

Park Baptist Church: 'Project 18'

Introduction

On Easter Sunday we celebrated Jesus' triumphant resurrection with six baptisms and a joint service with around 120 people in attendance. There was not enough space for everyone to gather in the Hall to witness the baptisms and we had to relocate the serving of refreshments upstairs to cater for everyone.

This is not the first time we have broken the 100 mark (our stated maximum capacity), but it highlighted the increasing concern that our present building is no longer big enough, fuelling the belief that alternative premises are required if we want to continue growing.

This document is presented by the Leadership Team as an introductory reflection for church members to consider the need to move to new premises. It is intended to be a launch pad for further discussion and prayerful reflection as together we seek the mind of Jesus in this matter.

We have given it the simple working title of 'Project 18'.

Brief History

There has been a continuous baptist presence in Great Yarmouth for over 250 years, with our church tracing its roots to 1754. In 1864 the premises on Crown Road opened at a cost of £1,620. In 1952 the two Baptist churches in Great Yarmouth - Tabernacle and Park - merged to become Park Baptist Tabernacle. After over 100 years and with the Crown Road building becoming unusable due to the onset of dry rot, the church realised drastic change was required. A move to new premises at various sites across the town were explored without success, and eventually the decision was made to sell the front premises and convert the rear premises into the sanctuary and hall we still use today. The church building as we currently know it opened in 1995, but in the 23 years since then the church has witnessed considerable growth. The planting of the Portuguese-speaking congregation some 10 years ago was hugely significant, and at one point Rev. Derrick Hill shared a vision with the church of the need for a new building to accommodate the growing congregation. While this has yet to be realised, the growth of members, regular attendees and community-focused mission work has elevated the need for change so that it is now a major priority for the church.

Reasons for Moving

The obvious question to first consider is 'why'?

Why do we need to move? The simple answer is that the building is no longer fit for purpose.

Our stated purpose for existing as a church is:

- To express our love for God together;
- Help each other as a church family to become more like Jesus;
- Share God's love with our community.

A large part of this is the belief that God has called us to be one church with two congregations; Portuguese and English speaking. The reality is that this has tended to largely look and feel like two churches operating under one roof, despite the consistently positive feedback whenever we meet together.



If we are to hold the question of ‘fit for purpose’ up against our stated purpose, we find it is failing to some extent in all three areas.

Most obviously we are struggling to fit in the building for worship services. Sunday service attendance figures are now regularly reaching 65, with a further 40+ attending Saturday services. Joint services require squeezing an 20-40 extra chairs, which puts us well above our recommended fire safety guidelines. Quite literally, ‘expressing our love for God together’ as one church is verging on the impossible.

Church growth research consistently suggests that once a church has reached 80% capacity in its services, its growth will plateau.¹ We usually have 90 seats in the church, meaning it only takes 72 people for the church to feel full, and for numerical growth to significantly slow down. It is becoming increasingly common for the Sunday services to be reaching these numbers, with greater figures more likely for special services such as Christmas and Easter.

In terms of discipleship (“becoming more like Jesus”), the Portuguese congregation are increasingly using The Hub in Middlemarket Road to meet, although capacity is restricted to around 20. We have no space for multiple Junior Church / Creche classes, and the presence of Park Playgroup using the entire downstairs from Tuesday-Friday restricts the use of the church as a venue for midweek groups.

In terms of outreach, the building is used for the weekly after school cooking club, art group, twice monthly community meals, The Living Room throughout winter and various midweek evening meetings and courses such as Alpha. We are operating at close to capacity on a daily basis, and this is a major obstacle if we want to do more or to try new things that require a meeting space.

The requirement for more space has come from our desire to realise God’s vision for Park to become a praying community which wholeheartedly loves God, loves each other and loves Great Yarmouth.

If we are to meet the needs of our town, to offer an authentic Christian community rooted in the gospel of Jesus to those who need it most - the marginalised; young people; broken families - then we require a modern, multi-purpose building that enables rather than restricts God’s mission.

Likely Hurdles

A major building project and transition is not without significant hurdles. The most obvious of these is the cost. Our current premises have been valued between £180-200,000.² This would likely not even cover the cost of a potential new building, let alone the costs of adapting it to our needs. The reality is any project would require a significant act of giving by the church membership, coupled with the application of grants and almost certainly a six-figure loan.

There also remains the issue of finding new premises. Despite the plethora of empty and available buildings in Great Yarmouth, locating and purchasing the right one is not an easy task.

It will also almost certainly require a period of self-imposed ‘exile’ as we would need to release the capital from the current building in order to purchase a new one. There would then be the wait whilst any adjustments were made to our new home.



This is a huge undertaking that only occurs once in every few generations. The last time Park Baptist Church did anything so radical was in 1861, when it was decided to build the church on Crown Road. That stood for over 100 years, serving the church and acting as a launch pad for the planting of other Baptist churches across East Norfolk. What we are considering is the 21st Century equivalent, and has the potential to set up the work of God for future generations in this century and beyond.

Alternatives?

The Leadership Team have been prayerfully considering this for several months, and earlier this year spent an away day together praying and discussing the issue.

We realise there may be other options for the church to explore, such as:

- The separation of the two congregations into two churches
- More services
- Free up midweek space by ending our contract with the playgroup
- Completely redevelop the current site

None of these were felt to adequately address the needs of the church. **Therefore the recommendation from the Leadership Team is for the church to conduct a feasibility study into the selling of the Crown Road site, with a view to obtaining alternate premises in the town.**

What Next?

This is not something to be rushed. This document is an introductory reflection and we will be using church meetings and designated listening days to discuss the various elements to this proposal until there is a consensus that we have heard the voice of Jesus speaking to us through the Holy Spirit.

At the Church Meeting on Wednesday 18th April, there will be an opportunity to listen to each other's initial thoughts on the proposal. The Leadership Team will also present some of our reflections from our Away Day, which took into consideration the responses offered to the discussion questions at our fellowship lunch in February.

Please be actively and continually praying into this matter. The priority here is not to say what you think, but to listen to God and offer what you believe God might be saying to the church concerning this project.

May we be blessed with the gifts of wisdom and discernment as we partner with Jesus to see God's Kingdom come in Great Yarmouth.

Park Baptist Church Leadership Team, April 2018

