**Exeter Church Boxing for Fitness Group Offers Love and Hope to People on the Ropes**

A boxing for fitness class in a church in Exeter which aims to offer hope to people living with addiction, homelessness and other needs has been officially launched at an event in the city.

Fitter for Faith is a community outreach ministry based at St David’s church in Exeter. Participants take part in a hour-and-a-half boxing and fitness training session in the church every Wednesday, followed by a shared lunch, wellbeing check-in and a time of prayer for each other.

It was started by Ben Cookson, a qualified boxing for fitness coach, who is himself a former drug addict.

He became a Christian after he was invited to church by a friend and attended an Alpha course.

Ben said “If I was to say to someone would you like to come to church and talk about your childhood trauma, they would say ‘no thanks’, but generally when I say to people would you like to come and learn some boxing skills, they say ‘yeah I’ve always wanted to do that.

“It’s an opportunity to do something for street drinkers or people who are homeless or struggling in life. It’s a way to connect and for me to carry a message of God’s goodness and to freely give what was freely given to me. We’ve got 74-year-olds, we’ve had 18-year-olds, people with disabilities – it’s open to everyone.”

Ben, who is due to begin training as a Church Army Evangelist in the autumn, is supported in his work by other members of St David’s church, including the interim minister Rev’d Mike Clark who leads the weekly prayer time with him.

Mike said: “I’ve been inspired and challenged by the way Ben shares his faith so openly and easily, and the way that could have such a transformative effect on people’s lives – just that simple Gospel message that you are loved and worth something.”

“The idea of a boxing group in a church has surprised me, but the more I see – it doesn’t surprise me, because I see how people are drawn into that love and sense of community.”

Jake, who attends Fitter for Faith, said “Since starting with Fitter for Faith, my life has improved drastically.

“I have new skills, meeting new people and improving my relationship with God. Fitter for Faith has helped me get out of my comfort zone, be more compassionate to others and also helped me stay clean from alcohol and drugs.

“Ben is teaching me how to coach some boxing skills on a Wednesday, and I hope to continue this in the future. I also must give thanks to Ben because he saw something in me that nobody else did. He has taken a lot of time out of his life to help me deal with personal issues. I am truly grateful.”

The Bishop of Exeter, the Rt. Rev’d Dr Mike Harrison, was given some boxing tips by Ben at the launch event and said Fitter for Faith was “A beacon of hope for the city of Exeter.”

“It is a great example of a Christian outreach project, providing healing, growth, belonging and community, as well as offering people an opportunity to experience the God who loves them and meets them where they are,” he said.

Fitter for Faith is in the process of raising funds to continue and develop – a weekly hot dog and bible study session at the church has just started and Ben is keen to build a network of trained volunteer mentors to walk alongside people in need and link them with appropriate support.

You can[find out more about Fitter for Faith here.](https://exeter.anglican.org/ministry/fitter-for-faith/)