THRIVING CHURCH LAB

EPISODE 4 | Creating Spaces of Belonging and Growth

Host Hannah Sanderson

Guests Pete, Lorna and Sarah — THRIVE Stewarton

Introduction & Icebreaker

Hannah Sanderson:

Hi and welcome to the Thriving Church Lab. Back again in my lab coat here in sunny Irvine today. And this is a podcast which talks about the how. How do we build cultures of growing in faith? How do we build places and spaces that are full of life and feel really vital? And we have some fantastic guests today. We have Pete, Lorna, and Sarah. Hey!

Pete, Lorna, & Sarah:

Hey! Hello!

Hannah Sanderson:

How are you doing?

Guest:

Tired after holiday club this morning.

Guest:

Yes, the first morning.

Hannah Sanderson:

Tired, but he's fizzing with energy.

Guest:

Exactly.

Guest:

But sunshine makes it.

Hannah Sanderson:

It does. And it is super sunny. If you are listening or watching this and it's the middle of winter, we're sorry, but it was really hot.

So, first thing in our lab of experiments, have any of you tried something new and it did not go as you were expecting? Ooh, should we start with you, Lorna?

Lorna:

Yes. So, I tried to crochet. I thought, "I can make a blanket, let's start with that." So, we'll start with the square. But unfortunately, it turned into a triangle. No matter how many times I tried, it always came out as a triangle.

Hannah Sanderson:

So, a bikini, maybe a very small bikini?

Lorna:

So, I decided to...

Hannah Sanderson:

You gave it a try.

Lorna:

Yeah, put that away and try something else. So now welding!

Hannah Sanderson:

I'm a great welder! Exactly, you just found your passion.

Lorna:

Yeah.

Hannah Sanderson:

Pete, what about you? Trying new things left, right, and center?

Pete:

Yeah, when I was a teenager, me and the mates, we were invited to do some paragliding. Now paragliding, you might think, "What's paragliding?" Well, I thought it was one of those glider things and they took you up in a glider and it was all quite safe. And so we turned up at the site, and actually paragliding is jumping off a mountain with a parachute.

Hannah Sanderson:

Oh!

Pete:

And so I got there and I was harnessed with a thing, and I wasn't really sure about this. And he said, "Just pull the green cord, don't pull the red cord." And I went up and up and up and up. And I thought, "Now what was it? Pull the green cord? Pull the red cord? Don't pull the green

cord?" I pulled the wrong cord and I went boom down onto the ground. I never paraglided again.

Hannah Sanderson:

Were you okay? Was this horrific injuries?

Pete:

I was absolutely fine.

Hannah Sanderson:

Luckily, you're bouncy.

Pete:

I'm bouncy.

Hannah Sanderson:

My goodness, that's crazy. I was on the edge of my seat there, I didn't know where that was going to go.

Well, thank you very much for sharing. So, enough about labs. We'll go to the other two words. We'll go to the thriving church bit. So first of all, why don't you tell us where in the world would we normally find you guys? Where are you from?

Guest:

So, we are based in the small town of Stewarton, just outside Kilmarnock, and that's where I am.

Hannah Sanderson:

And what do you love about Stewarton?

Guest:

Oh, Stewarton is just such a lovely community. People move from all the big cities to come and live in Stewarton. So we get lots of new families coming in, which is great. It is a growing town. I think it's growing 7% every year when the normal growth rates are much lower than that. So it is a really thriving town. It's growing really quickly. So yeah, great town.

Hannah Sanderson:

Fantastic! Fantastic. And so you're all based in Stewarton?

Pete, Lorna, & Sarah:

Yeah, yep.

Hannah Sanderson:

Nice, nice. And have you come from a church setting? Why are you here? Tell me about you, Pete. Let me go to you.

Pete:

Yeah, I was brought up in the church since I was a nipper. My parents were from Glasgow and they have been churchgoers; they were Christians. And so the thing that they did was they just looked for a church for community. And so I was brought up in the church. I think they tried another church which was a bit dull and boring, and this one was the best option. And so I got an opportunity to get involved in different things from Sunday school, youth, and youth fellowship. You get given things to do and experience, which was good. So I've got a good feel for church over the decades and different things that we've done in our community. And yeah, I love my local church.

Hannah Sanderson:

And what is your local church?

Pete:

So we're in John Knox Town and it's a very community-focused church, always has been, doing different things. But like everybody everywhere, more recent challenges have proved difficult in terms of connecting and keeping people in church. How we serve our community has changed in recent years. So yeah, it's been good.

The Origin of "Stewarton Thrive"

Hannah Sanderson:

So I believe I'm right in saying that you guys are all connected with something called Stewarton Thrive, is that right? It's not a garden center! Why don't you tell me what it is, Lorna? What is Stewarton Thrive?

Lorna:

I think Peter is best answering this question.

Pete:

Yeah. So Thrive is a missional community, a missional project, call it what you will. And I can tell you a wee bit about the story of how Thrive came into being.

Hannah Sanderson:

Yes, please. That is what I'd like to hear.

Pete:

So about five years ago, the local presbytery—the former Kilmarnock presbytery—were looking for missional projects, church planting, new initiatives to connect with communities and disciple people. I think every congregation probably submitted some kind of proposal or other. And so the minister said, "Oh, we need to get a few people together, we need to think of something that we want to submit." And so we were looking around the church and the church

had invested quite heavily in young people. There were youth workers, a lot of youth programs, youth outreach, and a lot going on for older people, clubs, and organizations. But there wasn't much happening for the in-betweenies: the kind of 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s.

Hannah Sanderson:

Like proper adults!

Pete:

Indeed, adults. And so we very quickly put something together and submitted it. We thought, "Oh well, that's that." And we were notified that we were one of six successful projects to receive funding and training for mission work.

And so all of a sudden, oh my goodness, what are we going to do? So we thought we need to get some 20s to 40s on the team to try and make this happen. We had some new Christians in church—Sarah and Lee, and they can tell you about their story—as well as one or two people who were kind of on the fringes, who were a bit fed up with church, who perhaps had a bit of a holy dissatisfaction with the way things were, where we weren't connecting and meeting the needs, discipling and supporting that generation.

So we pulled that team together, and then we went off on some training. We did the Forge Scotland Pioneer course together. I'd actually done it a couple of years before. I just sensed I wanted to do it, and so we were meeting up, discussing: What does this mean in our context? What does all this learning about mission mean for us?

And so that was really the start, and that's how we got going. That's how we developed that initial team and thought about what it was going to look like connecting and supporting 20s to 40s where we were.

Listening to the Community

Hannah Sanderson:

So that's really interesting because that almost feels like a kind of blank page. You sat round a table and said, "What do we want to do?" Which I think quite a lot of contexts don't have a blank page; they're always coming from a space where something has existed before. So Sarah, on that course, how did the ideas start to come together about what you wanted to do as a team?

Sarah:

I think the Forge Pioneer course was great because they were very clear: you're not going to start a worshipping community straight away, that could be years down the line. Sometimes it's not about doing any activity at the start at all, it is just about listening to community. So going out there, meeting people.

Like Peter said, we had just come out of the pandemic. So when we did go and meet people and met with stakeholders and GPs, mental health was just so low. People wanted to get back to

normal, but they couldn't really see what that was going to look like. And so the Forge Pioneer course was really helpful in saying: just listen to your community, see what the needs are.

So we did that for about a year, I think. We just spent time listening to people. We sent out community surveys, and we got feedback. A really high percentage—more than 60%—rated their mental health as fair to poor, and it was affecting their daily life.

So in some ways, it was an interesting time to start a mission project, but unique opportunities presented themselves and helped us focus in on where we might connect people and support them in this wellbeing crisis that people were facing.

Hannah Sanderson:

Can I ask a "how" there? I love the fact that you mentioned surveys, thank you very much, that's a total action point. But when you say you go out and you listen, for some people they might be thinking: what do you mean? Are you seeing people in a cafe and going over to them and being like, "Hey, sorry to interrupt, I'm..." How do you get to a place where you can ask a question like that?

Sarah:

Yeah, well that was really hard because people weren't out and about at that time. So a lot of it was social media. Pete had emailed quite a few professionals to say, "Can we just meet for a chat?" So Peter would go and meet them face-to-face and have those conversations. We did quite a lot of that.

Hannah Sanderson:

How did they know that you weren't a total bam? Why did they meet you?

Pete:

It's interesting because when we started to do the surveys on social media, for example, we thought: okay, this could be our soft launch, seeking the views of people. And people were commenting, "What's this Thrive thing? Is this a new gym that's opening in town?" And so we had to message people and say, "Oh no, we're part of the local church, we're just interested in seeing how people are doing after the pandemic."

"Oh, the church! Oh yeah, that's fine, no problem." So it's interesting, that reaction when we explained a bit more about where we were coming from.

But yeah, we phoned up and wrote to the local counselors, GPs, mental health practitioners, health visitors, social work. We just basically said: we know people are struggling, tell us about what's going on here. What are you seeing? We asked some questions like, "If you had a check for a million pounds, how would you spend it?" We just wanted to get a better feel for the needs, aspirations, gaps where we could come alongside, where we could maybe try some new things.

So we realized that we had to listen. Now, some people would say, "Our church has been here for 200 years, we know our community." Well, you know what you know, and you don't know what you don't know.

And so it proved invaluable, really. We built some great relationships with stakeholders, and since then we've been able to go back to them and tell them what our thoughts have been. We're running some activities, perhaps they've referred people or signposted them. It's lovely to see some of the activities that we're running where people have been signposted along, and now they're going back to the GP and saying, "Great place, lovely welcome, I feel so relaxed there, I feel this is helping my wellbeing."

And then the GP is sending more people, giving us statements of support for funding applications. So because we listened at the beginning, we weren't arrogant to think, "Oh, we know everything, we're going to do this and that and the next thing." We just took time to listen, and we've learned that lesson and we're continually listening. We're listening all the time to stakeholders and to people who come along.

Really for Thrive, there's been no 10-year master plan. This is all about listening, responding, and discerning where God is maybe leading us into.

Discernment and Practical Action

Hannah Sanderson:

I'm going to ask a "how" question. You used an interesting word there: you used the word discerning. I love that word. I know what I think it means, you know what you think it means. But when you say, "We listen and then we discern where we want to go," is there any way you could put words around how that works? You've got all this information from all your listening, all these different voices in your head. How do you know which of those to put together, which of those to clump, and if it's pointing in a direction?

Pete:

Yeah, so we were quite restricted actually at that time because remember, starting to come out of the lockdowns, churches had been closed, support groups had been closed, you couldn't even go to the hairdresser, schools had been closed. So there wasn't a great deal that we could do. But as we looked at the data and heard from these stakeholders, we realized that people did want to make a move to get back to some kind of community, but they were very cautious about it.

And so we decided, as we prayed about it together in that team, that we could do things outdoors. People had actually expressed a desire to be outdoors after being cooped up indoors, and they felt that was safe. We weren't going to be inviting people into a small room with people they didn't know.

And so we started a walking group! We started a walk-and-talk session, and we still run it every Friday morning. It didn't need a team, it didn't need a building, it didn't need lots of money. So it's something we could start with.

As we engaged with the people who decided to come along to that, we were getting to know them, they were getting to know us, and we were listening to them: "What else could help your wellbeing? What are your other interests?"

And again, just a slight cautiousness about coming inside, and so that's how our growing project started—growing veg for the local food larder. And again, it's outside.

Hannah Sanderson:

So you're also shaped by the realistic factors around you as well. You're taking on board everything that everybody's saying, but if they're asking for unicorns and candy floss, you can't—well, you could get them candy floss, but maybe not the unicorns! So your discernment process is listening to the people, listening to God, but also then looking at the reality of where you are. Has that reflection practice continued past that first year?

Sarah:

Absolutely. I think that kind of molding, growing, and discerning happens through everything we're doing. Peter is very good at, when people come along to the walk, asking, "Where do you want to walk today?" So depending on who our group is, we might go further or shorter, and it helps people just really take ownership.

All of our groups as well, it's about doing something. It's much easier to have a conversation with somebody if you're digging in soil or walking along in the community, rather than that intense across-the-table-with-a-microphone setup!

So yeah, like Peter said, we just have those conversations while walking alongside people, and that just continued to grow into what our family work is now. Like we said, people move to the town and they don't know their neighbors, they don't have any family in the area. They've moved to Stewarton because it's a nice place to raise children, but they may be working in Glasgow. So dad's away at work, and all of a sudden mom's here with a baby.

We were hearing quite a lot of that early on from moms. So just having a chat with them: "What would that look like? What would help you and your wellbeing?" And it was again that community, meeting with other people. And so that started Baby Beats, which was lovely. So again, it's the same process: it's that molding, growing, listening, and discerning before we start anything.

Hannah Sanderson:

What is Baby Beats?

Sarah:

Baby Beats is a music and song group. We're not reinventing the wheel here, there's loads of them about. We're not going to say that Baby Beats is a brand new sub- atomical group! It's just a space where we invite moms and dads in—majority moms. It's just on mats. Peter was lucky to get funding to get all the pews out, so our sanctuary has a lovely, great big space. So we invite moms and wee ones in, and it's just music, toddler time, songs, singing. And then afterwards, there's a cup of tea and a cake, which is so nice.

We always find from week one when moms come along, they're usually shooting out the door after the class, and then by week nine they are staying as long as they like. We are sweeping up round about them because they're so keen to stay! But it's lovely, and you see that real community coming together. It's just noticing people: when people are late, making sure you recognize that they've maybe tried a bit extra hard to get there that day. If somebody's telling you a story, trying to remember that and following up next week. Really simple things can just make such a difference to these parents early on.

Hannah Sanderson:

That's great. You've named some really important things there about how you help people feel connected and belong: trying as best you can to remember names, catching up on something they told you about a couple of weeks ago. And also noticing—noticing if somebody is more flustered today than they were. That is part of that discernment process as well: "I've noticed this, and I'm going to ask God should I raise it or just pray about it."

Weaving Faith into Community

Hannah Sanderson:

So I'm interested. You've got the walking group, the gardening group, and Baby Beats. Where in the process do you go, "Aha, we're actually all about Jesus"? Is it from the beginning? Do you seep it in? How is Jesus woven into the friendship and belonging?

Pete:

Yeah. So, we've been working in the growing project, and winter's coming along and people are getting a bit chilly: "Oh, I think we can go inside for a cup of tea." So that's what we did. We invited them in and started having tea and coffee, just that time around the table to chat.

Other people from the walk were coming in, and so in a very small space, we suddenly had 30-odd people in this tiny little space. You would see people come to the door and turn back because it was too intimidating, too busy, too noisy.

So we got a little bit of funding from the Community Health and Wellbeing Fund to do up the next hall, and we started doing lunches in there. This kind of cafe was developing, and something called Renew Wellbeing caught our eye. We were drawn to this model, which is based around presence, prayer, and partnership.

Presence: We've got a space in the community where people can come together into a cafe environment.

Prayer: There's a prayer corner or prayer space which people can access anytime. There are resources there, as well as led times of meditation at the beginning and the end of the session—reading from a Psalm, a little bit of prayer, something like that.

And we were finding people really were engaging with this stuff. That was a starting point for conversations about faith, the Bible, prayer: "Have you prayed? Do you pray? Would you like to try praying?"

And as I say, it was filling up. So we went to the council and said, "We've got this space, and the community's coming in and finding a safe space. Could we get some funding to take the pews out, level the floor, and form a cafe space?" We got a grant, and that's what we did. So we now have this larger, multi-purpose space where we can do Baby Beats and our other activities.

As well as having fixed moments in a session like the prayer corner, we have a meditation time on the walk. Halfway around the walk, we stop on a bridge for people to catch up and get their breath back. And we take 60 seconds and say, "Okay, just focus in on your breathing and slow it down, get your breath back. What can you see? What do you notice as you look around? What can you hear?" Usually, it's the birds singing, the stream under the bridge, and people just take time to slow down in what can be a busy life.

And then we just pray: "God, thank you for caring for the beauty around us. Thank you that despite the gray clouds, we're grateful for the small things that we have here in Stewarton and in our lives. Amen." And that's it.

That's a way in which we can just bring that into people's lives and encourage them to think about spiritual practices that can help their wellbeing.

Hannah Sanderson:

So it's really open from the beginning. You guys are like, "This is a church thing," but approaching it in a much more informal way. From the beginning: "If you're engaging with this, you're engaging with us, and we are Christians."

Pete:

Absolutely. This is a church building, we're Christians, we are putting on these activities for you. You'll get people who come into Baby Beats or other activities: "Wow, is this still a church? Oh, love what you've done with the place!"

And yeah, this is where we worship on Sunday for Sunday worship. It's not down the road, around the corner, down the lane—it's right here, they've come in the door. So it's not that big an ask or a big deal to come along on a Sunday.

Again, people will maybe say, "Oh, why are you helping me fill in this form?" or "Why are you being so kind?" They know there's something, and they're inquisitive and curious. I love that

verse in 1 Peter that says, "Always be prepared to give an answer for the hope in your heart, and you do it with gentleness and respect." It's amazing how people ask questions. As we build trust and earn respect, that's when we can share a wee bit more about our faith.

That's not just an "if it happens" kind of thing; we're very intentional about having that in our minds. We talk a lot about wellbeing today. As Christians, we also talk about the well-being!

Hannah Sanderson:

Clever Pete, come on!

Pete:

We're trying to show people by modeling it that there's more to wellbeing than just what you can see in the here and now. We believe there's a spiritual side to life—body, mind, and soul; physical, mental, emotional, spiritual health needs. We're holistic people, we need to look after every aspect of our bodies, and that includes the spiritual side. People are open to exploring that.

Lorna's Journey: From Attendee to Team Leader

Hannah Sanderson:

And you've built these relationships of trust, so it's not coming wham out of the blue.

Lorna, between two thorns there, sorry that we've left you for so long! Tell me, how have you got involved with this ragtag bunch?

Lorna:

I was actually coming along with my daughter to one of the groups, to Thrive Tots. I connected with Sarah, chatting with her each week. I was going through a bit of a tough time, and Sarah was there and just really helped me with it. Then we just had this moment of divine intervention.

Sarah asked me if I would like to run one of the Baby Beats classes. And I was like, "Yeah, that sounds great!" I was a stay-at-home mom, I wasn't working, I had time. My daughter had just started nursery, so I was like, "Yeah, this is perfect timing."

So I started doing that, and it's just grown from there. I volunteered to take one of the Baby Beats classes on a Friday, then Our Journey Together on a Friday afternoon, which is an after-school group for ASN children. I volunteer for that, and we've also just taken over the toddler group for the church as well, so I take that on a Tuesday too.

Hannah Sanderson:

Lady, she's running the show!

Lorna:

Yeah! So it's just all happened as it's supposed to. I feel like I've been where I was supposed to be. And now you bring the whole family!

Sarah:

Yeah, that's it.

Lorna:

I never went to church before. I came to Thrive Tots because I thought my daughter would enjoy it, which she absolutely loves. And now the church is her second home, really. If she's not going to church or nursery, she's not happy!

My daughter, who's 15, volunteers on a Friday afternoon at Our Journey Together, and my husband does as well. Then just in the new year, we started going to church, too. That wasn't something that we had done for a long time. We had tried before when my older children were younger, but it just never really fitted. But here it just feels like a home away from home, like our second home really for the whole family.

Hannah Sanderson:

So do you think you would be able to put some words around for us like how faith has been interwoven into that? Because that sounds like you're doing a load—brilliant, you can come around and help me with loads of stuff after! Has that gone hand-in-hand with a faith exploration?

Lorna:

Yeah. I think for myself, I've always had some sort of faith, but it's not been a huge thing in my life. I went to church when I was younger with my parents, but it wasn't a major thing. When my children were younger, we tried to go to church, but it just never worked out, so I never really thought about it for probably about 20 years.

Then being in the church building going to Tots, skipping around with ribbons to a children's song, there are things on the wall about Jesus, the church, and what they're doing. It's those wee subliminal messages that are there, and that made me curious about my own faith and the church.

And then obviously, the timing with Sarah just seemed like it was meant to be. I knew that's where I was supposed to be, that's where God had put me at that time. So I think that's how my faith has grown through Thrive as well. Tell us a wee bit about Stuart [Lorna's husband] and church, because he wasn't that happy at first, was he?

Lorna:

No! I had asked Stuart to take our daughter to Tots one day because I couldn't manage.

Hannah Sanderson:

Stuart is your husband! Just to clarify, not just a random man walking down the street!

Lorna:

Yes, Stuart is my husband! I asked him if he could take her, and I could see the look on his face. He was like, "I don't know..." But he went and took her, and I think it's helped him in his faith as well, to develop his faith.

So my husband and I are on this journey together, which makes a huge difference because the conversations are different now. We go to church on a Sunday, and we'll talk about the service and what we thought that meant. He's there on a Friday, and we do this together. It has become a family journey with our faith.

For me, I didn't have a lot of faith, but now I feel that I can call myself a Christian, and I'm looking forward to the next step.

Hannah Sanderson:

Welcome to the family!

Empowering Volunteers & Raising Leaders

Hannah Sanderson:

A couple of things I'd like to pick up on. You said that your relationship with Sarah and her asking you to join the team was really important. Sarah, coming to you from your side of that conversation: what helps people's faith develop when they start a bit of volunteering or service? What's going on there on the faith side of things?

Sarah:

A lot of the time, people are really curious. For parents coming in, sometimes they're shocked to even meet a Christian! They'll say, "But you're so normal!" And you go, "Well, wait till you get to know me!" They've got this image of what they think a Christian is, so breaking down those barriers is just so helpful early on.

In all of the activities we do, we always have prayer embedded in it. Before we start, we'll have a team prayer together. That can be, "Would anybody like prayer for anything in particular today?" Maybe we know that a parent struggled with something in particular and we'll pray on that. We just pray that the Holy Spirit will come during the sessions, be present, and help uplift us and our families. We're putting the Holy Spirit and God's involvement central to what we're doing.

That's why people come in and feel loved when they enter. We want to share that through the way we welcome people, the way we make them feel a sense of belonging— like this is their

space. They're not just turning up for a class; they're here for themselves, for their wee ones, for each other, and we're there for them.

The prayer at the start is really good, getting the team involved in that. And if we feel somebody's had a particularly hard conversation with a parent at the end, we'll pray as a team. Or if we feel we've built up a relationship with that person, we can ask them, "Would you like us to pray for you?" Or we'll say, "We've got a few people in the team that would like to pray for you afterwards when you go away, is that okay?"

Again, it's just those wee glimmers of prayer and the Holy Spirit being present through that. When Lorna joined the team—she's only been in the team six months—she's prayed out loud a few times for people now, which is incredible!

Hannah Sanderson:

Would you say there's a mentoring aspect to how you're interacting with people?

Sarah:

I would probably say so. I think it comes quite naturally. To be a good leader is about allowing people opportunities to be leaders—looking at their gifts, what talents they bring, trying to tease that out of them, helping them see it for themselves, and then elevating that for them, raising leaders up.

Peter and I can't do all this by ourselves. We've got over a hundred families coming in every week, so we are not capable of speaking to every single person and making sure everybody feels a warm welcome. For us to be able to do that, we need to have teams and lift people up.

Sometimes you don't even see Peter at the sessions, and I loved that when I started!

Hannah Sanderson:

We love it when he's not there!

Sarah:

We just love how he trusts people. He puts that value on them to say, "Actually, you've got this, you can do this." People rise to the occasion and feel like they are giving back their gifts. Everybody has God-given gifts and talents. Especially in the west of Scotland, people don't praise themselves, they don't say, "I'm good at this." So being able to tease that out is really important.

Hannah Sanderson:

That's a good "how." What you said there is that it's not just about identifying what people can do, it's about giving them something to do and then stepping back so that they actually have to do it. Not in their own strength—God is always the one that gives us strength—but they actually have to step up to meet that challenge. Sometimes leaders can hold on really tight, and then nobody's learning.

So Pete, am I hearing that you guys are intentionally building a culture where people come in, belong, but very quickly are participating? They're part of the team, part of the crew, rather than sitting back and consuming?

Pete:

Yeah. As we've gone along, we're learning how to do this on the job, but we're picking up things and are interested in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), where you try to focus on positives, strengths, giftings, talents, and skills. Yes, we see need in people and try to support them, but what are people's God-given skills? What is God doing in this person's life? How can we come alongside and encourage?

I used to think that God did all his business on Sunday morning at 11:00 AM. But actually, God's at work out there. We're invited to join in, to partner with God. It's spotting the giftings in people and giving them opportunities to use their gifts.

I don't really like the term "discipleship pipeline"—I like "pathway" better. We're seeing pathways for people to explore their gifts, get involved, and use their skills. That's how we see multiplication, and that's how we're going to see disciples that make disciples: if we're constantly listening to God, seeing what he's doing in people's lives, and encouraging them to acknowledge that those gifts are God-given and God wants to use them. Hopefully, being part of Thrive is a blessing. We've been hugely blessed, and we want to pass on that blessing to other people. It can't just be me, it can't just be Sarah—it's allowing everybody to flourish and everybody to thrive.

Hannah Sanderson:

You touched on the word pathway, which has a direction of travel. So when you guys talk about discipleship or people growing in their relationship with God, are you looking for times to help people take that next step? How would you describe that process?

Pete:

Yeah, it is discerning because everybody's gifts and skills are different. But for those who are open and wanting to be part of this discipleship journey following Jesus, we want to put things in place to help that happen.

We do a bit of mentoring, one-to-ones. We meet with people regularly—maybe a small group of people individually, and then we bring them together. Sarah works with some girls, I work with some guys. As well as one-to-ones, we have small groups, and then we try to bring everybody together who wants to be on this journey.

We run something called Thrive Collective, which is a monthly get-together where we do a bit of worship, lots of food, input around the tables, and a bit of Bible. We're actually looking at the fruit of the Spirit at the moment.

I've yet to find someone who doesn't want the world to be a more loving, joyful, and peaceful place, with us looking out for other people. So we're exploring that, and yeah, who doesn't want that?

Hannah Sanderson:

So are all three of you Church of Scotland ministers? No! Great. So we're people leading people. That biblical phrase: the priesthood of all believers. Is that something that holds a special place in your heart? Is it important to you that we all do this together?

Sarah:

Oh yeah, absolutely. For Bubble Church in particular, our team is massive when it comes to Bubble Church, which is great.

I remember going to one of the network meetings and someone saying, "At what point is somebody able to come on team? At what point are they Christian enough?" And I thought: there's no meter here! When this person wants to come on team and wants to be involved, that's them taking a step of faith and wanting to be involved in that journey with Jesus. So we absolutely have to open the doors for them and just be ready when they are.

Measuring Success & Transformation Stories

Hannah Sanderson:

That's great. Let me ask you a question: at Stewarton Thrive, what does success look like?

Pete:

What Thrive is all about is trying to create a space where people can feel belonging. We try to measure that as best we can by people coming along, getting involved, showing some level of commitment, and feeling supported. They want to be here—you can't keep Lorna away! Banging down the door!

People want to be here, they feel supported, they feel loved. And we're seeing changes in behavior, little changes. We are celebrating when people say that—even if they might not use this language—faith is starting to make sense to them, it's having an impact on their lives.

Hannah Sanderson:

Can you tell me a couple of sentences of some impact stuff?

Sarah:

Do you want to share about Danny?

Lorna:

Yeah. Danny's one of our moms who comes along. She actually comes to three of our groups and has five children. She comes to Baby Beats and Our Journey Together (our ASN group).

She comes from a Catholic background, but never grew up in church. She was having quite a hard time, and she was going for a driving lesson. She was really quite worried about it because she was going to start going on main roads. We said, "Can we pray for you that it all goes well?" We prayed for her, and she came back in the next week. The first thing she said was, "Prayer works! It works!" Which is just amazing.

Now she comes to Bubble Church as well, and the whole family comes and loves it. Lorna's joking when she says people are banging down the doors, but literally we have families banging down the doors when we're opening up for sessions, and Danny's family is one of them. They just love coming and being in the space. To watch Danny grow—she's so curious as well, she's got lots of questions—being able to be open and have those conversations, and for her to have that moment... it really works. It's just so lovely.

Lorna:

I think the success of Thrive is not the number of people that come through the doors, it's the people that keep coming back through the doors, commenting on how much they and their children get from it. As Peter said, the changes in behavior or just the smiles on their faces when they're doing the activities—that's success.

Sarah:

We always speak about seeing wee glimmers of God's kingdom. What would God's kingdom look like if it came here today? We just want our families to feel that when they come along.

Pete:

We've got a guy who comes along to our growing project and then comes to the Shed. I'll call him Scott. Scott was addicted to prescription drugs and was stuck in the house. His mother was doing the shopping one time, walking past the church, and one of our growing project volunteers said hello.

They ended up coming into the growing project and talking, and she became a regular. She said, "You know, my son Scott would so benefit from this." And so, as I often do, I said, "Scott, could you give me a hand down at the church? I need some help."

So Scott turned up to move some boulders or something, and we got chatting. He became a regular part of the growing project community, then the Men's Shed. He did an Alpha course with us and just says, "This has completely changed my life."

Those are the stories that we get time and time again. They're finding community, finding something that was missing in their life, and they're drawn to that community around Jesus. They're keen to explore.

Hannah Sanderson:

They're keen to explore, and you're trying to answer their questions by the sound of it.

Pete:

Yeah, we're trying to answer the questions, love them, and support them. We don't judge. Anybody and everyone is welcome here, as should be the case, no matter your beliefs, persuasions, or whatever. Everyone is welcome. That creates challenges, of course it does, but everyone knows they're welcome here when they come through the door. We want to see people find that fullness of life that Jesus offers, and any way we can, we will try and show them that love and support.

Hannah Sanderson:

You've used the word belonging quite a lot through this conversation. It's obviously very much a key foundational stone: for people to find belonging and be part of something. Has that been your experience, Lorna?

Lorna:

Yeah, definitely. I feel like I belong. I do belong there, I am meant to be there. As I say, it's like a second family or extended family. I definitely feel that, and so I want to create that for others as well. That's why I volunteer for so many things, because I know what that feeling's like to belong somewhere. I've never really felt that way, so to have that each week is an amazing experience. If I can create just a small part of that for somebody else or for loads of other people, then that's amazing.

Hannah Sanderson:

That is amazing because you found a good thing, and so you want other people to find the good thing. Sounds like a really fun place to be as well, which I think is key when people come in and say, "Oh, this church is still here, and look what you've done with it, and it looks really fun!"

Sarah:

A little bit of chaos as well! But yeah, always good fun.

Closing Thoughts

Hannah Sanderson:

Right, so we're going to close up now. But if we were to end on a sentence... Pete, I'm going to come to you for this. If you were to ball it all up, elevator pitch, you've got 30 seconds: focusing on the how, how does Stewarton thrive?

Pete:

I think this comes down to the fact that we ourselves have felt loved by God. We've had that tangible experience of knowing and feeling it. There's a difference between knowing that you're loved and actually feeling that love.

Part of that is our experience of feeling belonging to something. And we want other people—our mates, family members, neighbors, community—to experience God's love for themselves. That's what we invite people into: a space where they can be loved, supported, and where we can demonstrate that love in action to our community.

It's just wonderful how people are responding to God's love in our community. The wider community in terms of its organizations are seeing what's going on with Thrive, they're seeing the church in a positive light. Very often the church has had this credibility problem, but through our actions in loving people and loving our community, we're seeing lives transformed and lives changed. That's what we want to see more of in Stewarton.

Hannah Sanderson:

Absolutely. And then the belonging, the family, being together, and then this pathway that you're journeying together into deeper stuff—a deeper relationship with God, which is just wonderful. Thank you, thank you so much! It just sounds brilliant. Maybe I should move to Stewarton, it sounds like the place to be!

Pete:

Come on, people! Where the sun always shines!

Hannah Sanderson:

The sun always shines in Stewarton!

Okay, so if you're watching this at home, thank you very much for watching. Or if you're listening on the podcast, thank you so much.

Just remember that you can go onto the Church of Scotland website, and there's a learning resource that accompanies this. It'll recap some of the effective practice, some of the hows that we heard today, and then it'll take you through a bit of contextualization: how the things working in Stewarton can work for you in your community and in your family at home.

There's also going to be a little bit of recommendations for courses that have been mentioned here today, or books, or things that have helped Pete, Lorna, and Sarah recommend.

So go and find the other recordings if this is your first one. I'm Hannah Sanderson, and this is How for now!