

Beth Honey is Pioneer Minister in the Derwent Ward of Derby Diocese and Co-leader of a growing fresh expressions called Derwent Oak. Here



Christian community with branches that extend right across the local

An oak tree takes a long time to grow, and in many ways, it was an excellent choice for the name of a new expression of Christian community on an outer estate. Once it grows it is solid, stable, can last for centuries, but it takes time, and you need to give it space when you are establishing it.

Getting to know the area where you live and dwell is vital when growing a fresh expression of church. This is not project management, but disciple-making and listening to the Holy Spirit. What we have learned has been about getting under the skin of this place and getting to know our neighbours.

Our FX, 'Derwent Oak', began with a simple plan (yes, strategy is still permitted in the world of organic church life!) to see five new disciples in our initial five years, and to see the multiplication of small communities beginning to worship in ways that are natural to life here, and led by people who know the place, and could make a significant change.

What has emerged since we began in 2014 has surprised us, challenged us, tested us and brought new people to be part of Derwent Oak who have taken us beyond these initial thoughts so that we have had to learn to let go of first dreams and give them over to God. He has consistently taught us that he is already here, in the beauty and complexity of this community of faith that he is growing.

We formed partnerships with other church and community groups on both food and mental health projects. We are now working on community gardening and a community transport extension.

We meet to pray in a church building, as well as outdoors and in homes.

We have a central weekly gathering, which in pre-covid times met in homes, and has come to be known as 'Together'. Its roots were simply in sharing a cuppa, and this led to shared cooking and eating, and then into bread and wine roughly once a month. We shared stories, reflections, prayers, and a time of planning events for our wider community to let them know that we are all loved. 'You are loved' has become our central and simple summary of the good news.



We have hosted bonfires, art galleries, a gig in the garden, pop up art, prayer tents, a Derwent day out across venues (that this year will be the first Derwent community event post-covid), summer youth schemes in partnership with Aspire and Derbyshire Cricket, fun days, Christmas plays and outdoor events, and through lockdown, the garden provided a focus of prayer through online requests for candles to be lit.

As Derwent Oak became more well known locally, we found that those who had had some experience of church life in the past 'came out of the woodwork' and asked us a little more about church.

We decided to experiment with meeting on Sundays once a month, which started just before lockdown, and hope to restart later in 2021, and this is led from the original group from Derwent Oak, with lay pioneer support.

We are also now part of a wider fellowship of churches in this part of the city, including a church plant, a thriving Parish Church and another fresh expression community. We want to take our place in the mixed ecology of what is growing and to give and receive as part of that.

Through the most recent lockdown, another new group based around offering some mental health sessions online was formed, which is now growing into an online community that may well develop into an in-person community.

Along with Aspire, we also offer Walking Buddies - local residents offer to meet and walk with people as they begin to beat anxiety in emerging from lockdown. This new group is connecting to the Derby Diocese Greenhouse and part of that learning community across the county.

Although there's been growth, the pandemic has hit the FX and local communities here very hard. Almost symbolically, at the start of lockdown, we had tree surgeons working in our garden and they decimated the trees - for the health of the trees and the area, but it made us feel exposed. It felt like something like that had happened to all our work.

Now in the seventh year of the life of this fresh expression we are at the point of hosting and enabling and sharing the creative fruit of Derwent Oak, and tending and tidying unexpected growth.

Perhaps it is possible to be strong and vulnerable at the same time, to both need support and to be able to offer resource, to be in the place of death and growth at once. That is one of the key lessons that Derwent Oak continues to teach me as a leader. And, to always ask for help before you offer it in any community.

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