

## “You’ve created a real sense of community”

The disruption of the pandemic resulted in **Little Kingshill Baptist Church** bringing a much-needed amenity to its village. Interview with Martin Hatfield.



**L**ittle Kingshill is a small village, about four and a half miles north west of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. It has one school, one pub and one church - Little Kingshill Baptist Church. Martin Hatfield has served as the minister there since 2015, and early in his time he placed

a whiteboard in the summer fete asking residents what was missing from the village: a shop was the top answer; closely followed by café.

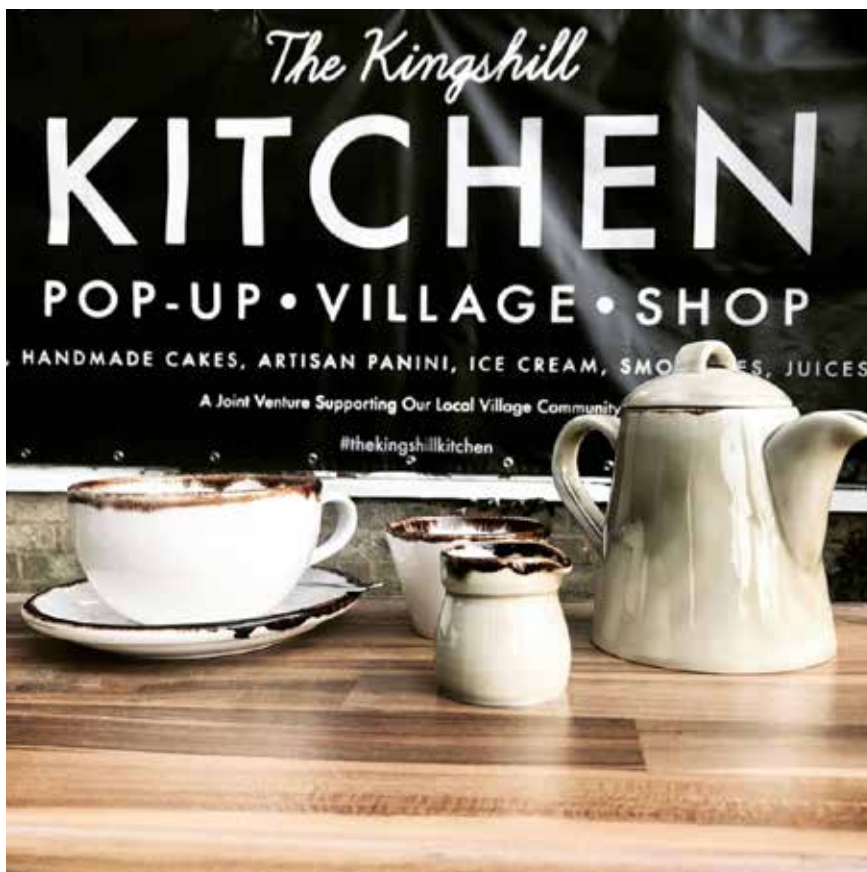
“We’ve always known the village would benefit from this,” says Martin, “and running a coffee shop is something we as a church have talked about for a long time. Our building is an ideal place opposite the village green, near a play area. However, once you start to drill into the detail it becomes more problematic. You really need someone to manage the day-to-day running – and could we support that? Would we have enough volunteers?”

It meant the idea of a church-based coffee shop remained just that – an idea. Until this year.

In January Martin received a call from another Little Kingshill resident. Silvio ran a chain of coffee shops in London which were all shut as the country had entered another national lockdown. He had noticed the church hall was closed, that members were meeting on Zoom, and had a proposition. “Would you like to open a coffee shop in the church hall in the village?”

“The question felt like a dream come true”, says Martin. Silvio proposed he move some of his equipment from London into the church hall, where he would serve quality Italian coffee and stock Italian delicatessen products, bread and milk and operate as an essential business. Deacons and trustees were supportive, and within a couple of weeks the idea had the church’s backing. Silvio would have rent-free access to the space and donate a proportion of the profits; but both he and Martin were clear that providing a service for the village was the overriding factor.

Silvio worked to spruce up the hall, giving it a lick of paint and new flooring, and the new venture opened on Easter Monday.



---

Initially it was as a takeaway-only, but when restrictions eased around a month or so later, they were able to offer outdoor seating, “even using the marquee that we used to take to Soul Survivor,” Martin pointed out.

Martin says the reaction was almost universally positive. Word quickly spread on Facebook and the coffee shop was very busy from the start. Around four weeks in, a friend of Martin’s remarked: “You’ve already created a real sense of community around this.”

“This was fantastic to hear,” says Martin. “It’s had a massive impact in the village. Somebody even said it’s the most exciting thing to happen in Little Kingshill. It’s undoubtedly serving a need in our community. It’s something that people have asked for – and we are part of that.”

Martin says, “the church is meeting people who’ve never previously set foot on the church premises, and it has opened the eyes of others in the village to our genuine desire to serve Little Kingshill.

“It is providing hospitality: time and again in the gospels we see Jesus and friends gathered around a table and offering a place for others to do likewise feels like a very missional thing to do - particularly at a time when residents are spending more time in the village due to fewer commutes and working from home.

“It’s the little stories too,” Martin continues. “We had contact from a local florist – she’d never previously had an outlet to sell in the village, and wondered if the coffee shop could sell flowers? We were happy for this. Then one day an 80 year old man rushed back in after finishing his coffee to buy his wife some flowers – it was the first time he’d been able to do this in years. In the last few weeks we’ve been able to employ some young adults to give them work experience, and that’s been really well received.”

The big question is what happens next. The formal arrangement between the church and Silvio ends in September, and there will be demand for the hall for other

activities. Silvio has appreciated working in the village where he lives – but will he want to carry on? And if he doesn’t, what will the church do?

“I want to see something continue, and I think as a church we would be missing a trick if it doesn’t, but we’ll see,” says Martin. “It has opened the eyes of our fellowship to just how differently church might need to operate.

“I just know it was the best chance of running a coffee shop we’ve had. There was a strong sense of God being in the process right at the beginning. It was very clearly accepted by the church, and it felt like a movement of the Spirit. For me, this is one of the best things the church has done.”

He adds: “Covid has provided us with this unique opportunity – seizing the moment and taking a risk was vital, and doing so has given life to the building and fellowship at what has otherwise been an often difficult time.”

---