though others recalled past events such as carols on the village green or were aware of the Foodbank or St Matthew's Community Centre. 4) A variety of **other groups** are active in the community, including a snooker club, the Stranton Club, pubs, Uniformed Brigades, other churches, family support (PATCH and PINS), dance, art, and music clubs.

5) There was concern among many that the **community feeling** has disappeared, and nostalgia for past events such as the Christmas tree and carol singing on the green, bonfire and fireworks, Signpost distributed in the community, local shops contributing a box of produce at Harvest time. Some still perceived a significant community feeling. 6) People's **concerns** centred around litter, dog fouling, traffic and road safety, drugs, and anti-social behaviour. 7) When asked how the church might **partner with the community**, there were some specific suggestions such as organizing garden parties on the green, helping the young and the old, and litter picking. Some commented that we already do help the community. One quarter of respondents suggested that we should advertise more, perhaps through leaflets, to let people know about our events and our faith.

## ***Potential Partners***

*As we look to the future, this report flags up a number of possible partners with whom we might work. These are "people of peace" (see Luke 10.6–7) who have shown welcome, hospitality, and openness to us. Although divided into four separate groups for simplicity, there is much overlap across these groups.*

Two priority areas for the church in recent decades have been the Burbank Estate and youth & children. Within the **Burbank Estate** we have significant current and potential partners at Ward Jackson CofE School, in the residents' association, in the retirement accommodation at Burbank Court and Schooner Court, and in the children's group Bridgebuilders. We currently have very few actual Burbank residents involved in the Burbank congregation. The poverty indicators for the parish as a whole are reflected at a higher level on the estate.

**Youth and children's work** operates across our three locations. Much of it caters for children from families who attend church, but various groups/congregations (Uniformed Brigades, Bridgebuilders, Messy Church) connect with families who are sympathetic to but not closely involved in church. Our staff team and Youth for Christ gap volunteers also connect with children and young people in schools within the parish and across the town. The high number of parents raising children alone represents a challenge we are not currently engaged with, although we do have lone parents in our congregations.

Another group of potential partners is focussed around **St Matthew's Community Centre**, with many community groups with widely varying levels of connection to the church using the building. These include the Burn Valley North Residents Association, local councillors, dance groups, sports groups, other (independent) churches, Eldon Grove Primary School. St Matthew's lies at the heart of the population centre in the West side of the parish, with a mix of more deprived and better off residential areas.

One final group with whom we might partner are the **asylum seeker and refugee community**. This connection really got going at the end of 2015; as of mid-2016 we regularly have 15–20 Iranians and others joining our 10.30 service. Most asylum seekers are accommodated in the Burbank Estate. We have begun to partner with local volunteers and charities to support English classes, by providing materials and a venue. Members of the church and staff team have undertaken informal advocacy and aid for individual families, both in paperwork and in supplying material needs for furniture etc.

## **A Prayer as We Look to the Future**

*God Almighty, Lord of the Harvest,  
who sends out workers into your harvest field:  
help us to know you and to know ourselves,  
that we might discern the people and places in our community  
to which you are calling us,  
go to them obediently,  
and proclaim the Kingdom of God expectantly;  
through Jesus Christ, Amen.*