

Calvary Evangelical Church, Brighton — Profile

Summary: Calvary Church Brighton is a warm-hearted gospel church with a reputation for good bible teaching and caring for people.

It actively engages with the local community and welcomes students and internationals. It is set in the middle of Brighton, a city environment which is both challenging and rich in opportunity.

The church is acutely conscious of the gospel needs of Brighton, and has for some time been engaging in specific prayer with other local gospel churches for people to be converted to Christ.

The church is at a sensitive stage. Over the years following the purchase (in 2014) and refurbishment of the building, we have seen significant numerical growth. But the Covid situation and the loss of two elders has reminded us of the need to rely upon the Lord.

We are conscious of the need for consolidation post-Covid, and the possibilities of further growth. There may be opportunities to revitalise in central and east Brighton, partnering with other churches as appropriate.

1. A living church

‘Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us.” 1 Sam 7:12

We are an independent evangelical church, affiliated to the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, and constituted as a charity. We are also members of the Sussex Gospel Partnership. We fully subscribe to the doctrinal statements of both of these organisations.

The spirit in the church is one of unity, hard work, and a positive outlook. We emphasise the church as the community of God’s people, motivated by love for one another, assembled by the Holy Spirit for mutual support and edification. We aim to give a warm welcome to all who come (Romans 1:11,12). There is a tradition of inviting visitors to lunch and holding a church lunch once per month. Visitors often comment on the welcoming attitude that they find amongst us. We believe that the Lord has yet more in store that is “far above all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). So, we seek the Lord to send out labourers into the harvest (Luke 10:2). The current church membership is just under 40; of these 40% have joined in the last eight years. This is partly by conversion, but mostly by transfer. Pre covid, a typical Sunday morning congregation was 75+ people, with 25 to 30 in the evenings. The demographics of the church have been changing over the past six or seven years. There are proportionately more younger married couples, and children. Obviously the lockdown limited our activities, but we are gradually reinstating them as opportunities open up.

We put an emphasis on preaching the gospel and teaching the word of God. This teaching aims

to be accessible to those of differing educational standards and social backgrounds, and also to those whose first language may not be English. (Romans 1:14-16). Sunday evening meetings currently take the form of discussion of the morning sermon (1 Corinthians 14:29).

The preaching and teaching is informed by the conviction that a Calvinist understanding of the gospel is closest to scripture, and draws on that tradition of biblical exposition coupled with the newer insights into context and Biblical theology as expounded, say, by the Proclamation Trust. We require all those who preach/teach to affirm wholehearted commitment to the Doctrines of Grace (sometimes called the five points of Calvinism). We believe that, by the Spirit of God, a ministry of the word that is expository is fresh and renewing to the church. Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) but the Spirit blows where he wills (John 3:8) so we welcome the advice given by Pastor John Robinson to the Pilgrim Fathers: “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his word”.

Our practice is baptist, but we do not insist that all members accept this position nor necessarily be baptised as adults. However all elders of the church are required to hold to a baptist theology and practice.

We believe that communion (the Lord’s Supper) is appropriate for believers (who are not under church discipline) only, but we impose no further restriction. All who have a personal faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to his table. Our new Handbook seeks to maintain a clear link between baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and baptism and church membership.

We emphasise the importance of prayer: e.g. at midweek Bible study and prayer meetings (attendance 20-25); at Sunday prayer times and during worship services. The church issues a prayer diary to encourage individual prayer.

The church of God is assembled and called by the Holy Spirit, and this needs to be reflected in worship and other activities. So, at all times, we need to be continually being filled with the Spirit and not put out the Spirit’s fire (Ephesians 5:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:19). However, Calvary maintains a non-charismatic stance in the sense that we hold that all believers are baptised in the Holy Spirit, not just some.

We happily continue the tradition of hymn singing, while we also recognise the value of developing musical ministry with a contemporary musical vocabulary. This is ‘work in progress’. Singing is generally in modern English, as used by the Praise! hymn-book and other material. We encourage the use of doctrinally rich new songs such as those from the Gettys, Stuart Townend and similar writers.

Before lockdown, Sunday Club (ministry to children) was growing to the extent that space to accommodate all the children with appropriate teaching to different age groups had become an issue. There had been a ‘Kid’s Club’ (called TNT) on Saturday afternoons. During lockdown, these activities were in abeyance, we have recently recommenced Sunday Club during Sunday morning service.

Our church documents i.e. Constitution and Handbook have recently been revised to accord with our new CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation) status. Copies of the latest Constitution and Handbook documents will be sent on request.

The Corona Virus pandemic

Like every church in the land we have been heavily impacted by covid. Some normal ministries have closed down completely e.g. International Cafe, parent and toddler group.

Our Sunday word ministry currently takes place at the church. In the morning we live stream on YouTube, and in the evening participants can join on Zoom. We Zoom-meet for pre-service Sunday morning prayer. On Wednesdays we have the whole church prayer meeting in the building and on Zoom, with smaller groups once a month. It has been encouraging to see a number of YouTube views not too far from our pre-covid Sunday experience.

In addition to the main organised events, the ladies and men (separately) have recommenced breakfast time once a month.

2. Some historical background

Calvary Evangelical Church was formerly the Brighton Railway Mission (see the appendix). Around the year 2000 there was a seven year period of upheaval during which it appeared that the national Railway Mission would require vacant possession of the church building. During this time there was much heart-searching as to why God would want a church like us in this particular time and place. We thought a lot about Jeremiah 29:7 ‘Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’ This prompted a fresh emphasis on getting involved with the local community and doing good. This resulted in work such as a parent and toddler (Caterpillars) group and also, for the last ten years, an involvement in the London Road community group (Local Action Team, LAT). The church facilitates this and has had good relations with City Councillors and service providers (e.g. drug and alcohol agencies). This is seen as providing a context for witness, evangelism and preaching, and is not meant to replace it, or distract from it.

The issue over the building was initially resolved by means of a 99 year lease. During this period the church needed to be established as a legal entity so, in 2001, it became a registered unincorporated charity with the elders and deacons as trustees. Subsequently the building itself was transformed. Some parts had become unusable: these were extensively remodelled and redecorated. Visitors now often remark on the warmth and attractiveness of the interior. In 2012 the daunting opportunity arose for the church to buy the freehold of the building with the full co-operation of the Railway Mission. This was a major undertaking considering the size of the church membership at the time. It involved the church raising, through the giving of the congregation and friends of the church, the sum of £162,500. By God’s grace this process was successfully concluded in late 2014 and the congregation is now free from concern about tenure issues and there are no outstanding debts. We are now an incorporated charity.

3. Organisation and ministries

The church currently has one pastor/elder Philip Wells (full time since 1989, part time since February 2022), and five deacons, as well as many others who serve in various capacities.

Until recently, the church had two other elders, one of whom was also employed full time, with the title of ‘Gospel worker and Community Chaplain’. But within a few weeks in October 2020,

the Gospel Worker had to resign due to a serious family issue, and the other elder died of cancer. This is a major challenge to us, but we trust that the Lord is sovereign over this, and will lead us on as he has in times past.

Several male members currently also provide word ministry, and we have a part time gospel worker who is a deacon.

The deacons serve in various capacities and ministries (e.g. Treasurer, Church Secretary, Care and concern); changes are still working through the system at the time of writing. Our conviction is that while elders should be men, both men and women may serve as deacons.

We have also recently appointed a full time church administrator who also contribute to student work, linking to the Brighton and Sussex university CUs.

The new pastor/elder would work alongside these other workers, but be expected to take over the leading role as Philip steps back from this. If possible, we would like to send more labourers into the harvest rather than fewer.

4. Challenges and opportunities

Brighton and Hove is an edgy and progressive city with a Green-led City Council, and the nation's only Green MP. There is a large artistic community and also many high technology companies. It is a student city, with implications in terms of apologetics, thoughtful bible ministry and a warm welcome for international students. There are not only two universities but also many language schools, one of which is specifically Christian. There is a large pre-18 international college nearby. Brighton is also well known for its large and influential LGBT+ community, some of whose leaders we have had some personal contact with, mostly via Philip Wells.

The city has the usual problems associated with large conurbations such as deprived areas and family breakdown. The city's reputation as a 'good time zone' (with a thriving night-time economy) means that there are particular problems of homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse and sexual licence. It may be said that the ethos of being a liberal and caring community contributes to the attractiveness of the city's provision for people with issues of homelessness and substance abuse.

Calvary Church is located in the London Road area of Brighton. This area is partly residential. On a 2014 government survey "indices of multiple deprivation" were flagged up as abnormally high. There is quite a mobile population, with a significant number of houses in multiple occupation. In the wider area there are a number of middle-income families with children and stable commitments. The London Road businesses have recently (pre lockdown) been enjoying something of a regeneration thanks to Council support together with the LAT (see section 2) and other agencies into which we have had a degree of input.

This context presents challenges and opportunities which need to be addressed creatively. Current pre lockdown ministries of the church (in addition to the usual meetings) included

Calvary International Cafe, which aims to provide a welcome for international students. This had been attracting large numbers. An international bible study and at least one baptism have been among the spin-offs. This has not restarted after lockdown.

Caterpillars, a Parent and Toddler group which attracts a good attendance from the community. This is regarded as part of the church's involvement in the life of the city, but also provides bridges into the local community. This has not restarted after lockdown.

Community activism through the LAT as described above.

Evangelism by visitation, leafleting, street evangelism, apologetics and personal contact. This continues to be an uphill task, but there are definitely opportunities to seek lost sheep, even if it is one or two at a time. The church regularly creates a presence in the London Road shopping area by means of a book table (usually weekly), and has also undertaken visitation both to houses and businesses. This could be developed further.

Periodic open-door events, for example hustings, charity musical evenings with supper, and men's and women's breakfasts. We are gradually reintroducing these.

Work among older children and young people. Pre lockdown, a successful development was a weekly kid's club TNT on Saturday afternoons. Certainly this area is ripe for further development.

In the past we have run talks of an apologetic nature initially with the help of English L'Abri. This was aimed primarily at Christians to enable them to give a robust defence of the faith and provide salt and light to the community. This rather ran out of steam after a while, but in a city with so many students, there is certainly a need for this kind of activity.

5. Relationships with other churches

Calvary Evangelical Church has had good ties with other gospel churches within Brighton and Mid Sussex for a long time. We have been active members of the Sussex Gospel Partnership (SGP) (since 2007) and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (since 2008).

Whilst accepting that they may well have genuine believers, we do not believe it is helpful to attempt gospel-work together with churches that do not share our protestant and evangelical position.

The evangelical church scene in Brighton is rather unusual. The numerically biggest church is St. Peters (Anglican), a church plant from Holy Trinity Brompton which has grown rapidly together with several arising church plants. Morning attendance at St. Peters is probably about 500. Of similar size is Emmanuel (formerly Church of Christ the King CCK) which was among the first of the New Frontiers churches, founded by Terry Virgo. Both these churches are located in the heart of the city and see themselves as having a city-wide ministry, rather than a specifically local one. They attract many students.. There is no comparably sized FIEC or Grace Baptist church, which is a notable gap. Holland Road Baptist church and Bishop Hannington Memorial Church are located some distance away in Hove, and all of the rest of the evangelical congregations are considerably smaller.

There are however two encouraging developments:

Regular Leaders' Meetings representing smaller like-minded churches in central/east Brighton. Specifically: Park Hill Church (FIEC); and Ebenezer Reformed Baptist Church (Grace Baptist),

The Grace Baptist Association proposal to resource Christ's Kingdom by extending work in central/east Brighton. Grace Church Plant and New Life Moulsecoomb (an existing FIEC work) established a new church by covenant in January 2022.

Calvary Church sees its future to be worked out, by God's grace, in the context of these interconnected developments.

6. Space, Ethos and the Future

The existing church premises are geographically constrained. With growing numbers this is now providing a challenge for us, especially on Sunday mornings when, pre lockdown, our main meeting area and accommodation for children was sometimes nearly full. We are unable to readily expand the envelope of our premises without difficult issues. In addition, at present time, the upper floor of the building is leased to Brighton and Hove City mission, although they are seeking larger accommodation.

However, we have had a professional Feasibility Study considering a number of proposals to increase seating capacity on a Sunday morning from around 100 to about 150. This would provide opportunity for increased children's ministry according to ages; improve access and egress arrangements and offer toilet and kitchen facilities to match; and additionally provide additional office space. At the same time we believe that the family feel of the church and the closeness of relationships are precious and attractive characteristics that sit squarely with the New Testament picture of church life and provide a vivid gospel testimony to a rootless and transient community. We want to continue to work hard at this. Pre lockdown, God had also blessed us with a degree of increased strength. Our short term vision, therefore, is not only to continue to seek for conversions, but also to consolidate and develop the growth we have enjoyed by deeper levels of commitment to Christ and his church as we actively look for ways in which that growing strength may be used to encourage gospel witness, both in London Road and in other parts of the city.

Appendix: A brief history of Calvary Evangelical Church

Our church was founded as the Brighton Railway Mission by Mrs Elizabeth Gates, a Brighton businessman's wife, who had a deeply held desire to see the Word of God proclaimed to railway people. The first meeting of three railway people was held on 19 March 1876 in a waiting room at Brighton Station. The work soon outgrew the room available in the company library and the London Brighton & South Coast Railway needed room for its own expansion. The Railway Mission, nationally, was formed in 1881.

In 1894 the former Primitive Methodist Church in Viaduct Road was purchased. The premises were expanded in 1896 and further in 1910 with the purchase of 71 Viaduct Road as a schoolhouse to accommodate growing numbers in the Sunday School and youth work. 70 Viaduct Road was purchased in 1969 from money bequeathed by Mrs. Glen to the local work.

By 1960 the railway industry had declined in Brighton. Although many of the congregation retained links with the industry, the need for a particular mission hall for this purpose was no longer clear. (Current Railway Mission work, which the church continues to support, is based

around a model of Railway Chaplains). When Les Hill was called as Mission Superintendent, the congregation, under his leadership, undertook a restructuring to become an independent evangelical church, with an emphasis on bible teaching in the Reformed Baptist tradition. A particular love of Pastor Les (as he was known) was work among students, particularly international students, of which Brighton has a large number. Many of these students returned to their home nations and became Christian workers and leaders there, including one who founded a theological college in Sri Lanka. UK students contacted during that period have also developed into Christian leaders.

Local membership was introduced at Brighton in 1948. In 1975 the former Advisory Council was replaced by a more scriptural pattern of church government, with Elders and Deacons. In 1984 the church became known as Calvary Evangelical Church. The work had become effectively a local church.

This initial restructuring continued into the 1980s. The church was established with a belief in the plurality of elders providing spiritual leadership within a congregation, and with deacons providing support in practical matters. Les Hill was appointed the first elder. Philip Wells (the current part-time elder) was appointed as assistant pastor and elder in 1975.

Pastor Les was not paid by the congregation as he worked as a school teacher, latterly as headmaster of a special education unit. Philip Wells also continued to work as a school teacher. In 1983, the church called John Cropley as a full time paid elder. During this period the formal constitution as an independent evangelical church was adopted, and the congregation renamed itself Calvary Evangelical Church. In 1989 John Cropley was called away to work elsewhere, but before John's departure Les Hill died suddenly of a heart attack. After a period of reflection and prayer, Philip Wells indicated that he believed the Lord was calling him to devote himself full time to the work of the church, and the congregation confirmed that call by appointing him as a full time paid pastor. He has since been supported by (unpaid) elders: firstly Rod Thomas (who retired to Wales in 2006) and more recently Chris Fry and Ben Alltimes (paid).

Throughout this period the principle of *Semper Reformanda* has been put into action. This states that the church is always being reformed by Scripture and the Holy Spirit. So, the Reformed Baptist tradition is respected but not adopted uncritically. Insights from other traditions, such as the importance of the congregation in worship and ministry, have been adopted where biblically valid (1 Corinthians 14:29).

As the church no longer fulfilled the Railway Mission's particular charitable object of carrying out a work among railway people, the Railway Mission at first required that the properties be sold to realise funds for the object of the Railway Mission. The properties 70 and 71 Viaduct Road were indeed sold and the proceeds divided between the Railway Mission and Calvary Evangelical Church. However, after some negotiation, an arrangement was reached in 2005 which amounted to a lease to continue to use the main church building, while the upper rooms were subleased to Brighton and Hove City Mission. Considerable refurbishment was carried out to the building subsequent to this arrangement, funded by Calvary Evangelical Church. As a culmination of this process, Calvary Evangelical Church purchased the title to the building from the Railway Mission in 2014 for substantially less than half the market value of the property, subject to an overage agreement.

Calvary Evangelical Church joined the Sussex Gospel Partnership (SGP) in 2007, and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC) in 2008.

The church was constituted as an unincorporated charity in 2001, and became an incorporated charity in 2021.