

STORIES FROM THE GROUND

Whatever comes your way, go for it

Abbey Baptist Church in Reading has seen transformation as it has grown to become an international, intercultural church in the past year.



‘What a difference a year makes ... from (in essence) a handful of elderly white native British people ... to a packed international, intercultural congregation ... and God did it ... when a small church dares to go with God and think big! June 2021 to June 2022.’

That was a message shared on the Facebook page of Abbey Baptist Church, Reading, earlier this summer, accompanied by contrasting pictures of an empty sanctuary with a full one. Quite a transformation – what’s the story behind it?

The church is led by Julia Binney, who joined in 2018 from Knaphill Baptist Church in Surrey to become the first female minister in its 382 year history. Abbey is one of the oldest Baptist churches and had been without a minister for around three years. It had been declining for longer, and Julia (whose husband Jim is a retired Baptist minister) wasn’t sure if she had been called to help the church die. However, she arrived with a mindset of simply taking opportunities, trusting that God saw a future for the church, and seeing where that would lead.

In the first year she tweaked things a little, introducing some small but significant steps, developing a blended approach to worship - building on the liturgical tradition of the church, but nothing too radical. The church became involved with the local winter night shelter, opening its doors each week, which began to give the fellowship confidence. A timeline of the history of the church was produced to be part of a town-wide event, which helped the church move away from being stuck in tradition to celebrating its heritage. Due to Julia’s interest in mental health, they planned to set up a Renew Wellbeing space.

Then Covid came. Due to the church's liturgical tradition and an elderly congregation, Julia prepared and wrote out the service each week, delivering it to those who were not online.

The lockdowns saw a number of developments. The church offered its building as a storeroom and distribution facility for Reading Red Kitchen, a charity feeding around 60 refugees every day housed in the nearby George Hotel. Another opportunity came for Care4Calais to have a drop-in centre to receive clothing. Stabbings in the nearby Forbury Gardens in June 2020 led the church to open its doors for prayer.

Come September 2021 the church met for a vision day. "Here we really had a sense that our future lay in transitioning to becoming an international, intercultural church," explains Julia. (Reading is one of the most diverse places in the country, and the church building is also used by three other congregations: a Tamil, West African and a Brazilian, Portuguese-speaking one.)

One of the members who owns a language school suggested the church linked with Two-nineteen, a group which helps churches set up English language conversation cafés. A number of Hong Kongers had settled in Reading, the church knew the pastor of a Chinese congregation and were aware of a need for conversation classes. Abbey also linked up with the Welcome Refugee Network, and the classes began.

Helped by connections made through working with the aforementioned charities, around 30 or 40 people started coming in the first week. The classes have met a need and continue

to grow, and this in turn has impacted the congregation. Julia initially led each week and Jim shared a little reflection at the end of each class, and while it's not overtly evangelistic, he invited people to the church's Sunday service.

Though many weren't Christians when they came to the café (apart from people from Iran), dozens have responded to the invitation and Abbey is now looking at a multi-cultural congregation of at least 100. As well as the Iranian refugees, it includes people from countries such as Libya, Romania and El Salvador.

"We didn't do it to grow the church," says Julia, "We did it to help people with English because we knew there was a need in a place as multicultural as Reading.

"But God is good and the church is just completely transformed."

One reason they feel included is the written service sheets Julia originally began producing in lockdown can, with a click of a button, be produced in Farsi, traditional Chinese, Spanish and Portuguese and more. She says "it has been majorly, majorly important in helping the newcomers connect."

Inevitably life leads to life: there have been four baptismal services this year so far including one of the local volunteers with Reading Red Kitchen who is now running the new youth club. Newcomers have set up a toddler group and re-established the children's work on a Sunday morning. An *Alpha* course has launched with around 35 attending and the Renew Wellbeing café has opened.

The age demographic of the church has plummeted.

People are inviting others. The number of refugees continues to grow. Hong Kongers who've been in Reading for years are now coming as well. The church has also welcomed several younger white British people from Reading because they're interested in what's happening. "The vast majority of the original congregation have remained (only one has left) and have been wonderful", says Julia. Over the years they had become risk adverse, but have embraced the new developments.

"There's no clever strategy here," she continues. "This was a group of largely older folk thinking 'What can we do? How can we help?' It's not planned, but it's been extraordinary – and that's where God takes you sometimes.

"There are so many different facets to it, but it just boils down to whatever comes your way, go for it.

"Why not, rather than why?"

