



“People are desperate and don’t need entertainment; they need Jesus”

Rye Lane Chapel has seen lives transformed in its community through a combination of evangelism and responding to local needs. Pastor Phil Woolley shares the church’s story

STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Rye Lane Chapel in Peckham, South East London, is a very old church. It was established in 1818, has been led by 10 great men of God over 200 years, and I am very aware that I stand on the shoulders of giants. I have been leading since July 2021. While the demographics have changed dramatically—shifting from a white church to a black majority church over the last 50 years—the faithfulness of those who prayed for its future has remained constant. Many people have prayed for the future of this church over all its years.

A SPIRITUAL SHIFT: WORSHIP AND HUMILITY

The church had been hit hard by Covid, and in 2021 there were almost no children or teenagers. The average age of the membership was in the high 60s. It was in danger of closing in the next 15 years.

The church had already begun to pray for the Holy Spirit to teach them about worship and abiding in His presence, so when I joined it felt like I hit the ground running. I had cut my teeth in praise, worship, evangelism and discipleship, and these experiences shape how I lead the church today.

In our worship, we wanted to create space for the Holy Spirit

to minister, so we made changes early on, moving away from the traditional ‘hymn-prayer sandwich’ model to create an atmosphere where people could worship more freely. We introduced modern songs while still honouring hymns.

We focused on specific prayers for revival based on 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people... will humble themselves and pray... then I will hear from heaven.” We also took to heart the challenge in Revelation 2 regarding the Ephesian church—we didn’t want to work hard but forget our first love. Jesus must always come first. Prayer and the preaching of God’s word have always been fundamental in the life of this church.

PARTNERING FOR EVANGELISM: LONDON CITY MISSION

One of the most significant shifts at Rye Lane was the way we partner with London City Mission (LCM). For decades, this has been through one missionary. But LCM have restructured and now operate in an Ephesians 4 model, equipping all for the work of ministry. So instead of having one missionary do the work for us, we now work with a team that trains our congregation in evangelism and in one case, youth leadership. They’re helping us with so many different things. This training has given church

members the confidence to engage in prayer walks and door knocking evangelism in the local housing estates.

An example is one of our church members Catherine, who has an immense love for her neighbours, and sprung to life after attending training. She gently led a woman named Linda—someone who had experienced a horrendous childhood of trauma—to the church. When Linda was baptised, she said “I felt like something was free... for the first time in my life, I have a Father who loves me.”

We’ve sought to add as many forms of evangelism as possible.

REACHING OUT TO MARGINALISED AND BROKEN PEOPLE

Peckham has a recent history involving gang culture, knife crime, and drug abuse. In our prayers, we asked God to clean up Peckham and allow us to look after the broken. We do this in different ways.

We host a ‘Friday Outreach’ where we offer free tea and coffee. Many who attend have mental health issues, and it has become a safe, warm space for them. Sometimes they just need to be alone, away from the bustle of life. Some enjoy chatting with our team. Some want to engage in conversations about the Lord.

In early 2024, the Lord spoke to us through Isaiah 58 about 'true fasting'—sharing food with the hungry and providing shelter for the wanderer.

We had been working with refugees and asylum seekers since 2022. We had learned that a local hotel was housing asylum seekers living in basic conditions on only £8 a week. Along with other pastors in Peckham, we asked what can we do?



Because I had taught English as a second language for 15 years, I offered to run a class at the church. Other pastors helped by serving coffee or looking after toddlers while parents studied. We wanted to design a place that would be safe—a warm space for people to engage.

After this word from Isaiah, we suddenly had an influx of Latino and Iranian people. A charismatic Mexican couple we led to the Lord brought 20 to 30 others from the hotel. An Iranian family who fled for their faith found us on their first Sunday in London and began inviting their friends.

To handle the language barrier, I bought translation equipment on Amazon. We now run our services in three languages simultaneously. I also translate my sermons into narrative form via Google Translate and send them to the congregation

the night before. It has created a culture where seekers feel seen and heard regardless of their mother tongue.

While it's bittersweet when the government rehuses our members in other parts of the country, we are thankful for the time we have with them.

A SEASON OF HARVEST AND NEW BIRTH

From late 2023 into 2024, we experienced a six-month season where almost every weekend someone was being born again. Some came because they were invited, others were drawn by the youth ministry. One person even heard an 'inner voice' while walking past the church telling them to go in. We've found people – especially young people – are ready to hear the truth of the gospel uh because they need hope. They need the truth.

I believe pastors mustn't be afraid to preach the full gospel. I make an altar call almost every Sunday. By the grace of God, we have baptized 64 people in four years, with more scheduled soon.

COLLABORATING FOR THE FUTURE

As a church where I am the only full-time paid worker, we realised we needed help. We began to pray for collaboration and partnership. Now, we host two Christian charities in our building that specifically serve the Latino and Muslim communities.

Our focus for 2026 is moving the church from a 'consumerist' mentality to a 'missional' one. We are re-establishing life groups and teaching people how to study and memorise scripture.

Peckham's demographics are shifting again—it is becoming younger and more white—and we are now preparing for how to evangelise this changing community.

I want to thank God for his faithfulness: we've simply chosen to believe God's word and act upon it. People are desperate, lonely, and broken. They don't need entertainment; they need to know Jesus loves them and wants to forgive them.

TRANSFERABLE PRINCIPLES

"This is a story of faithfulness and growth," says London Baptists regional minister Hany Abdelmasih.

"There are clear, transferable principles here: the intentionality about outreach to people, being attentive to the community and its need, being attentive also to the church limitations and what they can and cannot do, as well as intentional partnership with others to provide the needs of the community and the new believers.

And a very key principle is the trying principle: trying and if it doesn't work, stop it. Start something new and continue to be attentive, most of all, to the Lord and how he leads you."

Phil Woolley is the minister of Rye Lane Chapel, Peckham

This article is based on a talk Phil gave as part of the London Baptists (LB) Mission Hub Hour. To access this, and other LB Mission Hub Hour talks, visit: londonbaptist.org.uk/mission-hub-resources

One doorstep... to a family of new believers - to watch a video of the impact of evangelism door knocking, visit: baptist.org.uk/ryelane

