

## “We have responded to needs that have arisen in the pandemic”

How Gorse Hill Baptist Church in Swindon has moved to meet community needs over the last year. Interview with Heather Prictor.



**G**orse Hill Baptist Church had a fair idea of its community's needs, notes church member Heather Prictor – but one impact of the pandemic has seen the church play a far bigger role in meeting them.



Aware of pockets of child poverty in local neighbourhoods, the church had teamed up with the charity TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) with a view to offering a holiday lunch club later in 2020. Those plans had to be adapted following the introduction of restrictions in March 2020. Instead of lunch clubs, the charity encouraged participating churches to provide Boxes of Hope - food with activities for the children. Gorse Hill began this in June. It started small, initially to families

connected with the church, before being extended more widely across the town. The church started to take referrals from schools and other agencies, and gave people the option of self-referring. The boxes were aimed at families experiencing a sudden drop in income in the pandemic.

More than a year on, they are now packing and delivering between 50 and 60 boxes per week. Heather calculated that by mid-June they had delivered 2200 boxes 'all over town'.

“We wanted to make sure the food went to families that really needed it”, says Heather, “and it’s been a really interesting journey. In meeting people’s needs we have experienced from them many different emotions; some being so grateful and expressing this through e-mails, cards, texts and thanking the people personally delivering the bags. Some have asked us for prayer and we have prayed with others there and then. Through contact with many local agencies we have become known and trusted in the support and care that we give, and showing the love of Jesus in action.”

The project had the support of the church membership as it had already voted to support MakeLunch. The team that were planning to run MakeLunch are the main volunteers packing the boxes (though they are more

accurately bags) and delivering them. They’ve also had lots of regular help from many other church members packing and delivering the bags.

Gorse Hill Baptist Church has become very well-known throughout the town and built great relationships with community champions from the supermarkets. Morrisons has donated much of the food, while some has come from Asda. The church has successfully applied for grants to fund additional purchases, and has had financial support from the borough council. The bags contain toiletries and cleaning products alongside key food provisions. They make between 50 and 100 bags at the start of the week, then when the referrals come in they can be personalised. For instance, there are always some treats and activities for families with children.

Where appropriate they have tried to have a theme – Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day. The bags also contain a hand-written card, written by a church member. There is some Christian literature for the children and adults.

“It’s been very busy and exciting,” said Heather. “Sometimes we’ve had nothing, prayed about it, and then the next day that very thing has been donated in one way or another. God has really provided for all of our needs.”

“We want to make it as personal as we can. When children receive it, we want it to be exciting and nice. It’s about a personal gift, sharing love and hope, and there’s been a really good response. It’s not just about food – it’s about so much more.”

As the project has grown, the church has become more aware of other ways it can meet the needs it has encountered. In June it opened a community fridge.

“Because of the Boxes of Hope, Chris Anthulakis contacted me – would we be interested in helping him start a community fridge? He contacted Hubbub and it started from there.

Because we had a lot of things in place we could get it up and running quickly.

“So now we’re also able to provide perishables. It’s open three days a week, 11am – 2pm, and because of this we can now add fresh food to our Boxes of Hope.”

Heather explains the church is also looking at setting up a Renew Wellbeing café, CAP money courses and job clubs. (Honda, a large local employer, closed its Swindon plant in July).

“Throughout this time we have tried to quickly respond to the needs that have arisen caused

by the pandemic. We are feeding families physically but also want to respond to support them with their mental health needs, their well-being and their spiritual needs. As to the future months ahead, as the problems continue to unfold, we hope to be able to continue to meet the needs of the people around us.

“We had a good idea of the needs, but the pandemic has made us look at things in different ways. We know we are able to do so much more about it and have become much better at responding.”

**To find out more** about TLG (Transforming Lives for Good) visit: [www.tlg.org.uk](http://www.tlg.org.uk)



Heather (2nd left) at the opening of the community fridge in June, alongside Swindon Mayor Garry Perkins, volunteer Chris Anthulakis and Morrison’s community champion.

Photo: Mark Harris

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. [John 1:5]