



“Putting a smile on the face of the building”

Camberley Baptist Church, by ministers
Richard and Fran Bellingham

Camberley Baptist Church (CBC) has a long history. It is the oldest church in the town and the building predates that of Sandhurst Military Academy which was the catalyst for the building of the new town of Camberley. However, while the building is large, the congregation is small and vulnerable to closure.

Some years ago, CBC was a part of the Three Counties Baptist Church, three churches on the borders of Surrey, Hampshire and Berkshire. They shared everything, including leadership, charitable status, and resources. The hope was that this union of three small churches would ignite mission and church growth.

However, the Three Counties Baptist Church has now folded, with one of the churches closing, another leaving the Baptist fold and CBC continuing with reduced numbers. When speaking to church members they say the disentanglement of Three Counties was very painful and protracted. They viewed the whole merger of the churches as a failure on many levels. We are very grateful the previous minister here spent so much time and energy in this matter.

Our mandate on being called to CBC was to love the congregation and build community in whatever way we felt fit. We have the building which is reasonably well resourced and the support of the membership to try something different. The first thing we did was start litter picking around the buildings, engaging in conversation with people passing by. This gradually led to a regular coffee morning and intentional links with local housing associations, health providers, mental health groups, local counsellors and politicians. The coffee morning has become a hub where other agencies occasionally come to promote themselves and provide social capital.

When we arrived, many in the community thought that the church had closed, but by repainting the doors, litter picking, tidying the garden area, opening the doors for hospitality to all, as one person said, “you are putting a smile on the face of the building”. There has been no mission activity other than simply being present and hospitable. There have been no evangelistic campaigns. And yet, by the grace of God things are happening, the congregation is slowly growing, and it is none of our doing. As Jesus said, he will build his church.

When we first arrived at CBC we found an old communion cup, in two pieces, each part in a different cupboard. We took it to the local repair café, who did sterling work in knocking the cup back into shape. While it is unusable as a communion cup, (the insides are rusty), it sits on our communion table as a reminder. God is the one who takes the broken, the forgotten, the dismembered, and fragile and puts them back together creating something new. It might look a little bit as before, but has a new function and purpose. In the case of the communion cup it is used for flowers, or lifted symbolically during the communion service.

We have only been at CBC a year, but it has been an exciting ride and we are looking forward to seeing what the Holy Spirit has in store for the church over the coming years. If there is one thing we have been learning it is that church growth doesn't come from anything we do or say, it simply comes from our being obediently living out the gospel in our daily lives, opening the doors and inviting all to come and have a coffee.

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