

HOPE BAPTIST CHAPEL



Real Hope in Hebden Bridge



Nearly 100 people attending a candlelit carol service is probably what many people would expect to see in an old Baptist chapel on a Sunday evening in late December. But at Hope Baptist Chapel in the pretty Pennine town of Hebden Bridge, it was a complete contrast to last year, when only one visitor joined the two dozen church members. As well as encouraging the members, it was also a fitting final service for the Revd Allan Wolfenden, who had served the church with the help of financial support from Home Mission, during a period of transformation.

Only a few years ago, the large, listed building was leaking in many places and rotting in others. Membership had diminished to a remnant of mostly elderly locals and there was even a rumour that the church had closed. Now, with the help of half a million pounds from English Heritage and grants from many other sources, the buildings are being restored and everyone knows this church is alive. Six new members were baptised last Easter in the baptismal pool that was retiled after lying unused for 17 years.

Prayer and discussion by church members has been informed by public consultation. Although

early proposals involved remodelling the chapel interior, feedback from local people revealed that they valued the cathedral-like sanctuary – a unique community space in a town that has many venues for performing and visual arts. This has guided the church in its aim to create a ‘... valuable community resource’ which, rooted in Christian beliefs, is:

- » concerned about the wholeness and wellbeing of everybody,
- » a safe place for reflection, discussion and spiritual development,
- » space that brings people together and helps to build community.

The result is a church that does much more than open its doors on a Sunday morning and run midweek Bible studies and prayer meetings – although it does these things too. Often working with partner organisations, the church provides a venue for a variety of events that contribute to the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of residents and visitors to Hebden Bridge – a town that has a reputation for being ‘funky’ and ‘alternative’.



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Over the past year, the chapel building has been filled by people attending events as varied as the award-winning Hebden Bridge Blues Festival and a French-style café bar when the Tour de France came through town in July. *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot addressed a packed audience from the pulpit about environmental issues, and the concluding event for the Ted Hughes Festival took place in the church. Various singing groups are now using the chapel because of its unique acoustics and natural reverberation.

Other events, which may attract smaller numbers, are given importance by the church. Midweek meditation and a monthly reflective service make extensive use of silence, and the church has also offered courses in Mindfulness. The process of testing fresh ways of getting alongside people and sharing the love of Christ continues. The December candlelit carol service had been preceded by a Christmas Tree Festival, an a capella music workshop and day workshop using music and dance to explore the Beatitudes. The programme for January included a 'Blue Monday' event to encourage positive thinking about this time of year, as well as a video/discussion event based on the Billy Graham film 'The Cross'.

The recent offer of ongoing Home Mission support is a huge encouragement to the church as it now seeks a new minister. Part of this process will include reflection about new models of ministry and governance as the church continues to find ways in which a church founded in 1777 can serve the real spiritual needs of people in 2015.

Please pray:

- » Give thanks for the grants which have enabled the buildings to be restored and let everyone know that this church is alive
- » Give thanks for the ways in which the church buildings are being used, and pray for the people who come into them for a variety of events
- » For the process of seeking a new minister, and for a clear sense of God's vision for the future
- » For ways in which Hope Baptist can be used to bring hope to people in the 21st century



www.hope-baptist.org.uk

Gerard Liston

