

# Our journey through the secular year

## Let's go to a festival!

On Saturday 19 September 1970, some 1,500 people gathered in a field in Somerset, to hear T. Rex and others perform at the first Pilton Pop, Blues and Folk Festival. In the summer of 2016, 135,000 people attended the Glastonbury festival, as it is now known. And Glastonbury is not alone in attracting ever-increasing numbers of people. Festivals, sacred and secular, are more popular now than ever. Whatever your passions, tastes, beliefs and budget, there seem to be festivals to suit you. Glastonbury is world-renowned among music lovers, but there are countless other music festivals, in the UK alone. Greenbelt is probably the best-known Christian festival, but there are others too, with a huge array of themes and theological standpoints. And a whole spectrum of smaller-scale local festivals has grown up: food, music, arts, literature and even sport.

So what draws people in such large numbers to gatherings like these? How can the Church build bridges with people in a festival context? And what options are there for those brave enough to try running a festival of their own? We asked for perspectives from four Christians with diverse experiences of attending and organising festivals.

## Community outreach ideas

Arranging a festival might seem daunting, but with a little work, the right people involved and good publicity, it can be a huge success. Here are some ideas to get you thinking:

### Small-scale

#### Use the calendar

Make a high point in the church year open and accessible to newcomers. A Christingle service, for example, can be truly magical. Send invitations to all homes in your community.

**Bob Fyffe is the General Secretary to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. He was chaplain to the Glastonbury festival for a period in the 1980s.**



'A festival is a non-judgemental space. It offers people a chance to be themselves, to engage with others who share the same passions, worldview and values. Otherwise 'respectable' people throw off their inhibitions and experiment. It was great to represent the Church somewhere like Glastonbury. My team acted as a caring presence in a pretty crazy environment. We came across people with all sorts of problems, we did our best to help them and it's amazing how many times faith issues came up in conversation. We even had people wanting confession! So many of those we encountered were asking deep questions and exploring meaning. I'd call it a ministry of availability. It can be extraordinarily powerful just to be present; to be alongside people.'

**Stu McLellan is an artist and magazine editor. He and his wife host small-scale concerts in their living room.**



'We moved to a new village four years ago, unpacked our boxes and invited a couple of musicians to play at our house. We put on a little feast, invited some people to join us and asked for donations to cover costs. It all went really well. Since then, we've hosted about 12 similar events. It's been great to remove the barriers between the people making music and the people listening. The performers literally sit knee-to-knee with the audience, so it's a really intimate set-up. My approach to spirituality is one of welcome – to build community, create opportunities for people to meet, talk, eat together and be part of something. I want to create an environment where people can feel they belong. If you're thinking of doing something similar, I'd say, grow it out of your passions. Find people you have an affinity with and work with them. Keep it simple, manageable and think about how you're going to communicate what you're doing.'

Perhaps local schools could give out leaflets too? Serve mulled wine and mince pies, and make sure any new faces feel welcome.

#### Living room gig

Ask a musician to perform in your living room. Invite some friends, serve food and drinks and just enjoy the evening together. Don't forget to warn the neighbours!

#### Community BBQ

Arrange a BBQ outside your church or in another public place (get council permission if necessary). Provide plenty of food, drink and music – either free or request donations. As ever, publicity is vital, but the smell of food cooking might be enough to bring people out!

#### Local open day

Work with your church and other community organisations to organise an open day for visitors. Invite local people to explore their community, meet new people, wander into unfamiliar buildings and get a taster of different activities. You'll need to work hard to ensure people know this is happening.

### Medium-sized

#### Storytelling festival

Invite two or three experienced storytellers to lead workshops on how to write and tell a good story, and to share some of their own creations, too. Give everyone a chance to write their own stories and tell them. You could mix it up with some live music.

## Big screen film

Show a film on a big screen, with a high-quality sound set-up. Either choose something really popular (get permission for a public screening), or work with a group of local people to make a short film beforehand. Provide popcorn and drinks. On a summer evening, you could arrange an open-air screening, if you can find the right audio-visual equipment.

## Weekend in the wild

Escaping the rat race, even for a weekend, is highly restorative. Gather a group of people and choose a suitably peaceful campsite or woodland (ensure you have permission to camp there). Spend a weekend chatting, reflecting, telling stories, playing music and enjoying the peace. A campfire is a must.

## Fun run

A well-organised fun run can create a real sense of community. Measure and mark out a 5 kilometre route. A children's run over a shorter distance is a good idea, too. Food stalls, a bar and music will make it a day to remember. Publicise the event through local running clubs. Marshals are helpful, and you'll need to talk to the local police if you want to close any roads.

**Jess Foster is a deacon and involved in interfaith work in Birmingham. She is a regular festivalgoer.**



'Most years, I'll go to Greenbelt or Shambala, a dance music festival with an ecological ethos. At a festival, you get to be part of something bigger and connect with like-minded people. There's a sense of freedom. People participate and create a weekend for themselves, rather than expecting an experience just to be given to them. A festival opens up precious moments to connect with people, seemingly at random. Sitting around the campfire at 3am, you meet people who are lonely and need support – almost a chaplaincy role. It's good for Christians to provide that sort of presence. It also occurs to me that festivals in the Church calendar – like Christingle or All Souls – are really interesting to people and have cultural relevance. Maybe the Church could do more to open up our most treasured moments to people in our communities?'

## Ambitious

### Music festival

Organise a weekend-long festival in a local park. Line up some high-quality local acts and publicise the event far and wide. You'll need to think about staging, electrical supply, food and drinks, toilets and space for camping. If all goes well, it'll generate a terrific atmosphere and give you and your church opportunities to connect with hundreds of people.

### Food festival

Set up stalls offering delicious food (and free samples) from all over the world. Invite experienced chefs to give cooking demonstrations and hold competitions for aspiring local bakers. Sounds like a lot of fun? Drawing a crowd will make or break this event, so good publicity is vital.

### Film festival

Work with local screenwriters, directors, actors and sound and camera experts. Provide workshops on all aspects of film-making, showings of films made by local people, and a café area for conversation and networking. An interview with a high-profile actor or director would be fantastic, too.

### A celebration of life

Create a space, away from the pressures of everyday life, for people to meet, share ideas and express themselves, in whatever ways they want. Everyone participates, everyone creates, everyone brings something to share with the festival community. See [www.burningman.org](http://www.burningman.org) for inspiration.

*Simeon Whiting is a freelance writer, based in Birmingham. He recently attended the Keswick Mountain Festival and has ambitions to experience Burning Man in Nevada.*



**Martin Adams, ROOTS editor and a keen musician, is chair of the team that organises Bickerstock, an annual community music festival.**



'Bickerstock is a free festival to promote live music, bring the community together and raise money for local charities. We have local bands playing, and there are stalls, a bar and plenty of food. While not a church event, lots of church people help as individual volunteers or as part of the group who organise refreshments – and the church is a financial beneficiary too. A high point of the weekend is Sunday morning, when festival-goers and church regulars come together for a unique musical act of worship. To pull together an event like this, you have to be organised. Getting wise people involved, support from your local council, and good publicity are all vital. It is hard work. But it's a wonderful way to get to know people and to bring church and community together.'