

Neighbouring as the Church

Rowan Williams states that: 'One of the simplest possible definitions of the Church is to say that it is meant to be the place where Jesus is visibly active in the world.'

To be 'visibly active' means that we have to move outside our church walls and fall in love with our neighbourhood. We have a wonderful and unique opportunity as the church to flesh out the kingdom right where we are, and to bear witness to the life and love of Jesus.



For us at our little Anglican Church in Naenae, Lower Hutt, we firmly believe that the neighbourhood we are located in is not arbitrary or coincidental. It is the whenua God has planted us in, the geographical community into which we have been called to love and serve. How we grow and develop as the church is shaped by the context we find ourselves in. In practice, this has meant that we have thrown ourselves into our local community. We have walked and prayed the streets. We have talked with locals, joined community groups and attended community meetings to hear the voices of our neighbours and understand what is on their hearts. We have immersed ourselves in local issues and prayerfully asked Jesus, "how do you want us to respond?" "What does being good neighbours here in Naenae look like?" And God has been, as always, faithful, leading and guiding us in what to put our hands to.

We have had several very clear 'God moments' where we have sensed God's invitation to a particular kaupapa. One of these was back in 2017 when, during intercessions, one member of our congregation, out of the blue heard the Spirit saying, "camp on the Kāinga Ora land across the road in protest against the Government's lack of proactivity around building houses." So we did. On Palm Sunday, April 2017, we pitched our tents and ran a church camp with a bit of a difference. Armed with placards, sitting around the bonfire, we made a statement that we were upset at people in our neighbourhood living in cars and garages. It was an incredible time which bore witness to a God that cares, and still now, continues to bear fruit in the life of our church.

A short while later, whilst out prayer walking, we heard God's invitation to start a drop-in centre for locals who were homeless, disconnected from community or suffering from mental health challenges. Some from our congregation had previously attended community meetings hearing locals complain about the 'bad element' in Naenae and plotting how to move them on elsewhere. We heard Jesus' call for us to be good neighbours to the last and the least, which birthed Te Puna Manawa, our humble wellspring in the heart of the neighbourhood.

Most recently, we were approached by the co-ordinator of the Living Wage Movement, asking us to be part of their campaign advocating for fairer pay for workers at Resene Paints, which is 200 metres from our church and one of the biggest employers in our neighbourhood. We are now known to be the church who cares about local issues of injustice, so once again we have the opportunity to be good neighbours in Naenae. Since then, we have met with numerous Resene workers; people we never knew before. We have heard their stories and started to build relationships with them. They have asked for support and we can offer it. We were privileged to be asked to speak at one meeting about why we, as the church, would want to get behind a living wage campaign.

What a great opportunity to stand in solidarity with our neighbours and speak of a loving God who cares about justice! At that public meeting we shared a story of one person in our parish, who just 2 weeks earlier, had felt the Spirit prompt her to pray for the workers at Resene. She had lived in Naenae for many years and had never prayed for Resene before. She knew nothing of the campaign at that stage, but her prayers happened to be on the very same day that we were negotiating a meeting time with the Resene workers and the church.

Lastly, but very importantly, for us to be good neighbours means more than simply being involved in and supportive of local issues. We endeavour to keep Jesus in the centre and bathe all our neighbourly activity in prayer and attentive listening to how the Spirit is calling us to be faithful as the people of God in this wonderful rohe. We try to follow the advice of St Peter who reminds us to always be ready to explain the hope we have as God's people to anyone who asks. We invite extras to sit around our dinner tables and we try to look for every opportunity to offer the hospitality of Jesus, whatever that looks like.