



Gareth Hill has been a Methodist minister since 1999 and before that was a newspaper journalist. Much of his ministry has been involved in Fresh Expressions and in the early 2000s he started the Surfers Church in Polzeath, Cornwall, known as Tubestation. In 2015 he moved to Romsey, with perfect timing for a new project...



THE STORY begins...

'My welcome service was also the reopening of the church after a very significant refurbishment of the worship area. This meant that for the first time the church could use this space in a much more creative way. It was already a church that knew they weren't doing enough and they wanted to work out how to do more. So we went through a process, as a church, to look at what our ministry should be about and, as a result of that process, we hit on something we called the "Four Ws": Welcome, Worship, Wonder – in other words, a sense of engaging people so that they connected with God – and Wider, which was the evangelism element.'

New activities such as Friday morning coffee and cakes, and practical changes such as new chairs, sofas in the worship area and good-quality coffee, all helped draw people in, as did the church's continuing conversation around the questions, 'How do we welcome well? How do we ensure that people coming in really feel this is their place?' Then, after a while, Gareth discovered that Andrew Roberts was writing Holy Habits.

It was already a church that... wanted to work out how to do more.

'Andrew and I have known each other for a long time, since we worked together in Fresh Expressions. I had a conversation with him just as they were at the point of developing workbooks for each of the habits. They were working on it in the Birmingham Methodist Circuit and in a couple of other circuits, but Andrew didn't have a single church that was going to run the whole programme through, so we agreed to do that, to become a test church to trial the resources and bring Holy Habits in as part of the Four Ws plan.'

'I was pretty convinced that it would work; I was pretty convinced that God was in it. It's a really interesting church and with Holy Habits there was a sense of unity that it was something we could pick up and run with.'

Gareth invited Andrew to come and talk to the congregation about Holy Habits, and Nick and Marion Carter, who are both local preachers, agreed to take on the running of the entire two-year project. They spent



Friday coffee stop



The baking with apples challenge

time working out how best to tackle the habits and the order in which to work. But it wasn't all about work:

'Importantly, we decided in the early stages that we would try to have fun with it as well, so we gave people

a challenge for each habit. For Eating Together, the challenge was to bake something with apples and give it away. So we had people baking – apple muffins, apple pies, apple cake – and taking it into work and beginning conversations: “Why are you doing this?” “Oh, it’s something we’re doing at church.” So it was a really good way to help people in the congregation understand something about churchgoing beyond the Sunday morning service.

‘We had a launch for every habit, so we would have a Saturday evening with food and conversation, and a brief explanation of what the habit was, and they would all link up in different ways. We could easily get 50+ to these Saturday events, so well over half the congregation.



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Romsey Methodist Church... never knowingly underfed!

‘For every habit we would have at least one month of linked Sunday preaching, which meant that the services for a whole month were built around the particular habit, and in all the other services there would be a Holy Habits reminder.

‘It was great – really good – and people began to have conversations, not necessarily earth-shattering ones, but just general conversations around the challenges or the Holy Habits book – “Did you take a cake into work? What happened when you did that?” or “What did you think of such and such a chapter?”

Within a very short time there was a different feel to Sunday worship... new people began to come.

Gareth has seen the impact of Holy Habits in the deepening of individual discipleship in his congregation:

‘People are now more confident in having a conversation about faith and their beliefs. We’ve launched at least one more house group as a result of Holy Habits and people generally have become more serious about their faith and discipleship... I think what’s it’s done is help people realise that the skills they already had were good to put at the service of the gospel. And then there are fringe people who have become much more engaged in the life of the church, more regular at worship and willing to volunteer to do things in a way that they would not have been before.



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Some members of the new house group that launched during Holy Habits

It was perfect. It was just at the right moment.

But what has been the lasting legacy of Holy Habits in Gareth’s church?

‘We are now practiced and very comfortable with doing launch events, so we won’t lose the skills we’ve gained there. We have no evening worship in the church, so we’ve now launched a series of short “pop-up” Sunday evenings, so maybe four weeks where we’ll tackle an issue on a Sunday evening with a Bible study and a shared tea. We are working again on house groups, to see if we can increase their number. So Holy Habits continues to inform the life of the church, and one of our members who is a web designer has created a triptych of the Acts 2 verses, which is on the wall as a permanent reminder of Holy Habits. **HH**

We hope you’ve enjoyed this HOLY HABITS story!