

## Transforming Community Engagement

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Case study written up by the staff of the (Resource) Strategy and Development Unit in discussion with the Revd Al Barrett, Priest-in-Charge of Hodge Hill Church (St Philip and St James C of E Church with the URC), diocese of Birmingham

### Introduction

This case study describes how the congregation of Hodge Hill church found a new model of community engagement after their church building – which had been designed for community purposes as well as for worship – fell into a dangerous state of disrepair, forcing them to move out.

### Background

The church of St Philip and St James in Hodge Hill, Birmingham – situated in one of the 7% most deprived parishes in the Church of England - was built in the 1960s and hailed as a cutting edge multi-purpose building which was used for worship and for a wide range of community purposes, including sport (the nave was even marked out as a badminton court). The congregation were very attached to - and proud of - the building, seeing it as evidence of their identity as a church which truly reached out to the community.

However, structurally, the building was enormously challenging because it was built of concrete and had a flat roof. Large repair bills were the norm and eventually the congregation had to sell one of its clergy houses to help meet the costs. For many years the congregation was unable to meet its parish share because all available funds were channelled into the building. Maintaining the building also absorbed huge amounts of time and energy.

Matters came to a head one Christmas when structural problems with the main roof supporting beams above the nave led the insurers to remove liability cover forcing the congregation to move out of this part of the building. The rest of the building was very cold and uncomfortable for the congregation. The church had a very long established ecumenical relationship with the local United Reformed Church and, at the URC's invitation, moved in with them over the winter. Following this, it was found that the cost of the repairs to the roof would be around £225,000 – far beyond the congregation's resources. The congregation went back briefly to its church building and met for worship using the sports hall in the other half of the building but, towards the end of 2008, eventually had to admit that, due to the estimated cost of repairs and the removal of liability insurance, they could no longer meet there. They accepted the URC's invitation to worship with them on a permanent basis.

In the summer of 2009, the building was demolished with all necessary permissions and judgments due to its dangerous condition. The demolition took place very quickly and many in the congregation found it deeply upsetting. Some were away on holiday and returned to find that the building had gone. People were shocked and grieved.

At around the same time as the church's building was demolished, the parish went into interregnum, which was to last for 22 months. The Revd Al Barrett, who began as priest-

in-charge in September 2010, attributes the fact that the congregation numbers held steady during that time to the resilience of the congregation members and to their care for each other.

## A New Vision and Purpose

By the time that Al Barrett took up his appointment, the congregation had done some of its grieving for its former church building but members still perceived themselves as being the URC's guests rather than as at home. There were niggling little problems - such as who had keys to cupboards and what space the Anglicans could call their own – and they felt insecure.

Al Barrett saw his first task as helping the congregation to establish a new sense of identity, vision and purpose. It was agreed from the outset that this whole process should be undertaken jointly with the URC congregation. The two congregations met for a first 'big conversation' which took place as part of a Sunday service during which the congregation met in small groups and then in one large group to discuss how they would complete the sentence: *'The reason why we are a church in Hodge Hill is.....'*

The answers were gathered together and distilled and the church began to draft a purpose statement. It was notable that the key words that emerged were not about buildings but about values.

## Values

The five key values that the congregation identified were:

- Compassion
- Generosity
- Trust
- Friendship
- Hope

In the following Lent, the congregation explored each value, discussing where they saw it being put into practice around them and in God, what the obstacles were to practising the value, and how the congregation could nurture the value. These discussions were very fruitful and much wisdom emerged. People came to recognise that these values were the stuff of life and also to understand that they saw these values in their neighbours.

## Know Your Church, Know Your Neighbourhood

The next step was to run the 'Know your Church, Know your Neighbourhood' course developed by the diocese of Birmingham and the Church Urban Fund<sup>1</sup>. Several members of the congregation, ranging from the old to the young, participated in the course.

During the course, the congregation first looked inwards at the gifts and skills of its members and at the various groups which met in the URC building. Then it looked outwards - at the different kinds of housing in the community, at the main places of employment in Hodge Hill, at schools and at the other places of gathering. The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cuf.org.uk/thrive-together-birmingham/know-your-church>

congregation also examined neighbourhood statistics and began to make sense of a picture which members had already formed experientially. Al Barrett says that using the data was 'a penny drop moment'.

## Community Engagement

After the course, members of the congregation went out in pairs to visit a variety of local organisations and asked them what were the good things and bad things, their frustrations and their dreams about their community. They came back with many stories of the five values which the congregation had identified being put into practice in the community by those of other faiths and none. For example, one headmaster had told of how a mother had come to him in despair to say that she was being evicted from the rented accommodation in which she and her children lived. The headmaster had gone with her to her flat and had helped her to pack up her belongings and to move her and her family to a new temporary home.

In the light of this and many similar stories, the congregation decided to celebrate Hodge Hill's unsung heroes. Using a grant from the Church Urban Fund's Near Neighbours funding stream<sup>2</sup> the congregation invited the community of Hodge Hill to nominate people who demonstrated one of the five values which the congregation had identified and to tell a little of their story. Also with the help of the grant, the congregation organised a presentation event hosted by a local secondary school and attended by the Lord Mayor.

When the deadline for responses expired, only a trickle of nominations had come in. So, in the course of the following week, members of the congregation visited shops, schools and other institutions to encourage people to make nominations. They found that, as they talked, more and more names popped into people's heads and, a week after the deadline, the church had received 97 nominations. All the nominees were invited to the event at the school and 88 attended with their guests. Snippets of each person's story were told and each was given a cut glass award.

During the evening, everyone was asked what they valued about their community and - assuming that they had two or three people to join with them - what community initiative they would like to start. There were many suggestions, including a gardening group, an Islam awareness group, and a theatre group. Following this event, the church started to connect people up with those of similar interests. Gardeners came together to help clear and re-plant a patch of wasteland, and the church gave a small grant to the man who wanted to start a theatre group. He staged a Christmas pantomime in December 2012 and now plans - with the help of the church - to put on a community Passion Play. Al Barrett comments on the power of this initiative coming from someone from outside the church.



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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cuf.org.uk/near-neighbours/about>

The congregation reaches out to the community in other ways as well. It has developed a partnership with a local youth organisation and meets with them weekly for prayer. It operates a drop-in project at a local community centre – The Hub – which provides opportunities for people to make friends and to give and receive a whole variety of practical support, for example in developing IT skills, managing money, writing CVs, and searching for jobs online. It also runs a play café for young mothers and toddlers which has music and craft activities. The play café acts as a bridge to a monthly Messy Church.

Using the proceeds of the sale of the site of the former church building - which the diocese has allowed the church to keep - the congregation is currently negotiating with the local Council to take on a disused health centre and to turn it into a community house to serve as a place of hospitality and of prayer. The church is in touch with a community of nuns to tap into their wisdom about living in community and they have committed to working alongside the church in this project.

### Working Jointly with the URC

Al Barrett stresses how important it was that the Anglican and URC congregations focused first and foremost on their vision and purpose as a church. The leadership and administrative structures of the joint congregation were of secondary importance and they were worked out along the way as the church agreed its vision and purpose and began to realise them.

Leadership of the church's weekly Sunday worship alternates between the URC and the Anglicans. The worship space is flexible which enables the Anglicans to mark their identity and to be creative in their worship. The two congregations share the church building's running costs equally and meet to work out where the money will come from when additional costs arise.

### Growth

The diocese of Birmingham, through its Transforming Church initiative, is encouraging growth at every level of church life and it is encouraging that the Anglican congregation in Hodge Hill has grown, primarily through contacts made with dechurched people through its work in and with the community. Average Sunday attendance has grown from 60 adults and no children in 2010 to around 80 adults plus 12 children today. Attendance is continuing to grow.

Giving levels have also risen and, through good stewardship in many different ways, the congregation was able to pay its Common Fund in 2012 for the first time in many years.

Looking to the future, Hodge Hill church is taking part in a project to build on existing growth and replicate it. The diocese of Birmingham has received a development funding grant from the Commissioners and the Archbishops' Council to train mission apprentices, combining structured training and mission experience in growing parishes in deprived areas of the city, including Hodge Hill church.

### Conclusion

In summary, out of its experience of homelessness and exile – which Al Barrett describes as '*deeply biblical*' – the congregation of St Philip and St James has developed a new model which is not predicated on having a multi-purpose church building but on discovering different ways to be present in the community, finding out what people are passionate

about and connecting them with each other to help make things happen. The church has found itself able to hold on to its original vision of serving the community but to transform the way in which it realises that vision. In the process, it has begun to weave a new and enduring pattern of worship and presence in the community.

For further information, please contact the Revd Al Barrett at [hodgehillvicar@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:hodgehillvicar@hotmail.co.uk)

### Further Reading

Readers might like to [revisit the paper titled 'Creatively Closing Church Buildings'](#) in Liverpool diocese published in the Resourcing Mission Bulletin in April 2012 which includes case studies exploring how congregations have found new ways of engaging with the community after moving out from their church buildings.