



THE GRA:CE PROJECT

Why GRA:CE?

- **WHAT DOES CHURCH GROWTH LOOK LIKE IN REAL LIFE?**
- DOES SOCIAL ACTION HELP CHURCHES GROW? IF SO, HOW?
- **DO PEOPLE GROW AS DISCIPLES AS THEY CONNECT WITH OTHERS THROUGH SOCIAL ACTION?**

The GRA:CE project (which stands for Growth, Relationships and Action in the Church of England) is exploring these critical questions.

This 3-year research project aims to better understand how church growth, social action and discipleship are connected in practice in Church of England parishes across the country. The aim is that the GRA:CE project will provide an enriching combination of learning, challenge, and encouragement for the church, as well as providing robust and insightful evidence about its activities to wider audiences.

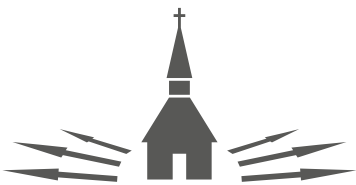


Progress so far

Over the past 18 months, we have conducted qualitative fieldwork in over 65 case study parishes. This has included interviewing over 300 individuals, including clergy, congregation members, volunteers and stakeholders from the wider community, as well as observing social action projects. The parishes have been chosen to represent the theological, demographic and geographic diversity of the Church of England, including at least one from every diocese in England.

What have we learned?

Social action can lead to people building meaningful relationships with the local church who previously did not interact with it, and there is a diversity of ways in which churches are engaging with and facilitating this. The research has explored both the challenges and opportunities of growth and discipleship through social action.



Participation in church life (and in particular, discipleship) can be a challenge for those on the margins of society. The research has shown how this challenge is being tackled in a variety of contexts and how it can lead to church growth.



Insights from the ground

St Michael's Church is the parish church of the growing industrial town of Sittingbourne in Kent. It is an imposing, historic building on the high street, which is Grade 2 listed but not, as the church community acknowledge, naturally inviting from the outside. The parish is ranked in the most deprived 20% of parishes nationally. A couple of years ago, after a succession of changes in leadership, the church recognised a need to develop a greater sense of community.

Through listening to local people, both inside and outside of the church, they found that **loneliness and isolation was a significant problem for people in the town**. They recognised that the midweek communion was a small congregation of about 10-15 people who gathered for coffee and fellowship after the service. In 2018, the church decided to develop this informal coffee slot into a Place of Welcome, opening the church doors and offering free hot drinks, soup and toast for anyone who would like it, whether or not they attend the service beforehand. **This has grown so much that the church has had to buy extra tables and chairs to accommodate everybody who comes; an average of 50 people come each week**. It is a buzzing hub of conversation, where friendships have developed and St Michael's has become known as somewhere welcoming where people can come for a hot drink and a chat, whatever their circumstances.

The parish is also part of the Ignite project, which funds mission enablers to build community, encourage discipleship and establish new café-style congregations across Canterbury diocese. There are two part-time mission enablers working at St Michael's, **getting to know people, beginning conversations about faith and growing relationships within the wider community**, which will form the basis of the new Thursday night Ignite congregation which will be planted later this year. **(continued overleaf)**



Insights from the ground (continued)

Paid staff and volunteers from the church have also responded to the increasing number of rough sleepers in the town centre by opening up the church hall with the Ignite team one morning a week offering a drop-in for homeless and vulnerable people. They offer hot showers, clean clothes, pastoral support and a warm welcome to anyone who needs it.

What's next?

The next stage of the GRA:CE research is a quantitative survey of a larger number of parishes, which will be carried out in early 2020. This will test some of what we have learned from the qualitative research and gather further data on congregations' understanding of social action, discipleship and growth. We will explore what church members are doing, the effect this has on their own faith journey, and the extent to which social action helps develop meaningful connections with the wider community and share the Christian faith.

The final report will be published in Autumn 2020. In the meantime, you can find more information, blogs and ongoing stories from the research on both the Theos and CUF websites.

Find out more at: www.cuf.org.uk/grace

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