

Focus on Soul Survivor Watford

By Catherine Ellerby, freelance writer, in conversation with the Revd Mike Pilavachi and the Revd Andy Croft, Senior Pastors

Summary

A passion to reach out to young people in Watford, to care for and befriend them unconditionally led to a radical church emerging which is still growing 23 years later. In conversation with Revd Mike Pilavachi and Revd Andy Croft, Soul Survivor's senior pastors, this case study tells the story of the church, its beginnings, its journey so far and how it ministers to all ages while still focusing on the younger age groups.

Introduction

Soul Survivor is no "ordinary" church either in size or style. Meeting in two warehouses in Watford, there are now over a thousand members and the church is still growing.

What began as a church plant 23 years ago for young people has grown into a large and active multigenerational church. With a team of 21 and a programme which includes three weekly Sunday services, numerous activities and community outreach, Soul Survivor now looks very different from its early days, while still with a heart to reach young people.

Looking back to those early days when the church met in a front room, Andy and Mike can see how Soul Survivor Watford has been supported with wisdom - both at the outset, and subsequently - by the Church of England at a time when it was very hard to plant a church outside parish boundaries. As a consequence of that support, Soul Survivor Watford has grown up within the Church of England's structures. 18 months ago, it became a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO) under the joint leadership of Andy and Mike.

Early beginnings

The impetus to plant a church came from Mike's experience of working as a youth minister at St Andrew's church, Chorleywood, about 25 miles from Watford. Mike says:

"As the youth worker I was very aware that in a lively charismatic evangelical church, only a trickle of young people were becoming Christians – it seemed as if whatever we did, we never saw the flood of young people we hoped and prayed for.

"I watched these young people and started to realise that what we considered to be a modern service was just as alien to young people as any high or more traditional church service. I talked to them and found out that despite our efforts, church was not working for them. In fact, rather than feeling welcome, they were thinking "why is that person talking at me and why can't I smoke here? It will help me concentrate..."

A group of eleven people from St Andrew's, including Mike, felt prompted to start a different sort of church, one which would fit within the youth culture of the time. Mike

says “Our church gave permission for a team of us to go to Watford and plant a church. One of the team was Matt Redman who was 18 at the time and had just started university; when I told him I was going to start a church he told me he believed that God was telling him to join us – I told him not to do it and to reconsider but I lost the argument – and as a result he came with us leading the band which turned out to be a central part of what we were trying to do to connect with the young people.”

Connecting with young people

Mike wrote to local schools offering to do assemblies and some accepted. Alongside this, they provided a place where they could invite the young people to come, starting up “Dreggs” café with music, games and food. Everything was aimed at offering young people a place to be and to relax in a comfortable and non-threatening setting.

Mike says: “We took some of our musicians from the group, with Matt heading up the band which did covers of well-known songs – Wonderwall by Oasis was a favourite – along with karaoke..... The band and other leaders had space and time to chat to the kids, play card games with them, start to get to know them a bit”.

The café started attracting young people immediately - first a few came and before long a hundred of them.

Aware that there was a big gap between assemblies and coming to the café for the young people, Mike was anxious not to put them off by offering anything overtly Christian:

“The assemblies involved telling a moral story and letting people know that we were Christians – but inviting them to the café was different. I promised them that if they came we wouldn’t try to convert them... I then went back to the team and made things very clear indeed, that they must not talk about Jesus! We couldn’t break our promise to the kids... The team were open about being Christians; they just didn’t preach to them, instead they cared for and befriended them.”

As a result, some of the young people started talking to the leaders about what was going on in their lives, opening up about the issues which were important to them and the things they were facing. Then some started asking them about their faith and a “rumour” that they met on a Sunday night. Mike says:

“When I told them that the “rumour” was true, they asked if they could come along. It was so natural – they were our friends so they wanted to join us. So the next thing was to find somewhere to meet.

“We hired a school hall and decked it out just like the café but on a Sunday. The band was the same as at the café. It all felt very familiar to them – they knew them already and it felt like their place with their people there playing music. One went up to Matt and asked if he was going to play Wonderwall and Matt told him he was going to play a song which he’d written himself.”

Mike says that he thinks of what they did then as building a bridge between the team and the young people and walking over the bridge to where they were; then walking back bringing the young people too. The same principle stands today in reaching young people, he says: “What we sometimes don’t realise, even now, is that church is a frightening thing and teenagers are asking “am I allowed to go?” or “what if I do something wrong?” We focused just on making relationships which allowed us to be in their world.”

From then the church continued to grow – young people became Christians and then told others: *“they were some of the best evangelists because they just talked to their friends – it all happened so naturally.”*

Looking back, Andy Croft who co-leads Soul Survivor, Watford with Mike, says the approach taken by the team was excellent practice for what was to come: *“In those early days, the focus was on cultural relevance, relationships with young people and then bringing young people into a space where they were exposed to worship and the Lord.”*

There were clear signs that God was moving, for example, on one occasion the church’s sound system, worth £3,500, was stolen from a congregation member’s car. Within an hour of a phone call informing him of the theft, a business man phoned Mike saying that God had told him to ring and say that there was a cheque for £3,500 in the post with a message saying: *“God says never let money keep you from your ministry with young people.”*

Andy continues; *“Another time a girl brought her sister in because she had fallen over in the road. But the girl had been met by the Holy Spirit and became a Christian. Her mother also came to faith through her daughter.”*

Although he says that Soul Survivor, Watford has never seen a time of miracles since those early days, it has continued to see God move in different ways and has grown to its present size – a large worshipping community of 1,100.

How has the church evolved?

The church has evolved from being a church just for young people. It has members ranging in age from 20–65 but much of the congregation is made up of people in their 40s with children. There are 100 children in the children’s club.

Mike explains this evolution: *“The reason we’ve become like this is that everyone grew up! I had assumed that young people would move on, but whenever I ask people about what they planned to do they always say “Why would I want to leave?” Some have got married and now some have children so we now have a challenge to keep investing in the next generations.”*

The pattern and style of services on Sundays reflects what they are trying to achieve to reach the different groups and different ages.

There is a 9am service of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of every month – all the other Sunday services are weekly. The 10.30am service has an all age focus with families and children’s work. A 4.30pm service caters for people in their 20s and 30s.

The 7pm Sunday service was aimed at young people but is increasingly moving away from being exclusive to youth and becoming more all age. Some changes are being made to this service, recognising that what young people want in church is changing, but the focus is on evolution rather than revolution. Mike says:

“We’re still trying to stay at the cutting edge of youth culture. When we started, young people wanted to be different and radical and to do things apart from their parents. Now increasingly young people like to be in a family environment, worshipping among people of all ages - we’ve become a multigenerational church.”

The 4.30pm service was started as an experiment with a different teaching style in response to a need to engage better with people in their 20s and 30s. It has now been going for eight years and numbers have grown from 60 to over 150.

Mike says: *“Many in this age group say that they have struggled to find a church where they feel at home. So we’re trying to provide something for them. We’ve listened to what they are saying, things like: “When I was in my teens I wanted to change the world; now the world is changing me...” and asking: “How do I know what is the right career path? When should I settle down? How can I find a partner? How can I stay faithful to my partner? Life is harder than I thought...”*

I’ve realized that everything is done within a culture – even Jesus ministered within a culture - and we as the church have to respond to that. I’ve learned to listen to what people are saying and we do our best to offer services and activities which are helpful to different groups and ages.”

Discipleship

Alongside the Sunday worshipping communities, helping people to grow in their faith is another area where Soul Survivor is changing and adapting all the time. Andy says that they are currently looking again at how to disciple people. *“We’re trying to reflect the context we’re in now – in modern culture which is actively hostile to the Christian faith, people need to know more than ever why they believe what they believe. Thirty years ago, people had a foundation of knowing the Bible but young people today don’t have that foundation. They don’t know the scriptures and don’t look to the Bible as a source of authority.”*

To help address this, the church is challenging the congregation on why they hold their beliefs through a unique teaching series for the 7pm service on the Apostles Creed.

Everyone who comes is also encouraged to join a connect group which come in many shapes, sizes and forms: there is one for new people on the basics of faith; some are more traditional Bible study and prayer groups; and others are very different. This includes one group which goes to the gym together, a crochet and knitting group and even a wine tasting and Bible study group.

There are clear signs of spiritual growth. Not only are young people coming to faith and growing in discipleship, they are also going on to become church leaders. In the last five years, over 25 people have been ordained or are training for ordained ministry.

Growth and the future of Soul Survivor Watford

Growth in the church has been slow and steady over recent years. While the church has “grown up” in terms of average age, and is involved in a broader range of activities than in the early days it still has the same vision to embrace people where they are and to be a place of welcome. Mike says:

“In everything we are doing we as a team of pastors try to foster a sense of unity and family – we love each other and want that to be evident and shared with everyone who comes or who we’re in contact with.

“Some of our recent growth has been through us being involved with Christians Against Poverty in Watford, and we also have a huge mothers and toddlers group now. There are lots of events and we eat a lot together!”

One of the two warehouses has been developed into a café which is used a lot for events, for inviting people in, e.g. after the 4.30pm meeting, everyone invites their friends to have a meal together.

Mike continues: *“We try to have a range of different events so that there is something for everyone – alongside our services and meetings, we have purely social events, and some with a bit more input. For example, we held a series of talks in January on the new year’s resolution theme, another evening on CAP and one with a health theme when we invited a doctor, a nutritionist and a fitness expert (all of them Christians) to come to tell us about how to keep fit and eat well. People really liked it and they said there was a nice ambience.”*

The church is involved in a Watford Trust for homeless people and in outreach to other groups in the town for people in crisis. *“These are lonely days,”* says Mike, *“and people are longing to belong.”*

Being a welcoming church is a strength and ensuring people feel loved and at home, wherever they are in their lives or in their faith is a priority for the team. *“We don’t always put on overtly evangelistic events but want people to enjoy coming and feel comfortable with us. One lady said recently, ‘Is it ok if I keep coming even though I’m not a believer? I love the community atmosphere.’ I pray that one day she will come to know Jesus, but I’m glad that she wants to come, wants to get to know us and is part of our community.”*

Resources

The church doesn’t have a formal membership and because those who come are mostly young, many don’t have much money to give. *“We don’t make a big deal of giving,”* says Mike but amazingly people give generously (between £50,000 and £60,000 per month).

The church has seen God work in a powerful way, providing funds for extending the ministry through the generosity of the church family. At a recent gift day which focused on funds needed to finish the café, Mike told the church that £115,000 was needed:

“We met together, people offered their gifts and pledges and then the counters told me that people had given £195,000. I asked them to check three times and when I received the final confirmation by phone Andy and I were at the front of church and were so moved we were in tears.”

Staffing

The church is supported by a large staff team – some are full time, some part-time and some are volunteers. Alongside the staff team many of the church family are involved, people who want to serve and contribute to the ministry and mission of the church.

Soul Survivor – the Festivals

For many people, the name “Soul Survivor” is also synonymous with Festivals for young people which have grown out of the same ministry. There are now five different summer venues and each year 30,000 teenagers are welcomed to these events – 8,000 bookings have already been made for this year. Momentum, a similar Festival for “older” young people in their twenties also continues to thrive.

Both the church and Festivals are led by Mike and Andy, but they are two separate Trusts and deliberately so. Mike says: *“We want to maintain total integrity and so ensure that in no way do the festivals subsidise the church’s ministry or vice versa.”*

In practice there is some overlap however as people from the church feel connected to and enjoy the Festivals themselves with many going along to help in various roles.

Mike says: *“Two guys from our church who help regularly now and are key members of the team came to us from a background of homelessness and alcoholism. The church loved them and now they are part of the Festivals. Others from the church community come to cook, steward, pray for people – it is a huge thing for the church.”*

Conclusion

Soul Survivor, Watford is an example of how a focus on young people has led to dramatic growth over more than two decades. As a model it shows how young people who have been engaged from their teens have continued in faith and commitment to serving the church, their community and, in some cases, have gone on to become church leaders.

For further information, please go to www.soulsurvivorwatford.co.uk/#welcome