



The Baptist church CAN continue to flourish in a thriving part of London

Minister Darren Powell shares some of the ways Northcote Road Baptist Church in Battersea is beginning to reconnect with its community.

“I was called to Northcote Road Baptist Church (NRBC) in September 2021 to ‘re-launch’ the church and it’s been such an interesting journey,” says minister Darren Powell.

“The church had been in decline for some years, was close to closing – but now we’re seeing exciting glimpses of growth as we’ve stepped out into new pioneering opportunities and been partnering with local organisations to serve our community.”

NRBC is situated in the heart of Northcote Road (close to Clapham Junction and Clapham Common) - a vibrant road packed with shops, restaurants, cafés and bars.



It has existed since Victorian times but in recent years the membership had declined, dropping to just a small group of people. Talks took place with the Association to explore its future, but the Leadership Team sensed God hadn’t finished with them yet.

They called Darren, then Co-Leader at Morden Baptist Church, and his young family. Since arriving, Darren explains how all the church’s activity is underpinned by a desire for as many people as possible to experience God’s love.

“We want to love as many people as possible and we want to be known for loving people where they’re at. This is a church for all – that’s the main thing we felt God saying. This place is to be a refuge for everyone. I say the

same thing to the church that I say to my young sons - ‘here at Northcote Road we’re kind, and encouraging, and we look for lonely people! This is what we want our church to be known for across our community.

“The thing we are keeping central is that Jesus was about relationships. Jesus was about loving people, and everyone could be a part of that crowd.

“God has poured himself in love to each of us and it doesn’t just stop there. We are passionate for those in our community to experience that as well.

“I believe in the small things. I think the small things are big things to those who have been brave enough to walk into our church building for the first time. A kind welcome and a decent cup of coffee can go a long way!”

In order to do this Darren was keen both to make partnerships and find things that were right for the context.

He soon realised people weren’t aware the church still existed and began to seek opportunities to make it known. This involved updating the signage, building an online presence and networking (“not massively my thing but I really pushed myself getting to know as many local people as I could; establishing relationships with our MP, local councillors, business owners and police officers”).

An unusual opening came in the form of selling coffee. In the pandemic era, Northcote Road was pedestrianised for six months in the spring and

summer as a way of supporting the local eateries.

“All of the businesses and restaurants and bars would spill out right across the street. We came one summer and there were thousands of people out there.

“We walked through them, walked into the church and there were five people in here. So we thought, obviously that’s an opportunity.”

He teamed up with a friend who runs a social enterprise called the Feel Good Bakery to set up a coffee van outside the church.

“I didn’t expect to be selling coffee when I was called into ministry, but doing this was such a good connection point in so many ways.

“It was a really good way to know the businesses, who were supportive as they felt it added to the footfall. It was absolutely brilliant for reminding people that we’re here, that the church is here, and there’s life here. This brought a vibrancy to our part of Northcote Road and demonstrated that the church wants to play our part outside of the walls.

“We were actually out there in the middle of this community in a really natural and authentic way, rather than just on the edge of it.”

Sensing loneliness and isolation was an issue, he set up a running club. “Really simple - we just meet outside the church and go for a 5k run around Clapham Common. Every week. We get people who’ve moved to London, and are finding the experience of being here isolating, who’ve found it really helpful.

“It’s been another great way of just getting to know people and showing an interest in their lives.”

He’s also discovered that having an appropriate social media presence, particularly on Instagram, has been important.

“I’m not necessarily the biggest lover of social media, for many reasons. But whenever we’ve had a bit of a push on social media, you actually see the fruit of that across the next couple of weeks. It’s interesting. Instagram is a really, really important resource for the community stuff that happens in and around this road and again we want to play our part in that. It’s been a really great way to communicate our message to local people.”

Life has brought life: a couple of professional musicians have joined the church, an opportunity arose to employ a children’s worker, and everything has contributed to the church slowly but surely becoming a place where people are choosing to worship.

“Every single person is welcomed here and valued here – that’s been our message to the community. And that means we have a varied group of people who now come into the church.

“We have some young families, lots of internationals including a small group of Portuguese-speaking people, a few families

from the United States too, alongside the brilliant, lovely group of people who were here when I arrived.

“We’ve just tried to make Sundays relevant for the people in our community. We certainly do aim high, and this is a quality to our worship and depth to our teaching. Yet, it’s informal. It’s messy. There are kids running around. But it’s authentic and it feels like family.”

Darren adds that, “things have happened quicker than I expected, but everything has been ‘so natural’. I think it’s about finding those things you can just get involved in easily.

“There are plans to build on the social enterprise opportunities in partnership with my work in the local prison and our probation service (see over page) and open as a music venue in collaboration with our local pub.

“There is certainly a long way to go, but I feel that our story could provide an encouragement that the Baptist church CAN continue to flourish in a thriving part of London.”



Running the coffee cart enterprise enables the church to provide employment opportunities to those who have experienced barriers to it.

This means that although the pedestrianisation of Northcote Road is no longer happening, the church is now in a fruitful conversation with the Council to convert a couple of the parking spaces in front of its building into a permanent trading pitch.

It wants to create an enterprise to complement the other businesses, and provide training to those in HMP Brixton and jobs to ex-offenders. There's also a long-term dream to develop the building's loft space into a large social enterprise and emergency accommodation.

"We have plans to do so much more on the social justice side," says Darren. "We are continuing to dream and discern more ways to work on loving our neighbour."

A decision taken 30 years ago by the Northcote Road Baptist Church congregation is enabling its life and mission today. Back then the church converted its basement and adjoining building

into a Christian school. With more than 100 pupils on its books, this has given the church a regular income, as well as investing in property.

Both these decisions were taken when the area was less affluent and not as vibrant as now.

"It's incredible really; I was called as a 'Pioneering Pastor' but some decisions made over the last 30-40 years have been courageously pioneering!"

I think how those decisions in our recent history have given us so much opportunity for today. There's been the most amazing foundations already here, and we are beginning to reap the rewards of those decisions and all that prayer that went in over the years."

Facebook: Northcote Road Baptist Church
Instagram: @nrbcbattersea

Photos | Lauren Powell

