

TOWN-CENTRE CHURCHES ARE DIFFERENT

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As its name implies, Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford is a town-centre church. Nobody lives around us – rather we are surrounded by offices, the central library, and a university campus. The challenge for us has been to develop a role specific to our situation. Thus in addition to all the normal activities of a large church, four days a week we run a café – no doubt because it is the cheapest place in town, it is a busy café and our volunteers are often run off their feet. People come in for the food – they also come in to use our computers – we have three of them, all with a fast broadband connection to the internet. Twice a week we run clubs for people with mental health problems referred to us by social services; every other Saturday we run a child contact centre for broken families referred to us by the courts. In addition, we have started up a community resource centre to help under-privileged people tap into mainstream services – in our context these under-privileged people are mainly black Africans, who have come to England and who take menial jobs, because they don't know how to get recognition for the qualifications they already have (Lest there be misunderstanding, those who run the resource centre are not whites, but rather professional black Africans who have 'made it' in British society). The important point to understand is that we can run a café, our mental health clubs, the child contact centre, the community resource centre, precisely because we are a town-centre church, and not a neighbourhood church on some local estate.

But there is another way in which we have developed our service to the community. As a result of having spent just under £2 million on revamping our Edwardian building into premises fit for the 21st century, we have found that many groups in the community wish to use our premises. If, for instance, Jamie Oliver wants to launch his latest book in Chelmsford, then it is to our church he comes. If the local university wants to find space for an introductory course for 300 nurses, then it is to our church they come. If the Chief Executive of Essex County Council wishes to address his staff, then it is to our church that he & his staff come. As a result of such bookings, we have a minimum of 1000 non-church people come through our premises every week. From a Gospel perspective, the encouraging feature is that for many of these non-church people our church is a revelation, because it is different. This difference lies not just in the comfortable surroundings, but in the distinctive 'feel' to the place: in part this arises from the various symbols around pointing to Jesus and his love; but above all it arises from the gracious welcome given by the church centre staff and volunteers.

Another feature of being a town-centre church is that people with no church connection will sign up for one of our Alpha courses. Some of these people see our Alpha publicity as a result of coming to a secular course or event being held at the church. Others on their way to the shops see our Alpha banner and decided to give us a try. While yet others find us on the web. And they come to us because we are accessible, because we are a town-centre church.

What is true about us, will in different and yet related ways be true of other town-centre churches. We are different from most other churches. We are not neighbourhood churches. This difference provides us with a challenge – a challenge to do church differently. Its not easy – but it is rewarding.

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