



The church of St John the Baptist, in the centre of Peterborough, has a remarkable history, not least the 16th Century parish sexton who conducted the funerals of Katherine of Aragon and Mary Queen of Scots, who are buried in the nearby cathedral.

But when the latest vicar, the Rev Michelle Dalliston, arrived two years ago, some were beginning to be concerned for the church's future.

After years of slow decline in numbers, the combination of Covid followed by a period without a vicar, had taken its toll: confidence was waning and the building was only able to open for services, a Saturday café and a Tuesday lunchtime concert series.



From support for homeless people and a variety of NHS and other drop-in musicians, and a myriad of other events and activities.

Every inch of the building, constructed in 1407 from an 11th Century base, is put to use – including a play area for children, a ‘book nook’ and areas set aside during the day with tea, coffee and biscuits and a listening ear.

Attendance, which was down to 35 to 40 regulars, is now 70-80 on a typical Sunday, with 120 at Easter, and a wider church community of about 200.

“It was built to be the church for the people of the city, so for me coming in two years ago there was a sense of needing to reclaim that identity,” Rev Dalliston explains.

“We realised that we needed to get the building open as much as possible and serving the community.

“There were people in dire need right on our doorstep; people who were at the gates and sleeping in the porch.

“We thought they are people we need to help. how do we go about doing that and increase the volunteer base to meet the need in the



community.”

Signing up as a Community Support Hub amid the cost-of-living crisis and soaring fuel bills in the winter of 2022, the church has continued ever since as a hub for local people, improving health and well-being, thanks to funding from various sources and great support from volunteers.

Some vital groundwork for the transformation was already in place including works around 15 years ago to reorder the back of the building installing kitchens, toilets and a café area and removing railings outside making the building fully accessible.

“People were really ready for something to happen,” Rev Dalliston adds.

“There was a real fear that if things didn't change we'd end up shutting the doors.

“People were incredibly faithful and kept everything going in tough times and have been really up for growing the vision and coping with a whirlwind of activity!

“Some of what we're doing isn't that different really, it's basic church stuff but it's about being outward looking.”

The worship is traditional but full of variety and participation.

“It's about exciting liturgy and worship that lifts people's hearts,” she explains.

“Last Sunday we had a baptism with an African family who were singing a traditional baptism song as part of the service but we also have robed choir – it's Anglo Catholic liturgy really done in a lively way which sends you out inspired.”

The service ended with the South African Hymn *Siyahamba* (We are Marching in the Light of God), with the congregation dancing in the pews!

“On Easter day for the Gospel Reading, we had the crucifer and acolytes there as we do every week but we had children reading the Gospel.

“Traditional doesn't mean boring or tedious, it's also novel and exciting and has this connection with the history of the building and the history of our faith, but within one service you can have so much variety.

“So in some ways it's not rocket science, but just being open, celebrating and trusting - trusting that God leads us; that you can take risks and that it's OK because God has got this.”

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