Reimagining Church & Congregation

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church

Question: How might we move towards a vision for the renewal of congregational life by: starting with one another’s assets, not our deficits; inclusive approaches to liturgy, worship and day-to-day communal life; and seeing that God is giving the church everything it needs for the renewal of its life in the people who find themselves to be on the edge?

Let me tell you about my church, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in the heart of the West End in London.

We gather about 70-80 people on a Sunday. We most sing traditional hymns accompanied by the pipe organ, and sometimes I get my guitar out and we sing a modern hymn accompanied by the piano.

We have prayers, Bible readings, a sermon, and that’s it. You might think, therefore, that reimagining our congregation would start with refreshing our worship.

But you’d be wrong. We’ve started somewhere else entirely.

Five years ago my church, we took the bold decision to appoint a Communities Minister, to help us reach out into the diverse communities around us in central London. It was 'bold' because it would be funded from reserves, and would take us into a negative budget for several years.

The balancing of commercial viability with courage in ministry is a hallmark of churches such as ours, where the work before us will always outstrip our resources to meet the need.

From the homeless and vulnerable of the city, to the hidden elderly, to carers and toddlers, we have explored ways of using our building to help people progress, belong, and find meaningful relationships.

Always resistant to 'doing charity', we instead seek to practice reciprocity, inviting people to join with us as part of their own journey.

The invitation of HeartEdge to see commercial viability, compassion in ministry, and congregational and cultural development as all being facets of a coherent whole will be vital to us as we seek to find ways of offering sustainable and transformative ministry over the coming years.

And then, we re-imagined our congregation again a year or so later, when we became the first Baptist church to conduct a same sex marriage.

Except it wasn't really a re-imagining; it was more of a re-discovery of who we are as a congregation before God.

To realise that it mattered deeply to us that \*everyone\* belongs with us, because everyone absolutely belongs with God, was an old insight newly found.

This commitment to inclusion has both won and lost us friends, and is the beginning and not the end of a journey of belonging.

We have unexpectedly found ourselves in the media, with over ten million people watching the film of me conducting a same sex wedding service, where the pop singer Sam Smith turned up.

We have become very involved with Christians at Pride, and are finding new ways and new courage to publicly state our conviction that God's love extends to all.

Our membership of HeartEdge is challenging us to continue finding new ways of being church in an old building, and to find new ways of communicating the love of God to the great diversity of humanity that walks past our door each week.

I hope these little snapshots give you an idea of what reimagining Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church is looking like at the moment.