



It's simply a real focus on Jesus

Baptisms, healings, growing discipleship - Hillfields Church in Bristol has witnessed many hugely encouraging developments since emerging from lockdown. Interview with with lead pastor Rich Rycroft.

"Seeing salvation, new life, growth and transformation have become part of our culture and our life," says lead pastor Rich Rycroft.

"And we have a real heart to encourage other churches - not because we think we're better, just because we believe it's possible. We want anyone else that feels like we once did - when they're asking if there is any hope - to know the answer is 'yes'"

The church, which opened in 1929, had a dwindling and ageing congregation by 2016. So much so that Rich was seriously considering leaving for the sake of his two young children.

But Rich, a youth worker, sensed God had other plans. "I felt God kind of rebuke me, telling me that I can't just be critical - I have to become part of the solution." There was a leadership vacuum at the time due to ill health, and Rich subsequently felt called to offer his services, not as a pastor but someone who could implement and oversee some changes.

The membership agreed to him serving in this role for one year.

"I said: 'I'll do it with God. And if it's not God, if I'm not the guy, then you've wasted one year, and you can go back to whatever you had. I wasn't qualified for this, but I had a passion for the place

and the passion for what God wanted to do here."

Changes were gradual and encouraging. Between August 2018 and early 2019 a new person walked through the doors every week. "Not everyone stayed, but we started to believe there are people out there and there is potential for people to walk in. There is hope."

The church started recording its sermons around this time, which meant it adapted quickly to the lockdown restrictions.

"We were ready to minister to the church, and it kept the church alive," says Rich, "And it meant we were really ready to get back." When Hillfields returned, the congregation numbered around 30-40.

But Rich felt something in people had shifted as a result of the pandemic - a brush with death giving rise to an increased interest in faith. The church was visible, as the congregation worshipped outside due to restrictions on singing.

"And we just started growing," he says. "We started seeing amazing things happening. People walking through the doors, people giving their lives to



Jesus, people getting baptised, healings. There are tons of stories."

Hillfields has baptised more than 60 people since the first lockdown, and its congregation is more than 200. Rich is now the lead pastor and serves alongside four others. There are growing pains, but he feels it's just the beginning.

Rich reiterates Hillfields' desire to encourage others. It has connected with several churches, both locally and further afield.

"I'm a leader. So I do understand how hard it is for leaders. I know how difficult it is - what we suffer, what we go through. I'm someone who's been in the church nearly 30 years. I saw miracles, then two decades of it being really dry and difficult.

"When I was doing youth work, it was just tough ground and I didn't understand it. I asked God: is there any hope anymore?"

Does anyone even want to know about Jesus?

“This has got us believing again - and encouraging people, putting hope into situations, it can't be bad.

“It's not about anything we've done, there's no glory in it for any human here,” he continues. “If you look at the story, it's too perfect - God has done this. We're

just vessels every now and then that God uses.

“If there is a formula, it's simply a real focus on Jesus. He has done it, it is finished. Everything we need is him. Jesus is the answer, and Jesus is always the answer. For some reason, I think we put other things ahead of that - we're just as guilty as a church as anyone else, I'm not pointing fingers. It does sound a bit too,

I don't know, too easy, but it's the answer and he is the answer.

“He saved my life and many, many other people.”

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