Thriving Church Lab, episode 3:

In Together, Perth with Lynsey Paterson and Anne Stott

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InTogether is a Perth Presbytery Mission Initiative of the Church of Scotland under the governance of Perth North Church. They have operated as a part-time, volunteer led initiative for three years sharing the difference God's love can make with families who have children with additional support needs. They do this through direct provision of specific community services and are developing new and existing ecumenical worshipping communities that meet the spiritual needs of the whole family.

Hannah: Welcome to the Thriving Church Lab. You'll see we're here in our lab coats as we think about experimenting and trying things. We want to create places and spaces that are spiritually vibrant, full of life and vitality, where people can grow closer to God in their context. I have two lovely guests with me today. Hello!

Lynsey: Hello! We're excited to be here.

Hannah: It's hot in here, isn't it? You might be listening at Christmas, but it's summer here, and Edinburgh is hot, hot, hot! Lab as in laboratory, not as in golden retriever. Sorry about that! We're talking about trying and experimenting. Have you tried anything that gave you results you weren't expecting?

Learning Through Experimentation

Anne: When I came to Scotland a long time ago, my Northern Irish mother thought I was going to the frozen north. She packed me off with a little bottle of whisky and said, "If you get a cold, make yourself a hot toddy and all will be well."

Anne: I got a cold within the first two weeks at university and could hardly get out of bed. My roommate Valerie offered to make a hot toddy. She listened to the instructions, left it with me and went off to her class at nine. I didn't have a class until eleven.

Anne: I took a sip and thought it was lukewarm, so she couldn't have boiled the kettle. I drank it and went back to sleep. When I had to go to class, I couldn't

understand why it was so hard to get out of bed, get there or understand the questions in the tutorial, never mind know the answers. I went back to bed and slept for five hours.

Anne: When I got up, I discovered it wasn't the hot toddy I'd expected. She had boiled the kettle, but she'd also poured in the whole 200 ml bottle of whisky. That explained why I couldn't understand the questions! I haven't had any whisky today, so if I don't understand the questions, it's not for that reason.

Hannah: The question is, did it cure your cold? We're definitely not advocating this! We might need a disclaimer. What about you, Lynsey?

Lynsey: In 2019, some friends and I decided to do a marathon walk as a fundraiser. We signed up in January and followed the training plan very diligently, with an unlikely characteristic of obedience! We did the walks and bought all the kit. Five minutes before we were due to set off, they cancelled it because parts of the course had flooded and weren't safe.

Lynsey: We were so disappointed. Then one of my friends said, "I think it's about 26 miles to my house in the opposite direction." So we walked an unplanned route, over stiles and through fields. It took about half a day to do the first nine miles, and we were aiming for 26.2. It was actually 26.4 when we finished, but we got there.

Hannah: Wow!

Lynsey: The lesson was to do all the preparation, but then be willing to go. I was resistant at first because we hadn't planned it. It was about trusting.

Hannah: That's almost a sermon. We could end the podcast right there! Enough about the lab. Let's get into the thriving church part.

Introducing In Together

Hannah: Lynsey, tell me a little about your context. Why are you here?

Lynsey: We co-lead a presbytery mission project in Perth called In Together. It's about developing a new worshipping community for families who have children with additional support needs. We've technically been running since March 2020, and we all know what happened then: the plan was ripped up.

Lynsey: Anne and I met before that, which is a bit of a God story in itself. We got to know each other, prayed together and felt God had a call on both our lives. He'd been working in parallel. My background was in speech and language therapy, and I was then working in a secular charity for families with autism. Anne had been working in teaching.

Lynsey: We'd both come across families with children with additional support needs and felt God was asking us to do something. My question was, "Where are the families I work with on a Sunday? They're not in church." Even if a church was as welcoming as it could be, the way we do church probably wasn't going to work for those families. It could be very difficult for them to be in that space.

Lynsey: If we imagined it again from the beginning, what would it look like? That's really what started us on this adventure.

What Is a Presbytery Mission Initiative?

Hannah: There's so much to pick up on. Some listeners might be outside the Church of Scotland. Anne, what is a presbytery mission initiative?

Anne: It's a way the Church has created to enable people to reach beyond a parish and try new, small things, with the support of a bigger church and presbytery, rather than having to work through all the legalities on their own.

Hannah: So ordinary people can say, "Let's give this a try," under the umbrella of a PMI?

Anne: Yes.

Hannah: Are you two ordinary people? We'll let the audience decide! Anne, am I right that you're a Church of Scotland minister?

Anne: I'm an ordained local minister.

Hannah: That always sounds to me like one of the exams at Hogwarts! And you, Lynsey?

Lynsey: I'm an ordained elder, but I have no theological qualifications apart from loving Jesus. That's my qualification.

Hannah: You like learning about and talking about Jesus. People might be listening and thinking, "I think I have a call on my heart, but I'm not a minister. End of the road." But we say no.

Lynsey: Absolutely. God has placed you where you are, with the connections you have. You're his eyes, hands and feet in that space. What needs do you see, and how would Jesus respond? That's not just for people with official ministry qualifications. It's for all believers.

Lynsey: In your workplace, family or community, what do you see, and how could you be Jesus in that space? Then ask, "What's the first step I need to take?" In

Together has evolved over time, but our starting point was simply understanding the community and how we could respond.

Anne: We started with a presbytery mission grant of £4,000 to cover room rental and basic resources. Everyone contributing volunteered their time. It started in a really simple way.

Noticing the Call

Hannah: You were both experiencing a call separately before you found each other. Lynsey, you said, "I noticed." That's a useful how in itself: what is God calling you to notice? You noticed an absence. Anne, how did that call develop for you? By "call", I mean feeling that God is highlighting something or trying to tell you something.

Anne: Lynsey had been praying about this for at least a year before I started thinking about what I was being called to as an ordained local minister. I was in my probation year. Sometimes presbyteries don't quite know what to do with ordained local ministers, so you need to work out a plan and bring it.

Anne: I'd taught in additional support needs for a while, and part of my theology course at Aberdeen explored what makes us human and disability theology. But I hadn't put those things together. I was simply aware that families I'd encountered through teaching had so little support. There was this little pilot light that kept lighting up. When it happened for the third time, I thought, "Maybe that's God."

Anne: I eventually mentioned it to my husband. He said, "I've met this perfect person. She doesn't live too far away, and she's passionate about the same thing." We got in touch and had coffee. After an hour, we realised we both felt called to this, but neither of us felt we were meant to do it alone.

Lynsey: I'd met Anne's husband Kenny at an SU meeting where I'd been invited to do something outside my comfort zone. It hadn't gone as I'd expected. I left feeling angry with God, wondering why he'd put me there and whether I'd represented families well.

Lynsey: My memory of that meeting and Kenny's memory were different. God was at work. Without it, Anne and I probably wouldn't have met. There was a bigger plan.

Hannah: So you both felt drawn towards a particular community, rather than sitting down and asking, "How do we grow the Church of Scotland or the kingdom of God?" It started with the people.

Lynsey: Somebody once said that every pioneer and church planter needs to ask, "Who does your heart ache for?" When things get tough, you need that sense of call,

purpose and why. What gives you the emotional energy behind what you're doing and the sacrifices you'll make? I'd encourage listeners to ask who gets under their skin, and who their heart aches for.

Gathering a Team

Hannah: You found one another, recognised a shared call and received some funding. How did you find those first volunteers?

Anne: We approached people we respected: elders and ministers around the presbytery. We asked three people to form a core leadership team and provide some oversight. During Covid, they helped us think through ideas, and we met every few months.

Anne: One team member's wife was a teacher. On her time out of class as a principal teacher, she was spending much of it speaking to parents of children with additional support needs. One evening she said, "If only there was somebody they could speak to instead of me."

Anne: It wasn't on our plan, but it sounded worth exploring and offered a way to connect with families. We worked with her to develop a listening project and listened to about ten parents that year. At the end, staff asked whether we could do it across Perth and Kinross Council. There were only two of us, and we were still in our paid jobs, so we couldn't. The demand was huge and our capacity was small.

Hannah: One practical how there is approaching people you already know, respect and trust. You need different kinds of volunteers: people working with families, people helping with a website, and people providing oversight. Who are those first people you could call?

Lynsey: We deliberately sought different skills and gifts. One person had experience of pioneering and mission, another of counselling and listening to families, and another of additional support needs.

Lynsey: Volunteers often share a heart for these families because of their own lived experience, a child or grandchild, or their work. We don't need to sell the vision; they understand why we exist. Sometimes we've also prayed for the people we need.

Asking for the Help You Need

Lynsey: After doing our first accounts, we realised that if things became more complicated, we didn't have the skills to manage everything ourselves. We prayed for someone with administrative skills to help us.

Hannah: Let's unpack that phrase "praying people in". What do you mean?

Lynsey: Simply praying, "God, we think this is what we need. Please connect us with someone, or show us who is already in our network." We prayed over a couple of months.

Lynsey: The person who had helped with our PVG checks was an elder at Perth North. She'd heard about us and had a background in teaching business administration. She came and knocked on the door and said, "I have a bit of time. Could you use me?" We absolutely could! She's now our treasurer.

Hannah: Brilliant!

Listening to the Community

Hannah: You've described a listening exercise. Was that a strategic decision to begin with research and data, or a response to recognising that people needed to be heard?

Lynsey: The listening activity Anne mentioned was a way of serving families through emotional and pastoral support. Through that, we also heard about difficulties and pressures, while recognising that every family has assets, joy and things to celebrate alongside anxiety, chaos or frustration. It isn't one thing or the other.

Lynsey: We also did a consultation at the beginning. We looked at what was known about additional support needs and disability in church. There wasn't much, but people had gone before us. Mark Arnold at Urban Saints helped us with some data. We held evenings inviting anyone connected with additional support needs to tell us what church did well, what it didn't do well and what it needed to do.

Hannah: Did that shape what In Together became?

Lynsey: Absolutely. We learned about the pressures of caring, the impact on parents' mental health and relationships, and the impact on siblings. It's about the whole family, not just one child. Families kept describing isolation and feeling that they were walking the journey alone.

Lynsey: They also spoke about the difference it made to meet someone who "just got it". That helped us shape a community where people feel they belong and parents can support one another, alongside volunteers. Wellbeing for mind, body and soul has become a theme in the activities and resources we offer.

Starting Small and Learning as You Go

Hannah: Give listeners a picture of what In Together actually does.

Anne: We begin with connecting activities. They weren't all things we planned. We never expected to run toddler groups or outdoor church. A parent told us there wasn't a toddler group suitable for their child. A minister's wife said she knew a couple of parents saying the same thing. Through those conversations, a toddler group for children who may have additional support needs emerged.

Lynsey: That was another God moment. We had volunteers and were set up as a PMI. We thought we could do it, but we didn't have toys or a space. When we met the minister, he said he couldn't organise it and didn't know who could help, but he did have toys and a space! God doesn't always speak that clearly. Building community was one of our values, and this felt like the next step.

Anne: The place, toys and agreement to use the church on a six-month trial all came together. We also knew grandmothers who wanted to help with toddlers. We ended up with six volunteers, and within two or three months we were ready. That's happened several times: when the time has been right, God has opened a door. We need our eyes and ears open to what he's doing.

Making a Trial Feel Manageable

Lynsey: We started by saying, "Let's trial this for a term and review it." Nobody was committing beyond that, which made it more accessible. The risk also felt smaller. If we tried it for six weeks and nobody came, we could rethink.

Hannah: That's an iterative approach: try something, learn, take stock, notice and try again.

Lynsey: Yes. Be willing to try something, knowing you'll learn from it, and let that help you go again.

Hannah: Is the toddler group the main part of what you do?

Anne: We realised the toddlers would grow up, so we developed Fun Together Plus for in-service days and holidays. It could include all ages, siblings who didn't have additional support needs, and partners. That was the next opportunity opening up.

From Serving Families to Conversations About Faith

Anne: Throughout, we wanted to show God's love and connect people with Christians who love Jesus. We wanted them to discover that Jesus could give them strength amid enormous challenges. It wasn't only about physical or emotional needs. We believed God had more for them.

Anne: Although we describe those first activities as "connecting activities", they're all part of being church and a community of God's people. I don't think anything we do isn't church. We were also asking, "What's next? How do we introduce faith? When will there be opportunities to speak about Jesus?"

Anne: As relationships grew, opportunities opened up. One day a parent arrived after a really difficult morning. By then, her son was happy to spend time with the rest of us, so Lynsey could go out and talk with her. That became a real encounter-with-God moment.

Lynsey: She spoke about feeling desperate that week and having prayed. She asked questions about my faith, and we were able to pray together. It encouraged me and the whole team. We'd been serving and wondering where it was going, and suddenly we could see God was already ahead of us. It was a small but significant step in a longer journey.

Being Open About Faith Without Pressure

Lynsey: Our publicity is clear that we're a Christian organisation, part of the Church of Scotland, and that our volunteers are motivated by faith and happy to talk about it. But we don't deliberately build faith conversations into those connecting activities. Sometimes they arise naturally.

Lynsey: A dad once told me that coming along had felt like a little bit of light when they'd been in a dark place. I said that the Bible speaks about Jesus being light. He said, "Really?" That was the whole conversation, but it was an opportunity to share something naturally.

Lynsey: Some families only want the community spaces, and that's absolutely fine. We're still loving them and showing that God cares. We don't know where that seed might lead. Some families have also been open to exploring spiritual questions, sometimes following difficult or medically complicated experiences.

Lynsey: One family's son was going for a significant operation. I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to say something about my faith. I said, "I don't know where you're

at with this, but I believe in the power of prayer. We'd love to pray for you." She said she was completely open to that. They now come to outdoor church.

Hannah: I hear churches asking how to bring Jesus into a conversation or community space. You've said you felt the Holy Spirit prompt you. Could you put words around what that felt like?

Growing in Confidence and Taking a Small Risk

Lynsey: There's a longer story behind that moment: becoming more confident in my faith, practising evangelism and watching people who do it naturally. It isn't a natural gift for me; I've had to practise. The Talking Jesus course has been helpful. Prayer matters too. Our volunteers always pray together before a session, praying for the people coming and for ourselves.

Lynsey: In that moment, it was simply, "Take a risk and share." Someone might say they don't believe in that. I start from my own perspective: "As a Christian, I believe in the power of prayer." That helps people understand where I'm coming from and offers an invitation.

Lynsey: Sometimes a conversation ends there. Other times, listening to someone's vocabulary opens a door. A parent said she believed there was a reason her child had additional support needs. Not every parent would share that view, but she did. I responded from my Christian perspective, mentioning the passage in Jeremiah about God's plans. She said she shared that belief.

Lynsey: Be willing to take a risk, but don't take a declined conversation as personal rejection. Understanding that helped free me from worrying about whether people would like me.

Hannah: You're sharing what you believe and have experienced, rather than telling someone what they need or making claims about them. You're laying something before them and leaving them free to pick it up or not.

Lynsey: And pay attention to their response. If someone closes down the conversation, move on, stay friendly and keep building connection and trust.

Anne: It's all built on relationships. Lynsey wasn't walking up to someone she'd never met. There had been time to get to know one another.

Hannah: When you know someone, you can notice when a conversation isn't comfortable. You're not there to make them uncomfortable. You can change the subject and keep the relationship.

Everyone Has a Part to Play

Lynsey: I'm part of a team. Another volunteer might be praying while playing with the children. Others offer hospitality or look after the children so a parent has space to talk. People might see me having a significant conversation, but the whole team created that opportunity. Everyone has a part to play.

Hannah: Even if you're not the mouthpiece, you're part of the whole body. It's a listening conversation, rather than talking at somebody.

Anne: As part of the Forge course, I once asked a cousin about his impressions of Christians. He said, "You're the first Christian who's asked me what I think about that." There's a history of people being spoken at. People can be ready for a conversation if we're prepared to listen and respond.

Hannah: Sometimes we presume somebody has already been asked, listened to or invited, when they haven't. For me, faith is part of who I am. If I never mention it, I'm censoring part of myself. If someone asks about my weekend, I can mention church just as naturally as anything else I did.

Lynsey: That was one of the first ways we shared faith at Fun Together. It happens on a Friday, so we'd ask parents about their weekend plans. As they got to know us, they asked us too, and our volunteers naturally spoke about being involved in church.

Depth, Numbers and Building Relationships

Hannah: Your relationships with families sound deep and take time to grow. Other projects we've spoken to connect with hundreds of people. How do you see God at work in both smaller, deeper relationships and much larger groups?

Anne: God speaks in different ways. Sometimes a larger group gives people space to think without being too visible. Our families often don't feel heard, so they may be ready to go deeper quite quickly. God works in both.

Lynsey: For us, it's about understanding the community. Many families experience isolation, rejection or not feeling understood. Being remembered and valued matters. Even in Fun Together, that's part of our DNA. We remember holidays and appointments and ask how things went. We're actively building relationships.

Lynsey: Relationship also creates a bridge for sharing. Sometimes people have taken a four-tonne message over a bridge that can only carry one tonne. When you

build a relationship, you can share smaller pieces over time. Not everyone wants a deeper faith connection, and some will remain in the community spaces.

Creating Intentional Pathways

Lynsey: We've found the idea of the Engel scale helpful when thinking about how people come to faith. We begin with high contact and low content: community spaces focused on relationships. Then we intentionally invite people into spaces where there may be fewer people and more faith content.

Lynsey: Someone might move from Fun Together into parent coffee and chat. It's more intimate, with no children there and fewer distractions. We might invite them to a parent retreat evening with activities for mind, body and soul. They can choose Pilates and a hand massage, or opt into reflective sessions, prayer or meditation.

Lynsey: From there, we might offer an Alpha course or Discovery Bible Study, or people might come to outdoor church. We think carefully about where to put our energy and resources. If everything goes into the initial community activities, we have no capacity left for the other spaces.

Anne: We learned that through experience, not because we had the perfect plan. We're always reviewing the balance. How do we develop community spaces, one-to-one discipleship, shared worship and prayer while also caring for our own walk with God, our families and our volunteers? It's a constant balancing act.

Anne: We realised we needed to employ a worker if we were going to develop in those directions. Parent coffee and chat, retreats and some of the activities offering more opportunities to explore faith became possible once we could employ Lynsey as our project worker.

Hannah: I'm hearing intentionality. Alongside flexibility and responding to where you sense God leading, you think about the next space and how to build bridges to it.

Lynsey: Established parish churches often already have a worshipping gathering. As pioneers starting something new, we didn't. We began at the community end. My plea to the Church is to understand why relationship and community are the starting point.

Lynsey: My plea to pioneers is to remain attentive to building a worshipping community. We need to talk about Jesus and have people on the team who will do that. We also need spaces connecting community activities with exploring faith. The leap straight into Sunday church can be too big. We need those middle spaces.

Reimagining Church

Hannah: Sometimes we have a very fixed picture of what church is. The core remains encountering Jesus and worshipping together, but the vehicle may need to be reimagined. Your families have told you a traditional Sunday service can be difficult to engage with.

Lynsey: Outdoor church has been a gift. We're in a different environment that often suits our children better, so some building-related barriers disappear. It also challenges our assumptions. Are we simply doing indoor church outdoors, or genuinely imagining something different?

Lynsey: We need to explain it clearly. One parent thought her child might manage to sit for a while with an iPad. I said that outdoor church didn't require that. It wasn't our expectation, but it was what the word "church" suggested to her. We have to explain and show what it looks like, using photos and video so people can picture it before they come.

Hannah: People need to see somewhere before they can feel confident taking a step into it.

Being Welcomed Before You Arrive

Lynsey: A parent described it as being "welcomed before you're welcomed". People need information to work out whether the effort and risk of coming will be worthwhile. That was something we considered from the start when asking what would make this genuinely a space for families with additional support needs.

Hannah: When I visited, you sent such detailed information: where the door and parking were, photographs, what would happen and what snack looked like. I felt safe because I knew what to expect. That's a really practical how.

Lynsey: Every activity has an information sheet beforehand. We meet in different places, so we show the garden, meeting point in the park, building or room, and toilets. We explain who will be there, what to expect and where there are other spaces if things become tricky.

Lynsey: We also use frequently asked questions on Eventbrite, including "Is this just for Christians?" We make clear that we're a Christian organisation, but welcome people of all faiths, no faith and those who aren't sure.

Discerning the Next Step Together

Hannah: We're nearly at the end. This podcast is about sharing the hows: behaviours, choices, words and actions, rather than hiding behind jargon. If you were in a lift and someone asked what had worked well, what would you say? Lynsey, you first.

Lynsey: First, notice where God is already at work. What is he doing and showing you? You don't need the whole plan, but you need to understand the next thing he's asking. Take time to discern that together and check it out. Work at his pace, not your own. What's a good idea, and what's a God idea? I've had to learn the difference.

Lynsey: Second, understand the community you're trying to reach: its assets and needs, and what good news looks like for those people. Become fluent in explaining that. For families experiencing isolation or rejection, one of our values is, "Come and belong, and we will value you." That's what good news can look like.

Lynsey: Third, move at the pace of the team, not as a lone ranger. I'm often looking at what's next, but we need to move as a whole body. Sometimes I need to slow down. Working closely with somebody who can honestly challenge your five new ideas is helpful! And prioritise prayer.

Hannah: That's quite a long lift ride, but there's so much in it. Anne?

Anne: Look for what God's doing. Listen to your community. Gather people you respect, listen to them and talk through big new ideas. If things are coming together to make something possible, pay attention. Then do that one thing.

Anne: We often discuss lots of ideas, sit with them for a month and then ask which ones are still there. What do we both feel enthusiastic about and agree is the way forward? There can be room to try something without full agreement, but the things we've really agreed on have been important.

Valuing Relationships Above an Idea

Lynsey: As a team, we value our relationships over an idea. God cares more about our relationship with him and with one another than our ministry. A ministry that comes at the cost of those relationships isn't worth it.

Hannah: That belongs on a T-shirt! Our first call is to love and worship God, and love one another. Anything that eclipses that isn't a choice we want to make.

Lynsey: I want to demonstrate a healthier way of leading, not at the expense of myself, my family or relationships. I'm not saying I've got it all right. It hasn't been

an easy lesson, but there have been times when God has slowed us down and we've needed to learn from that.

Hannah: I've heard so much about listening and discerning today. You've put practical detail around "a good idea or a God idea": speak with people you respect, seek agreement, notice energy and momentum, and notice when things come together. The Holy Spirit doesn't always feel like excitement, but excitement and energy can be things to pay attention to.

Hannah: You've also said, "Give it time." Let an idea sit for a month and see whether it still seems right. Those are practical ways of explaining what discernment can look like. Thank you.

Closing Reflections

Hannah: Thank you both for coming from Perth and sharing your story. Every podcast comes with a learning resource on the Church of Scotland website. We'll pull out the practical hows, offer reflective questions or activities to help you apply them in your own context, and suggest possible first steps. We'll also ask Lynsey and Anne to share resources they've found helpful, including those mentioned during our conversation.

Hannah: Please listen to the other podcasts too. We have stories about deep relationships and small communities, larger gatherings and everything in between. This is the story of God. It's not a story about numbers; it's about growth in relationship and community, together with and towards God.

Hannah: Thank you for listening to the Thriving Church Lab. I'm Hannah Sanderson, and that's How? for now.