

Enabling life in all its fullness

West Lane Baptist Church has a small congregation – but plays an integral part in the life of the Yorkshire village in which it is based



When men's mental health support group 'It's Worth Talking About' had to find a new venue for its Haworth branch following the closure of a local pub, help was at hand in the form of West Lane Baptist Church (WLBC). Although members were not meeting there for services, the church building remained open because it housed a foodbank. Blessed with a redeveloped building, the church was well equipped to offer Covid secure premises for the group - and had even secured lottery funding to provide a rent holiday.

What's more, minister Chris Upton was acutely aware of the need for such a support group.

Chris has been West Lane's minister for 20 years and says he has tried to act as a chaplain to the Yorkshire village in that time. A couple of years ago, along with a local Anglican vicar, he set up 'Healthy Haworth', a loose coalition of people who are thinking about how to make Haworth (and its surrounding areas) a healthier place. 'Healthier' in this context means general wellbeing and sense of ease, peace and flourishing, rather than a strictly medical lack of disease. 'Healthy Haworth' sees a mixture of health care professionals, alternative therapy providers, church leaders and Parish Councillors gathering every eight weeks to talk and see if there are ways they can help each other.

Chris knew from these discussions that there was a need for a mental health peer support group.

"There is nothing in the village – you have to travel a long way to access one.

"So the men's group 'It's Worth Talking About' began at the pub; but when the pub closed, the group needed a new, neutral venue.

"I was put in touch with the group's leader on Facebook, and we were only too happy to lend them the church. It's exactly the kind of local initiative which contributes to people's wellbeing that we have supported for many years here. It's not something we're leading, but we're helping it to happen."

Chris explained that the church's actions are underpinned by its theology: it takes seriously the Christian gospel's call to be 'salt and light' in the world. It wants to break down the wall between who is in and who is out, and enable people to live life in all its fullness.

Redeveloping its old building has been key. It was originally built for around 450 people. By the 1990s, when the congregation numbered around 40 people, the church leadership at the time took the decision to sell much of its land and plough the funds back into modernising the main building,

including installing a mezzanine floor.

Chris arrived as a student minister in 2000. He was told by deacon Derek Fuller: "We've done what we can with the building – now we need help with the spiritual bits."

"The idea was, we've got this building, how do we make it work?"

With further improvements over the years, the building is both useable and useful throughout the week. In pre-Covid times it was in use every day: it had become integral to the social life of the village, and from the church's point of view was playing a part in enabling 'life in all its fullness' for all people.

Pre-pandemic it was used by many different groups such as:

- Weightwatchers and Slimming World - aiming to encourage healthy eating.
- An over-55s exercise class along with Health Walks - encouraging taking care of the body.

- The Bronte Society, the Gilbert and Sullivan Society and Haworth Cinema - stimulating the intellect and appreciation of the arts.
- The Parish Council, the Women's Institute, Drop-in lunches and other public meetings - helping local community engagement and building social capital.
- The Guides, Weeny Boppers and Sunday school - ensuring that children and young people know they are valued.
- Sunday worship - aiming to explore the spiritual side of life and providing a framework for how religion is integral to how we live this life and not simplistically concerned about the next.

“That all of these things happen at WLBC is no accident but a clear outworking of a commitment to serve the whole person and not just be interested in ‘saving souls,’” says Chris.

During the pandemic it continued to be used, as a foodbank, and the venue for the afore-mentioned mental health group. (Support groups such as this were still able to meet during lockdown).

The foodbank has been running throughout the pandemic. When the restrictions are eased, Chris sees it being a place where it can act as more than just a signpost; but a place where people can be heard and be advocated for. “And as with the other groups, there is no shortage of people wanting to help”, he says.

“Many people who would not come on a Sunday are involved, people who have great sympathy for Christ's heart for justice. I've been overwhelmed by people in the village wanting to channel that, people who delight in coming to a local place so they can help local people.”

He adds: “We may still have the same numbers in our congregation as we had when I arrived 20 years ago, but the church is there and is clearly a healthy aspect of society.

It's back to the idea that we don't need anything new, no shiny theology – it's about being salt and light, and just simply going about loving people and being there for them.”

Chris Upton is minister of West Lane Baptist Church. He is also trained in pastoral supervision and is a member of APSE (Association of Pastoral Supervision and Education). Contact him if you are a minister considering pastoral supervision as part of your ongoing CMD: chris@altruists.org

Every year we do a 'Holiday at Home' for the local community where, with good imagination and plenty of buy-in from local pubs and restaurants who donate food and drink, we travel in our imagination to another country.

In 2020 we were meant to be going to Belgium and this painting was done in the style of the surrealist artist René Magritte. We think that it is an almost prophetic piece of work and speaks volumes about re-imagining our church buildings as stages on which the drama of the gospel is played out in our local communities.



Painting: West Lane Baptist Church - Ian Palmer