

A Community Built on Justice, Not Charity

Kyle Henderson-Begg and Tom Herbert write about their involvement in The Grace Network

The Grace Network is more than workplaces, they are a modern monastic framework shaping a new way of living.

Kyle Henderson-Begg writes:

Imagine if the toys and clothes your children have outgrown could meet a neighbour's need, create jobs, and fuel the circular economy, or if your old bike could help train a youngster. What if a meal with a neighbour could transform a community?

Driving east on London Road away from Stroud in Gloucestershire, you'll discover some beautiful scenery. Scattered with old wonky mill chimneys, bricks walls with arched windows in what was once the Victorian industrial powerhouse, Stroud's Five Valleys boasts a rich

heritage of creativity and engineering ingenuity that still echoes around the valleys today.

It's easy to miss, but nestled at the bottom of Brimscombe Hill in the Golden Valley, in one of those Victorian factories, is a thriving, bustling, transformative community of which I am incredibly proud to be a part.

I first encountered The Grace Network in November 2022. After hearing about its vision and visiting Brimscombe Mill, I was hooked. I knew I needed to be involved, one way or another.

Brimscombe Mill has been open since 2022. While it's an old, drafty, leaky ancient mill, stepping through its double doors transports you into an atmosphere of warmth, community and enterprise.

From Vision to Reality

In 2009, the Mansells, Will, Cara and Jo, along with their friends, launched The Grace Network. Inspired by Jesus' manifesto in Luke 4:18-19, they set out to create true transformation. Those ancient words motivate us still and form the bedrock of our vision, which is:

To show the vulnerable that change is possible. To help free people who feel trapped and to tell the world a new way of living. To proclaim a new start, a second chance at a good life.

They began by leading a local food bank and Baptist church, yet soon recognised the limitations of food banks as "sticking plasters" rather than solutions. From that wrestling, The Grace Network was born and



Grace Long Table inside
Photo: Grace Network

has become eleven interdependent social enterprises employing over 120 people and serving an ever-growing community.

This Community isn't Charity, it's about Justice

Emerging from these enterprises is a community that is alive with hope. Working in this community day by day has helped us see what we do isn't about charity (applying a plaster), it's about justice (addressing underlying root causes).

The hand that gives is always higher than the hand that receives (Abdullah ibn Umar), and we believe that society is tired of the evident inequality. People are hungry for change, for a community where we can stand side by side. Out with the platitudes and sticking plasters.

Tom Herbert, co-founder of The Long Table, one of the enterprises and part of Brimscombe Mill team, writes:

We've created spaces where everyone shares in meaningful action, turning surplus into value and isolation into connection. At our core, what we truly crave is meaningful human connection, I love it that people find those things here.

It's a beautiful and hopeful thing.

It's clear to anyone: we've more than enough stuff in the world. Mountains of our waste smoulder in the Global South while a third of our food is never eaten, and much of what we do eat makes us sick.

At Brimscombe Mill under the enormous 'Welcome' sign, a challenging phrase greets every visitor, written on the wall:

"We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself" (words from an early sermon by Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

This belief underpins everything we do. The meals, the connection, the transformation, they're all part of a larger mission to disrupt inequality and build something better, together.

Being Social Enterprises does not mean that we are not-for-profit; rather, with much prayer, grace and a crowd of supportive friends, together we've created an economic engine that generates profit which empowers transformation. This profit is then recycled into our enterprises generating more employment at living wage or above, free goods and services for the local community, and focusing anything that's left to launch new enterprises to bring yet more transformation.

Justice is restorative at its core, it's dignifying and empowering. It is our commitment to justice that drives us to offer not just a handout but a hand up. To offer employment to those who have been overlooked in the past and not allowing their history to dictate their future. We don't really use volunteers, we employ. We do this so individuals have the dignity of a good job, a decent pay in a healthy community. Each person who joins us is supported and trained to grow in leadership and skills to enable them to gain responsibility and position through the network of enterprises. Within each hub, a voice is given to everyone to influence how the hub operates. They become more than just staff; they are co-collaborators.

It is this commitment to justice that means that one of our Home Remedy drivers is now the General Manager, why one of our house clearance team members is now a highly trained bike mechanic, and why one of our Long Table chefs is now developing a new enterprise, The Great Plate.

Expanding Our Reach

From The Grace Network's humble beginnings and as the seasons have rolled on the scope of the Network has proliferated to include these enterprises. We've included some statistics from our 23/24 impact reports which you can read on our website www.thegracenetwork.org.uk:

- **Bike Drop:** Restoring bikes and training apprentices. [249 bikes refurbished, 588 bikes serviced, 7,388 hours of employment including 1,320 skilled training hours]

- **The Great Plate:** Reimagining healthy school dinners. [79,727 meals in 7 local primary schools, 11,685 hours of employment.]
- **Kick off Stroud:** Primary school sports & holiday clubs. [4,162 hours of employment, 400 kids a week at afterschool clubs, 1,500 spaces in holiday clubs, 150 of those given away.]
- **Kids Stuff:** Providing preloved children's items to families in need. [9,642 hours of employment, 64 newborn bundles, 81 family bundles, 46 vouchers]
- **Gloucestershire House Clearances:** Repurposing household goods. [7,915 hours of employment, 197 tonnes of household items sorted & recycled, including 14 tonnes of items sold through our sales.]
- **Kitchen Companions:** A "meals-on-wheels" social care initiative. [1,245 hours of employment, 1661 visits made]
- **The Home Remedy:** Preloved household items sold or given to those in need. [7,898 items are used, 551 items given away, 10,118 hours of employment]
- **The Long Table:** tasty, nutritious food, locally grown and offered pay-as-you-can. [20,482 hours of employment, 34,698 meals enjoyed, 41% of those sold below cost, 3,101 meals given away]

This does not include the events and social action and activities that are hosted by each site each year, or the work placements we offer across our network. Our impact reports for our sites can be found on our website: www.thegracenetwork.org.uk

Each enterprise disrupts cycles of inequality and isolation, offering work, connection, and opportunity. A network of over 11 interdependent Social Enterprises employing over 135 people across three sites in Stroud, Aston Down and Cirencester, we are interdependent as we share risk and reward as well as learning.



The Long Table was a key addition, an excellent place to eat with great coffee and fantastic cakes offering pay-as-you-can meals, five lunches and three evenings every week. It made its start based on the understanding that ‘Amazing things happen when we eat together’ and an old saying ‘if you have more than enough, build longer tables not higher walls.’ The Long Table and its team beautifully embody and give energy to our value of radical hospitality and welcome, a place where all are welcome and no one need eat alone.

All of the social enterprises have formed spaces that build community, create employment and work to turn the wheels of the circular economy.

Rooted in Faith, Open to All

The Grace Network’s founders share a Christian faith that shaped their early vision and inspires us still, drawing on the Luke 4 manifesto. Christian foundations inspire us to treat every individual as valuable, nurturing an atmosphere of hope, grace, and welcome, especially for the stranger. It’s perhaps also important to mention that the workplaces are secular, welcoming people of every faith and none. A recent survey showed that 30% of our team identify faith as an ingredient in our lives. Our workplaces are open and welcoming to all. We don’t ask anyone to subscribe to a particular belief, only to enjoy the

spaces on offer, embrace the values of connection, respect, and collaboration as we work side by side to feed change.

What Makes Us Different?

We call our places monasteries. Ancient monasteries were places of worship, healing, learning, and industry, transforming their local communities. Inspired by this, and the writing of George Lings (*Seven Sacred Spaces*, BRF, 2020), our places offer seven sacred spaces reimagined for today. We have renamed some of the spaces for our usage

1. **The Market Place:** A place of work and productivity.
2. **The Cloister:** A place of connection and welcome.
3. **The Refectory:** Spaces like The Long Table where we eat together.
4. **The Chapter House:** Where decisions are made and ideas are shared.
5. **The Library:** For learning and growth.
6. **The Retreat:** For quiet reflection.
7. **The Sanctuary:** For creativity and shared experiences.

Each of these spaces supports our enterprises and creates opportunities for reflection, connection, and growth, making transformation possible for individuals and the wider community.

Each of our places has its own rhythms of prayer and forms of expression, all inspired by the values of Presence, Prayer, Hospitality and Justice.

These Seven Spaces are open to our visitors as well. We often find the retreat in use for private discussion or time by oneself. Recently one of our Brimscombe site leaders came by when the site was closed and found a teenager coming to use the retreat; it’s one of their favourite spaces to just be. It is truly these, almost unseen, elements that provide the magic sauce to spaces like Brimscombe Mill and Cirencester.

A Network of Transformation

One question we’ve asked that allows everyone to speak into the transformation of our community and play an active part in shaping the future is: “What if everyone in our community had access to great food, and people to eat it with? Here’s just one example of what we’ve seen happen:

A woman who used to shuffle in with two walking sticks would take her place by the fire, warmly greeted by our team who brought her food to the table. One day, a fellow diner, a chiropractor, sat across from her. They struck up a conversation about the pain that made her walking sticks essential. Moved to help, the chiropractor offered pay-as-you-can treatment.

The result? The woman is now healed, free from pain, and has found a lifelong friend. These days, the two women return weekly, sometimes more, to play table tennis together. A simple meal sparked a connection that transformed not only one life but a community. To hear their laughter and see the gleeful competitiveness is transformation made manifest.

Similarly, our guest book is full of comments such as 'love manifest' or 'such a beautiful atmosphere'. It's an atmosphere that you or I might interpret as a sense of God's presence. Yet it's this space that is bringing transformation.

We see in the gospel of Luke that first Jesus invites people to join in (Luke 5:1-11), they work with him (Luke 6:12-14), then he gets them to do the work (Luke 9:1-6). It's not until after that he ask them who they think he is (Luke 9:18-20). We recognise this as a pattern, people join in, doing the work, and over time as they feel safe to do so people start to ask life's big questions.

Would They Miss Us? A Community's Answer

A question I, Kyle, have always liked to ask myself, regarding projects I'm involved with is 'how would the community react if we suddenly disappeared? Would they notice?' We were able to test this in March 2024 when our landlord sold Brimscombe Mill to another business who gave us

just a few months' notice to leave. We shared this shock on our social media and within hours there was uproar from the local community, local politicians and some national celebrities. James Bond himself, Daniel Craig, hearing of our plight, donated a whopping £50,000 that made a massive difference.

The response was heartwarming and now we are happily able to say that we are safe in Brimscombe Mill. The site was bought by a super-benevolent local family who were able to purchase it so that we can have a permanent home.

Yet we also know that we are truly having a meaningful impact in our community as they rallied round us and fought for our survival. That's when you know you're making a difference.

Growing the Network, Spreading Hope

We continue to grow as a network. Our Stroud non-retail site Aston Down is growing from strength to strength, our enterprises there are learning and growing. The doors are finally open in Cirencester - home to another The Long Table, Kids Stuff, Bike Drop and Home Remedy. Then in 2025 I, Kyle, am excited to open our fourth location in Bedminster, South Bristol, expanding our network into my community to see how Social Enterprise and this monastic framework might be put to work to bring about lasting change and restore some hope. We still see

ourselves as pioneers, creating the pathway ahead of ourselves.

We are grateful for the friendships and partnerships of those around us who offer us wisdom and governance. We are excited for the future, for the innovative enterprises that will be created and the friends we will make along the way, wherever that will take us.

Personal Reflection

Tom Herbert says:

"As someone who has seen lives change around at The Grace Network, including my own, I can say this: amazing things happen when we eat together. Come see for yourself."

A Call to Join In

Whether you're looking to connect, give back, or share a meal, The Grace Network would love to welcome you. Join us building a future that echoes Jesus's words in Luke 4. "To show the vulnerable that change is possible. To help free people who feel trapped and tell the world a new way of living, to help free people from the things, systems and choices that oppress them, to proclaim a new start, a second chance of a good life".

We can't wait to hear from you.

With every meal shared, every item repurposed, and every connection made, we believe The Grace Network proves that transformation is possible, one small act at a time. 



Kyle Henderson-Begg and Rossie live in Bristol with their three children. They spent 19 years serving in Youth With A Mission, and were involved in a range of discipleship and missions projects in Northern Australia & Southeast Asia, before heading back to England to facilitate mission around the 2012 London Olympics. Kyle and Rossie then moved to Bristol to pioneer a YWAM team working with local churches and reaching into the city. He is now developing social enterprises through The Grace Network.

Tom Herbert is a baker, food equality champion, and co-founder of community restaurant The Long Table CIC. He and Anna opened Hobbs House Bakery in Nailsworth, where they live with their four children. He loved being one half of the Fabulous Baker Brothers that ran on C4 and globally on Discovery for three seasons. Tom's books include Do Wild Baking, he is an Honorary Fellow at University of Gloucestershire and an Ambassador for Tearfund International.