



## 'Alternative Gatherings' at Chichester Baptist Church

How members are encouraged to spend one of their Sunday mornings each month in the community.

Interview with minister and team leader Ellen Wild.

**"C**ould a church like ours take seriously the call to go? When the practical reality is that, however well planned our services are, however brilliant the other churches in the city are, 95 per cent of people in Chichester are not just going to wander into our buildings."

That was the dilemma facing Chichester Baptist Church just over a decade ago. While it was serving a large congregation, it recognised it was nevertheless meeting a fraction of the local population. What could it do to reach more people?

"Chichester is a reasonably well-established, evangelical church," notes Ellen, "and was never going to bin our Sunday services and become pioneers overnight. But we are committed to finding ways to engage people with faith - and realised we had to be where people are."

The church explored a gathered/scattered model, encouraging the congregation to 'recycle' one of their Sunday mornings each month and spend it in the community. Called 'Alternative Gatherings', they are based around three areas: a hobby, such as golf or cycling; a need in the community people have a heart for serving, such as a wellbeing cafe; or a particular people group they have a burden for (one current example is Cedar Ministry, which takes place in a nursing home).

Members are encouraged to provide some form of Christian input, often in the form of a short reflection and discussion. For example, participants of the Mud, Sweat and Gears Alternative Gathering stop halfway through the bike ride.

There is a missional element to them - each Alternative

Gathering has a mission statement, and at the outset members are commissioned at the front of church.

"They are Christians on a mission with their hobby, being with other people who share the same interest," explains Ellen.

"Every gathering, even if it's in a very light touch way, has some kind of Christian content that feels appropriate. And this is always clearly expressed in the literature, so people coming along know what to expect."

There are currently around eight Alternative Gatherings throughout the month. At any one Sunday morning, at least one group will be out somewhere in the community, participating in an Alternative Gathering. For the other Sundays of the month they'll be back in the main service, which still takes

place each Sunday morning - out for one, in for three.

A significant percentage of the church is involved, even if it's not right for everybody.

"Some people are bruised or worn out or elderly, or they just need to



be with us, and that's absolutely fine," says Ellen. "But nevertheless, there is a real encouragement that you might consider getting involved in one of our Alternative Gatherings."

More than a decade since they were first launched (and having had a break during the Covid pandemic), Ellen has several reflections:

### **An easy invite – and mission for the long haul**

"It's actually quite a big deal to invite someone to Alpha," says Ellen. "You have to know somebody well and have had quite deep conversations. But we feel our Alternative Gatherings are an easier invite, much more accessible. We've learned people are willing to invite people to those things, because there's not massively high risk."

Ellen says this accessibility has enabled the church to connect with many more non-Christians than it otherwise would have done. "But of course, the journey for those people is longer. In this way we've learned that mission is long haul."

"And while the church doesn't have hugely dynamic stories to tell, there is nevertheless a bunch of good news stories", Ellen continues.

"We have very few: 'They came to play golf, and they got saved on the golf course.' It's much more - they came to play golf, or they brought their kids to our sports event, and then gradually the kids came to the youth work, or an invitation to a Sunday worked, and it's a much longer process."

### **Higher spiritual temperature**

Being involved in an Alternative Gathering in some way has impacted people's discipleship.

"I would say the spiritual temperature is higher, because when you're doing a missional thing, it feels a bigger deal in terms of dependence on God. Our gathered times are special, but coming to church and sitting in a service is easier."

"We've found if you want your church more prayerful and dependent, doing something a bit more scary, like being part of an outreach, makes a difference! The teams will always pray and plan together, and you're more likely to lean on God and remember the mission if you're praying and serving together."

"We want to be proactive and look for intentional conversations – and when you have an amazing conversation with someone, it can give such confidence and courage."

### **Mission at the centre of church life**

While Alternative Gatherings are one aspect of the church, their presence has enabled mission to be at the centre of its life. At least one Alternative Gathering takes place on each Sunday, and this is communicated at the main service.

"When we welcome people onsite and online, we also mention how we have people meeting out and about, and we pray for them. So every Sunday, there's a feeling of being a church that's gathered and scattered. Part of keeping the mission intention is keeping it visible in church life on a Sunday, even for those who aren't committed to one."

### **Recycling church time**

"We call it recycling Sundays," Ellen says. "If you've got a Sunday gathering and a midweek life group that you're encouraging people to, and family time and work, and then you tack on something on a Saturday or Thursday night, it's always going to be an added extra."

"But if you're coming anyway and you're here for two hours anyway, why not use time that you already have to do this? Because of this, I think, the number of people involved is so much higher."

### **Church as gathered and scattered**

"If you've been out for one, but back for three, it doesn't feel like you are disconnected in any way. You're so very much at the heart of the church family. Our gathered times are so precious."

"We sometimes talk about the 'up, in, out' triangle: up to God, into each other and out in mission. The triangle should be equally weighted. But if we're honest, we were operating a good up and good in, but the out more of a struggle."

"But let the 'out' lead a bit more, then are we not being the Church of God more effectively? Where we gather, we worship, we pray, we share communion, but we also deliberately and intentionally go out in mission. That feels more church to be gathered and scattered than it is just to be together."

**Ellen Wild is the Minister and Team Leader of Chichester Baptist Church**