



12. David Howes: King's Community Church

King's Community Church moved into the former Lads' Club in July 1997. We met first in schools and then St. Andrews Hall but we needed somewhere more permanent. Two of the leaders looked first at St. Peter Parmentergate but it wasn't big enough. They saw the door open in the Lads Club and met Ronnie Brooks, the manager, who told them that it was proposed to turn the building into flats and that nobody in the city centre then really cared about young people. They said, "We do!". A few weeks later Ronnie Brooks phoned and said the deal with the developers was falling through and if we could get the money and sign contracts in six weeks the building was ours. £120,000 was needed; amazingly, after sharing our vision with the church, that sum was raised in an offering the next Sunday. We believed God was directing us towards being a church in the city centre.

When we moved in this was an area for single regeneration so there was a budget for that, from which the City Council funded us generously over the next three years. We did a survey of the people in the area who said they would love a place where they could meet, with a cafe and sports facilities; businesses wanted affordable conferencing space and we wanted to run a homeless project, which offered homeless people a meal, showers, and clothes washing facilities. We rebuilt the front and revamped the building all the way through. We now have a

conference centre, a children's work area, the main auditorium which is used for conferencing and for Church on a Sunday morning; we have an area called King's Care, which is for homeless people, and we also run washing facilities during the week. We didn't want people to have this idea that it was a church with stained glass windows and vicars with dog collars, that's not our style. We're here with people, we live to serve the city. We don't press our Christianity on people. We call the cafe our front window. It's a place where people can come and go and it's always busy. We'll have people from Norwich Union in there, people from the Magdalene Project who work with prostitutes, people who are homeless, and people working locally will come in for their lunches. It's also a place where we train volunteers. A lot of people in the catering and coffee shop side are volunteers. Some of them come from the streets; we help them to get housing then training in catering and that sort of thing and then they'll go on from here and get jobs. We see that as a really positive thing to do. Coming here worked well for us. Initially it was that this size of building at that price was just a gift.

King Street seems part of my heritage. My mother was born in Argyle Street, worked at Colmans' and married in St. Etheldreda's in 1939; she often talked about her memories of the street and the war years. One thing she remembered very clearly from the 1920s, when she was a little girl: there was one big house in Mountergate with a palm court, where the orchestras used to come, and her mum would take her down there in the evenings to see the gentlemen in their top hats and

tails and the ladies in their flapper dresses. My great-grandfather was the Norwich City Missioner and he worked with the foreign sailors who would come up to the port of Norwich on a one-way passage; he built a mission hall in Ashby Street where they could sleep until they got a passage back. So he worked in the courts and the slums around King Street, which was a very poor area at the time. I have some of his diaries.

We worked with a guy called Andy, art and architecture, who has renovated the whole corner of Mountergate and the Kings Centre. He designed the front of the building and we did the inside. By 2001 we had the front built, opened the coffee shop and started conferencing. We gradually rolled it out and people began using it. As well as the coffee shop we do student lunches, lots of church weddings, and conference catering. We keep changing spaces and developing our resources for different uses. We did have a gym initially but that really didn't take off because we didn't have enough space for all the facilities people expect, so that closed but we still run a sports club; that will change into a badminton training centre in the evenings. To give you an idea of the scale of use of the building now; last year [2010] I think we sold 30,000 cups of coffee to conferencing alone. We have conferences for 300-400 people, exhibitions, weddings, banquets. People come in here and call it The Tardis. The front cafe space used to be an open car parking area. The main auditorium seats up to 700 people. Going back and down to river level you have a series of rooms - crèche, children's rooms. On the first floor is a large conference centre

overlooking King Street. Corridors lead back to other conference rooms and boardroom. The second floor is offices and a counselling room. We are also offering a development which the city hasn't got at the moment: "BusRev" which is a business hub, a shared hot-desking and meeting area for small businesses run from home, with trainers on hand for marketing and IT. On a normal day staff will get in at 7.00 to set up and we will probably have six or seven different groups in, ranging from 4-5 to 60-70 people. It is a diverse mix of users, for example Barclays, RSPB, Aviva, Mind.

On a Sunday morning we meet for worship then from 2.00pm onwards our community lounge is open. We provide a hot meal for everyone; there are showers, washing machines and tumble dryers. We have a facility for clothes, we provide razor sets, we have provided suits to enable people to go to interviews. We can get up to sixty people in an afternoon; the number actually living on the streets in Norwich is a lot less than that, but these are "sofa-surfers", living in other people's flats or hostels. It is somewhere to come on a Sunday. Salvation Army are brilliant as are the Matthew Project, St. Martins Housing and NORCAS, but there was nothing on a Sunday in the city so we put something in that gap. We work closely with these other agencies on homelessness and addiction. We have helped several people get their lives back; they help here regularly and our aim is to help them back into full employment.

We have 19 employees. Three of the leaders are full-time; there's myself as pastor/administrator, paid office staff and

the cafe manager. Most of the other staff are volunteers. We self-fund everything. With King's Care we do get some grants and charitable income. For about three years we have run a theatre group called Loose Change which gives homeless people and those who have been in a deprived situation the chance to do some theatre work which builds their self-confidence. We've started a similar youth group in Mile Cross.

We are an independent, non-denominational church. We have a team of Elders, six men who work together as a team and the church gathers to them as a leadership. We are joined to a world-wide group of independent churches called New Frontiers. We work separately with our local communities but join together on international projects like raising funds to support churches working on poverty in Kenya. We have 400 membership and we get around 500 on a Sunday, which was rather too many for our space, so we are growing out and we now have a smaller more community-based group of around 80 in Mile Cross. Like most Anglican churches we are part of the Evangelical Alliance so we mix with most of the churches in the city. We have a different style but our basic beliefs are the same. We are working, not just in Norfolk and Suffolk, but across into Northern Europe. We have a big connection with Copenhagen where the church has been turned into another King's Centre. A number of churches from other countries have come here to see our format. The furthest away is Beijing where there is a church meeting place and cafe in an office block overlooking Tianamen Square.

Not very many of the people who live in King Street come here. We've not really be able to reach out in that sort of way. When we first came here we helped run the King Street Festival, which was incredibly popular and this building became the hub, with teas and children's activities. When they built the new houses down there, obviously the new residents didn't want their street taken over, so that was stopped and since then it has been that bit more difficult to make contact. It has not had that same sort of feel of all being here together that it had before. We've done flyers to every door down the street but we don't want to be seen as chasing after people because of our religious beliefs, we want to be here for people who want us to be here. We have a ball once a year which gets packed out, we do quiz nights and we have started a monthly music evening in the cafe.

The building is wood-faced, shutter-faced; it looks more like a Norwegian quayside building, in blue and grey. The main front is mostly glass. You come in and there is a reception desk and office, with a coffee shop on the right. The coffee bar has round wooden tables, wooden chairs, with a very light and comfortable feel. So the initial reaction is that it looks like a cinema or theatre entrance with a coffee shop and double doors to the main auditorium. We don't play cheesy Christian music but chilled-out music, jazz and so on. That's us. No formality.

Where do we need to be next? As a church we want to be a voice for the city. We are looking all the time to make ourselves relevant and involve people. We have a lot

of young people here, lots of students come on a Sunday, so we do welcome lunches and so on. We've also just started a cricket team. Church was always about the community. We look at these beautiful medieval churches and we forget that the church nave was the main place where the community came, where they had their fairs and their wedding parties. The chancel was the part used for worship. The whole building was about community. As well as the Sunday morning gathering we have small home groups around the city, where people meet, have a meal, look at the Bible and pray together. It's just about building friendships and community. Most of our congregation are from Norwich; a lot come as university students and stay when they get jobs in the city. Others have moved here to work. It's quite a vibrant group of people. They enjoy life but also have a faith which they want to express in the ways they can in this church.

Initial reaction to us in King Street was very favourable. There are a lot of small businesses opposite us who liked having a coffee shop and used the facilities as we developed. It was nice to have life down here; it was very quiet during the day, although it was the red light district so there would be people down here at night. When we opened King's Care there were a few teething problems because homeless people would congregate in the street and people felt a bit vulnerable walking past, but we changed the system and have timed tickets for people to come in. I think prostitution has moved on from King Street now, although we still have the Magdalene Project next door.

We would love to see St. Anne's Wharf developed. That would join Riverside, this area and the walkway to the Mall. The plans were to have a mix of private and social housing, shops and a big square where people could meet and sit. That would bring a lot of life in. In the history of Norwich, when it got complacent and left things as they were, it died and it needed people to come in and revive it. We have been through the Sixties rebuilding, which was a bit horrendous, and we now have a chance to build something which is really great. I think the new housing down King Street has been done really well; it looks good, although I don't know what they are like to live in. Dragon Hall being developed and brought back is just tremendous.

David Howes, The King's Centre