

Beech Hill Renewal Report

Overall Summary

PROJECT AIMS

The project was to renew the Baptist Christian witness at Beech Hill after Beech Hill Chapel effectively closed in January 2019. The initial intention was to hold a regular Sunday service aiming at about 25 regular congregants, 50% from the local area (previously Beech Hill Chapel had been composed almost entirely of people from *outside* the village). While there was always considered the likelihood that Beech Hill would be strongly supported by Shinfield Community Church, there was the aim for Beech Hill to sustain itself financially, effectively 'paying' for its share of support – clerical, upkeep, pastoral etc.

The renewal also incorporated:

1. **Worship** - a regular worship service that celebrates God's presence in Beech Hill, moving from monthly services in 2019 to weekly services in 2020.
2. **Evangelism** – developing relationships with local people and organisations to sensitively share the good news about Jesus;
3. **Discipleship** – small groups, teaching and activities that help people to grow in their relationship with God,
4. **Service** – seeking ways to lovingly serve the village that demonstrate God's goodness,
5. **Family** – building rich relationships within the church that enable people sense and feel the love of God and provide an environment that promotes mental, emotional and spiritual growth in Him.

OPPORTUNITY

At the time the renewal was initiated there was a strong possibility that a Grazeley New Town would be built with about 15000 homes The proposed Grazeley New Town had the strong backing of three local authorities (Wokingham, Reading and West Berks) being their preferred option for fulfilling their housing building quota. Beech Hill Renewal would then be seen as 'a viable congregation in Beech Hill of strategic importance either as a point of church growth itself or as a 'jumping off point' for a new congregation' in Grazeley New Town.

THE TEAM AND SUPPORT

The Renewal Team was composed of seven individuals including the Pastor (Nathan) and Associate Pastor (Sallyann). Apart from the pastors, all members of the team were volunteers.

To kick start the project, financial support of £10,00 was given by local churches and the SCBA (£7500 from churches in the local BU cluster, £2500 from SCBA)



PROPHECY

In a prayer meeting of pastors from the local Baptist Cluster held in the Beech Hill Chapel as the project was being planned there was a prophetic sense of Christ's resurrection and renewal.

Shinfield Community Church in their prayers and meetings sensed the team like a small river that cuts a great canyon, steady, small, yet powerful over time –making a deep impression.

CHALLENGES

- To the surprise of many, the New Town proposal was turned down after the Beech Hill Renewal project got under way due to safety concerns regarding the nearby atomic weapons establishment at Aldermaston.
- The renewal team also had to deal with the pandemic just as they began their project.

VERY FRUITFUL

Both these factors altered the tactics of the project but it has, by God's grace been remarkably fruitful in achieving its goals as can be seen in the Growth/Decline, Missional Success section below.

Growth / Decline and Missional Success

The following all demonstrate the fruit of this church renewal

- **MONTHLY JOINT SERVICE**



This is held in Beech Hill Memorial Hall which is equidistant between the Baptist Chapel and Anglican church. The venue is accessible to those with impaired mobility and for parents with buggies, prams etc. It is also warm, modern and well lit.

- The average attendance is about 30 people (in a village of 250). Around 80-

90% of the congregation are local (some of the renewal team come from outside the village). This exceeds the initial target of 50% from local community;

- There is a high correlation between those attending Coffee Morning and those attending the service;
- The service has served to help members of Shinfield Community Church to develop their gifting e.g. the person playing the keyboard is comfortable playing in a smaller church setting;

- **ALPHA**

Two online Alpha's – the first Alpha had enough guests to merit two small groups. There has been lasting fruit. People came from a variety of backgrounds – non-Christian, those who had discontinued their childhood faith, those who had experienced an encounter with Jesus and wanted to know more and those who sought deeper inspiration in their faith.

A very high number of those who came to Alpha went on to continue to grow their faith. Many now play key roles in church activities in Beech Hill and Shinfield since Alpha and help others to meet Jesus and grow in their faith.

The group led to the establishment of new weekly discipleship group to support those who wanted to grow in their faith.

- **COFFEE MORNING**



A weekly coffee morning is held in the community hall which is given to the church free of charge. In a village of 250 people, weekly attendance is about 12-15, almost all from the village or related to people in the village. The coffee morning has been immensely fruitful: *'An Oasis in my week.'* (Facebook comment) *'Never stop this [the coffee morning]':*

- Two attendees are now volunteers on the team – as is the local Anglican vicar!
- It has become a place where grandparents, children and grandchildren meet – being a special place of intra family connection as well as families connecting with others;
- The coffee morning has been a place to help people rediscover their childhood faith, others have found it to be a real help to restore them in times of challenge and difficulty;
- Of those attending about a third to a half attend the monthly church service
- The coffee morning has become a key feature of village life and has highlighted the church as a place of love and welcome, with the team invited to e.g. village meetings, highlighted in village survey etc

- **GRAZELEY SCHOOL**

A member of the Beech Hill Renewal Team leads members of the team to produce termly assemblies in the local primary school that are well received. Initially these were online and then moved to in person this academic year:



- *'Thank you so much for this Collective Worship. It is lovely and spot on!'* (Julia Easton, Deputy Head).
- The team also led a successful 'Prayer Space' over a week in the Summer term of 2022 where every pupil had the opportunity to explore a space in the school garden that had been designed to support and encourage prayer;

- **EASTER PASSION PLAY**



A Passion Play by members of Beech Hill Anglican Church (St.Mary's) and members of the Beech Hill Renewal Team and Shinfield Community Church. The play was held on School Green Shinfield, which was agreed as the best location for 'drawing a crowd.' But the event itself was organised by a member of the Beech Hill Renewal Team and a member of St.Mary's Church Beech Hill. This partnership between the two churches, with members from each bringing expertise in different areas. Other local Anglican churches also supported the event providing actors and organising refreshments:

- Estimated attendance 200-300 people e.g. 100 children went on the Easter Egg Hunt following the play
- *'what a beautiful morning it was. Thank you to all involved.'* (Facebook) *'What a fantastic occasion, Beautifully done so lovely to be with so many people.'* (Facebook)
- Play featured twice on BBC Berkshire radio;
- Live animals came from a farm near Beech Hill – Roman Cavalry Horses, donkey for Jesus triumphal entry to Jerusalem – due to a connection one of the Beech Hill organisers had;

PARTNERING WITH OTHER CHURCHES

There has been a strong ecumenical dimension to the renewal. Jesus said that all people will know we are his disciples when we love one another and there has been a powerful witness in the partnership between the two churches. There is a sense that the Beech Hill Renewal Team are also implicitly serving the renewal of God's church within the village and this of course includes the Anglican church. There are close relations between the team and members of the Anglican church and also between the clergy and the Pastor and Associate Pastor of Shinfield Community church (who are also part of the Beech Hill Renewal Team):

- Prayer walk – Beating the Bounds
- Passion Play (see above);
- Monthly Joint Service (see above);
- Members of Beech Hill renewal team invited to attend weekly daytime bible study led by Anglican church;

BEECH HILL – A TRAINING GROUND FOR CHURCH PLANTING

There has been huge development of the team. People have undertaken roles they previously would never have envisaged undertaking e.g. leading Alpha. They have become somewhat experts in church planting and give Shinfield Community Church significant expertise to plant again.

Way Forward

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Jesus mission was both physical and spiritual. The Coffee Morning which has been extremely fruitful in nurturing physical (and mental) well being. It has also been developing a spiritual dimension. We already offer prayer, share our stories of God at work. But we are now moving to a regular time of prayer and bible study at some point in the morning (possibly at the start or towards the end of the morning). This will be invitational i.e. not all who come will want to attend. But through this we hope to point increasingly to Jesus – the way, the truth and the life.

We are also not sure what shape this will take and will look to try out different things. We also envisage that it may act in the place of a church worship service for some in the village.

SCHOOL

We continue to provide assemblies to the school and are open to exploring further ways to support the school and share Jesus as our capacity and resources allow.

MONTHLY SERVICE

We look to continue this throughout the year. The team continues to keep an open mind with the possibility of a more regular service with the Anglican church if resources allow