



Harbour Church

A second generation HTB church plant in a poorer, less glamorous city

George Lings, Church Army's Research Unit

January 2018 (from research carried out in 2017)

Since 1985, Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) has been planting teams of 10 to 200 people into a wide variety of churches throughout London and, since 2009, beyond. Although most HTB church plants do not have a specified age focus, many attract large numbers of young adults.

Harbour Church, Portsmouth is one such example. Harbour Church is a 'second generation' HTB plant in that the team all came from St Peter's Brighton (HTB's first plant outside of London).

Harbour Church was started at the invitation of the Diocese of Portsmouth, who asked St Peter's Brighton to send a team. Alex Wood (St Peter's Curate), his wife Liz and 15 people relocated to Portsmouth in 2016. They brought values and models from both HTB and St Peter's, as well as having to learn what works in poorer, less glamorous city centre Portsmouth.



The key lessons that this case study of Harbour Church highlights include:

- A clear focus on **what works for outsiders** is essential
- **Getting everybody involved** is key. ‘Harbour’ is a working boat, not a cruise ship.
- **It’s still early days.** Portsmouth’s city centre will test how far Harbour’s ‘high cost’ financial model can work in a poorer context and what may need changing.

Introducing Harbour Church

Where: Portsmouth city centre, 97 Commercial Road PO1 1BQ

Denomination: Church of England

Date started: September 2016

Target groups: Local young adults (18-30s), NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), young parents, students and young professionals

Number of people involved (leader’s estimate): 240. In the morning around 130 are aged 18-30. In the evening, about 75 are in that age bracket

Staffing/ funding: 7 staff. 3 stipendiaries are centrally grant-funded (via the diocese) and 4 part-timers are locally funded. The diocese also provided clergy housing for Alex Wood and the curate, Ben Bryant, as well as securing funding for a £130,000 venue refurbishment.

Premises: Refurbished 4-floor ex-department store

Other points of note: Has a Bishop’s Mission Order. Is a 2nd generation plant in the HTB family.

Website: www.harbourchurchportsmouth.org



Mission at Harbour Church

Harbour Church’s vision statement is to

“...play our part in the evangelisation of the nation, the revitalisation of the church and the transformation of society”.

Its approach to mission with young adults is characterised by the following headings.

Being for the city, not existing Christians



A neutral venue was leased on the major shopping mall; it is near the station, university residences and the Portsmouth Guildhall events and conference centre. It has been refurbished with a ground floor café, 1st floor worship space, 2nd floor children's rooms and a hipster style top floor.

Having an active, updated web presence connects to today's young adults ... but deliberately it isn't filled with shots of lots of "beautiful people".

Putting on only what you would go to yourself

The principle of 'putting on only what you would go to yourself' is clearly important to Harbour Church. This applies to standards of hospitality, choices in worship, language in communication and the range of social events. It means making Sunday into what would make sense to those not used to church.

Services that are accessible to outsiders

The following snapshot of a Harbour Church service provides one example of this.

The doors open half an hour early. The welcome is first class, by truly hospitable people, with provision of food and drink. We got strawberries and cream in Wimbledon fortnight.

The style is informal, explanatory, but directive. The songs are Jesus-centred but human need focused. One title was 'My heart is an open space for you to come and have your way'. Provision for many different ages of children on floor 2 is superb.



Each service is thematic; each offers and expects ongoing personal transformation by encounter with Christ.

In around 90% of the services a response time is evoked.

In both morning and evening, there was a discernible shape to worship (welcome, songs, message and response), but the links to contemporary Anglican worship were quite tenuous (there was nothing resembling confession, creed, collect or intercessions).

This research can only say that for those we met, this style works. We have no way to contact those for whom it might not work.

Continuing the HTB family DNA



Both the ethos and approach of Harbour Church appear to be intuitively framed through that of HTB and its wider network. Alex Wood comments he became a Christian there and “it shaped the way I do worship, ministry and what talks are like”.

He then learnt foundations of leadership, grew a church from smaller beginnings and was involved in social action at St Peter’s Brighton, an HTB plant.

All the other Harbour Church staff members also have a background in the wider network of the HTB family of churches. Reflecting on this, Alex comments:

“If you bring in people from outside, don’t be surprised at how there can be a clash of values and culture.”

But he is also clear that this approach to selection has not simply been about choosing “best friends”.

Involving everyone

While HTB by its size has a staff culture, Harbour Church follows the example of St Peter’s Brighton of making voluntary lay participation central.

Evangelism through small groups

There are more people in these small groups than come to Harbour Church. This is key to its lay-led, diverse, engaged, relational evangelism. The groups are time-bound. Every 10 weeks they disband. They re-form, responding to the church's needs and people's sense of calling.



There are 3 kinds of group: to go deeper in faith, to serve by social action, and to make friends. The latter put on social, gaming or sporting events and invite friends to them, using homes and 'third places'.

Evidence of growth

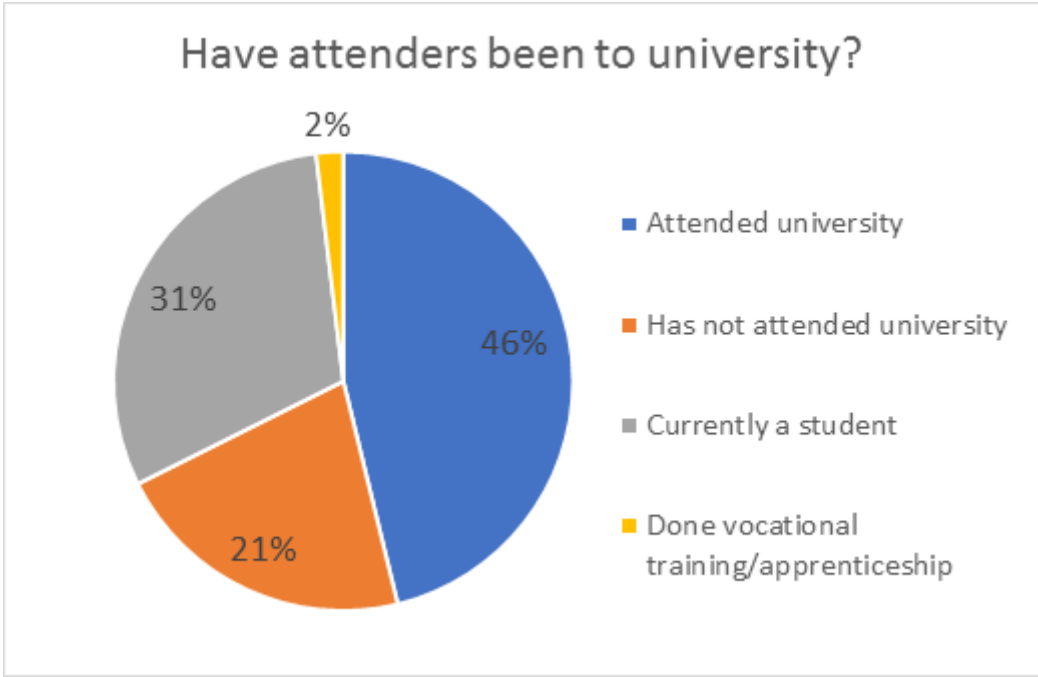
Quite a start

When we visited this case study, Harbour Church was just a year old. But from a team of 15 and a couple of friends who came for a few months, numbers attending had already grown to about 240.

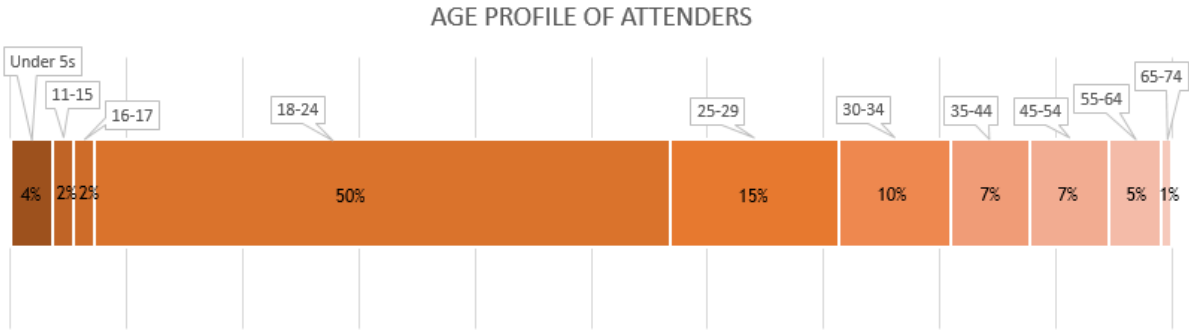
During term time, the morning service of 150 fills the 1st floor space. The evening happens on the 3rd floor. Out of term time numbers can be 50-60. In term time it's 80-90.

Quite a mix

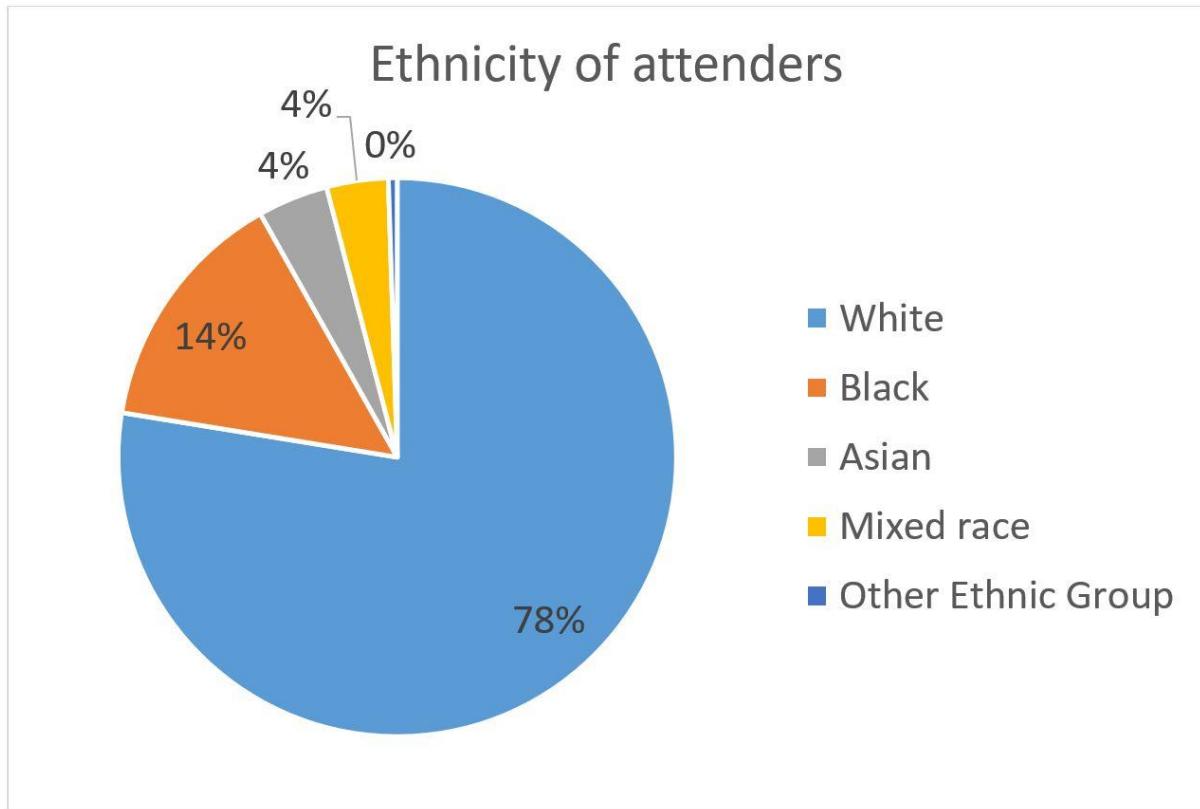
Harbour Church has attracted a variety of young adults. Those interviewed one-to-one ranged enormously: graduate young professional, local young adult with a difficult background, a single parent mum and highly qualified asylum seekers. The surrounding parish is a mix: shops and civic buildings, urban poverty and students.



The age range is wide in the morning, from children to pensioners. Around 10% of the evening congregation are over 30. Across both congregations, the all age mix is seen as the best context to hold 18-30s. The chart below shows a more detailed breakdown of the attendance data we gathered.



In both congregations, the women outnumber the men, roughly 60% to 40%. 22% of attenders are not white British.

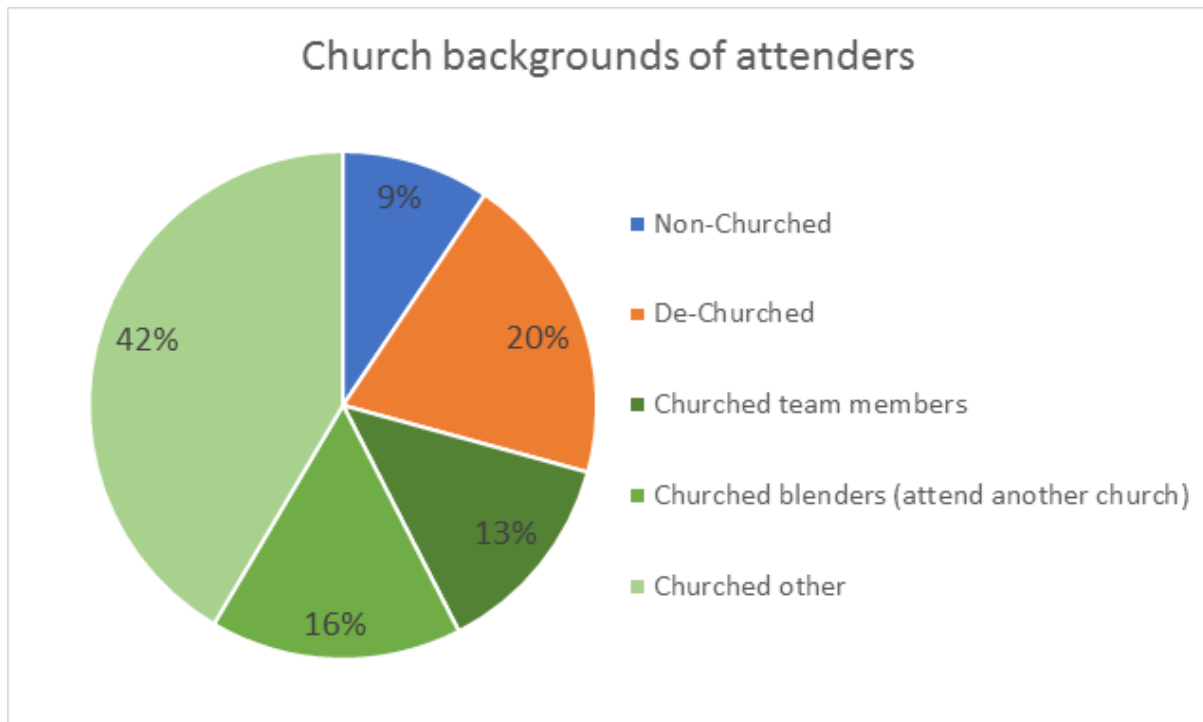


Evangelistic impact

Alex Wood has a phone list of non-churched converts. In July 2017, it was 14 people known by name, with 10 under 30. But the results of the attenders survey we conducted when we visited Harbour Church suggest that at least 20 people have become Christians through Harbour Church, with a further 15 saying they rediscovered a lost faith there.

As the pie chart on page 8 shows, a large proportion of Harbour Church attenders come from 'churched' backgrounds, though a significant minority were either 'non-churched' or 'de-churched' when they starting attending Harbour Church.

Alex Wood also tells us that about half of the existing Christians who have joined Harbour Church were only infrequent attenders elsewhere in the city and are now regulars at Harbour Church.



For a further explanation of the categories in the pie chart above, please see our [summary report](#) (Appendix 2).

How have people come to faith?

“It was totally different - relaxed, and on a level I could understand.” Sarah

In the small groups friendships are made and spiritual interest starts, but this is not the whole process. The Alpha course runs 3 times a year and models community, hospitality, real openness to explore questions and transformation through encountering Jesus. The relaxed, engaging Sunday services also play their part.



We interviewed several other young adults who had become Christians. They identified various factors that had influenced their faith journeys:

- Most mentioned **the impact of the Sunday songs and prayer ministry** that resonated with inner needs
- Several appreciated that Harbour Church is **not traditional church**
- A number found the Alpha course via a **Google search**
- For many the start was **having Christian friends**
- Some were **befriended by a one-to-one evangelist**

Tom's story

"They tackle real questions avoided elsewhere."



Tom is 24. He came to Portsmouth for uni, graduating in 2016. He was not raised as a Christian. In school years he moved from atheism to agnosticism.

In his travels, and at uni, he met impressive Christians that made him curious. One of them commended the Alpha course which he Googled. It came up with Harbour Church. He dared make the scary decision to go and investigate.

The hipster setting on floor 3 helped, and he said the lovely people there created a great atmosphere, served great food and he could ask lots of questions in the small group. They didn't have all the answers, but that began to matter less. Next time the Alpha course ran, he decided to help. For him, that was the sign he had become a Christian.

Conclusions

A clear focus on outsiders

For Alex Wood and the Harbour Church team, a clear focus on what works for outsiders is essential. He comments:

"Gaining one non-Christian is worth attracting 10 existing Christians."

This ethos is reflected in the way everything, from Sunday gatherings to small groups, is done. The wider Church should applaud the instinct that expects sacrifice by Christians over style, priorities and content.

Involving everyone



The value of getting everybody involved (particularly through outward-focused small groups) is another important lesson from Harbour Church. In this sense, Harbour Church is very clearly a working boat, not a cruise ship.

However, Alex also reflects that wanting it all to look good on day one meant missing out on a better process of getting people together in the mess of starting and being part of the journey.

This honest reflection illustrates that genuinely involving others is easier said than done, particularly for larger churches. To be more effective in involving young adults, many churches still need to kill a ‘provider-client’ mindset.

A reproducible and adaptable model?

When we came to visit, Harbour Church was just a year old. Though it has made a promising start, it is still too early to make a definitive judgement about the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of this approach.

With a paid staff team of 7 and a large building that costs £40,000 per year to rent, Harbour Church’s approach is clearly very resource intensive. Other HTB church plants with a similar financial model (e.g. in London and Brighton) have become self-financing by virtue of the large numbers of professional high-earners they attract.



But Portsmouth is a different type of place to London and Brighton, with fewer young professionals and graduates that stay on in the city.

Within this poorer and less glamorous context, only time will tell what from the resource church model used here by HTB is truly replicable, and what must be reproduced non-identically.

To find out more

To find out more about Harbour Church, visit

www.harbourchurchportsmouth.org

You can also connect with them on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Vimeo](#) and [YouTube](#).

For a list other HTB church plants, go to

www.htb.org/about/related-churches

There have been various other studies of HTB church plants and city centre resource churches in recent years. These include:

- [Love, Sweat and Tears](#) - A study of church planting in East London by The Centre for Theology & Community
- Case studies of St Peter's Brighton and St Thomas's Norwich (two other HTB church plants outside London) in the Church of England's [Resourcing Mission Bulletin \(July 2014\)](#)
- Features on city centre resource churches in the [June 2015 Resourcing Mission Bulletin](#) and the [Centre for Church Planting and Growth website](#)