

# Growing in The Wey

In the second of a series looking at the journeys of individual churches, we look at a small rural church which has experienced remarkable and consistent growth

## Easy 'stepping stones' to growth

Whether it's through visits to the night café, playing football in the church team or attending an Alpha course, a "stepping stone" approach to joining St Peter's Shared Church, Chertsey, is one of the factors that has led to a growth in numbers of almost 50 per cent over recent years.

The church, a Local Ecumenical Partnership with an electoral roll of 220 people, stands at the centre of the town on the main road and has built up an identity at the heart of Chertsey.

Youth worker, Marie Adams said: "It is easy for people to belong to St Peter's, even if they cannot attend one of the many Sunday services.

"We have a 'stepping stone' approach with few hurdles to enable people to get into the life of the church easily.

"For example, young people may hang out at the night café where they can meet their friends and one or two adults from the church. From there it is a simple step to an informal Alpha course, where they bond with a group that goes on to form a small group that meets to study the Bible together...and hopefully the rest is history.

"Equally, members of the church football club feel they belong to church even though most of them do not actually come to Sunday services - yet."

When the Revd Tim Hillier became vicar in 2000 St Peter's was described to him by one of the bishops as a "grey" church, meaning the average age was on the high side. Today the average age is much lower. "The balance has shifted very considerably. The church has many more families and young people, including young, single people," said Tim.



St Peter's keeps up its profile

Churchwarden Yvonne Barnes said: "Much of our growth can be attributed to the ongoing work with young families and children. We first employed a youth and children's worker in 2002 and that has had a significant effect on the young people both within the church and through outreach.

"There are a great variety of services, both at weekends and on weekdays as well as plenty of different types of groups to join. The local school, Stepgates Community School, which became affiliated to the Church of England in 2006, also regularly invites Marie Adams in to lead assemblies."

A twice weekly parent and toddler group has been a great success with many carers also going on to join an Alpha course - but the elderly are not neglected at St Peter's either.

Tim said: "Work with the older members of the congregation is of great importance to us. We hold a monthly Songs of Praise service with transport provided to bring in worshippers from across the town.

"We also have a weekly 'coffee break' which is largely for the elderly and attracts considerable numbers of people from the community who perhaps otherwise would have no contact with the church."

A mission, 'Chertsey Alive', held in 2005 and headed up by Canon Michael Green, helped give the church new energy and direction.

Tim said: "We were already a mission-orientated church, but this town-wide mission gave us considerable new energy and life.

"Alpha courses have been running for the best part of 10 years. Like many churches over the first few years our 'Alpha undergraduates' were drawn from within the church and then the numbers coming on the courses dropped for a bit.

"Then over the last three to four years people have asked to come on the courses from outside the church, some because of their church contacts and some have noticed the Alpha banner outside the church and asked to join 'on spec'.

"All of this has had a knock on effect as when people finish Alpha they often want to continue to meet together, so new small groups are formed."

But it would be a mistake to imagine that this church does not have difficul-



St Peter's Shared Church in the heart of Chertsey

ties of its own. With small groups having grown from two to eight in the past five years, finding good leaders is an ongoing - albeit exciting - problem to have.

Bonnie Appleton, from the department of mission, evangelism and parish development said, "It is obvious that not only does this church make it easy to feel included, but both Tim and his curate Steve go to great lengths to be available and accessible to people.

"If someone wants to see either of them, they make it a priority. There is no doubt about it, people feel wanted and valued and that's bound to make people want to go to St Peter's and stay."



Pictured together are St Peter's staff (left to right) the Revd Tim Hillier, curate the Revd Steve Brunn, youthworker Marie Adams and director of music Rosemary Richards.