

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST GEORGE CHESTERTON CAMBRIDGE



*Text, design, and photography*

**Dr Timur Alexandrov**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**REACH Ely (Reimagining Churches as  
Community Assets for the Common Good)**  
is a multi-partner research project that  
aims to help communities make fuller use  
of their churches.

*Editorial board*

**Dr Helen Haugh**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**Geoffrey Hunter**

Diocese of Ely

*The project is implemented by*

**Centre for Social Innovation at  
Cambridge Judge Business School  
and the Diocese of Ely**

*with the generous support of Allchurches Trust  
and Historic England*

**[www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)**

The challenges facing church communities and their buildings have been extensively studied in the light of declining church attendance in the United Kingdom over several decades. REACH Ely aims to address the less-well-understood opportunities for churches to engage and reconnect with the 97.7 per cent of the local communities in the Diocese of Ely who do not attend their parish churches.

With the absence of universal determinants of success and failure of churches in the community engagement context, the REACH Ely project will provide an understanding of the relationship between communities and wider use of church buildings as well as the contribution that churches make to the common good. The project will determine community values, needs and opportunities that can be used in the most effective way to ensure a win-win outcome for communities and sustainable future of church buildings.

The **case study series** is based on in-depth interviews and observations about church building use with informants from a subset of deaneries and parishes in the Diocese of Ely, supplemented with secondary information about the communities they represent. The purpose of the case study is to unearth various church experiences in renovating and envisioning their buildings as missional and social spaces, engaging with local and wider communities, addressing current challenges, and learning from their practice.

The **Glossary** is a separate document that accompanies the case study series. It is available as a download from the project's website [www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)

*On the cover: Handmade model of St George's exhibited in the church.*

Copyright © 2020 University of Cambridge. All rights reserved. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from The Ely Diocesan Board of Finance under research grant ref RG95970.

# ST GEORGE CHESTERTON CAMBRIDGE

**Church Category:** Suburban

**Deanery:** Cambridge North

**Address:** Chesterfield Road, Cambridge CB4 1LN

**Website:** [www.stgeorgeschesterton.org.uk](http://www.stgeorgeschesterton.org.uk)

**Cambridge Community Circus:**  
[www.camcircus.org](http://www.camcircus.org)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade II listed building; Church hall; Car park; Large garden; Circus rig in the church; Recording studio; Facilities and kitchen in the church hall; Limited church opening times

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 33 / 8,701

**Fundraising:** The church has not carried out fundraising for major improvements to the fabric of the buildings

**Income Generation:** Rentals of recording studio and church hall; Circus group

**Communications:** Church website; Church Facebook page; Church news featured in a local community newspaper *Chesterton News*; Information banners

**Community Engagement:** Hope Church initiative; Social prescribing plans; Circus group; Chesterton Festival, Film nights; Barbeques; Listening exercise; Church and families worker; Ideas for a Parallel Lives project; Working with the elderly; Community survey; Community space.

# ROOTS



## Profile

---

Chesterton is a suburb of Cambridge (population 18,134 residents in 2011) located on the north-eastern edge of the city, and is divided into two wards, West and East Chesterton. St George's church is located in East Chesterton, whose population was estimated to be 9,008 in 2017. This is a largely residential area, 74.6% of whom are said to be economically active.

Chesterton lies to the south of Milton Road, a main arterial route linking the centre of Cambridge with the nearby Science Park, Business Park, and the A14 road. A new railway station, Cambridge North, was opened in Chesterton in May 2017, and provides fast links from Cambridge to King's Lynn and Norwich to the north and east and London to the south. The River Cam forms the southern boundary of the ward, fringed by boathouses belonging to the Cambridge colleges.

The parish area includes three primary schools, a nursery school, a day nursery, Brown's Field Youth and Community Centre, and two public houses. There are several play areas for children. A hotel is to be built next to the new railway station.

There are two Church of England churches, St George's and St Andrew's, Chesterton Methodist church, a Baptist church, and a Buddhist Temple are nearby. On the other side of the Arbury estate, to the north of Milton Road, are another Church of England Good Shepherd's church (*See REACH Ely case study: Good Shepherd Chesterton*) and Arbury Community Church. The asylum of the Victoria Benefit Society, county gaol, and Union workhouse were formerly located in the area.



Top: View of the church entrance from Chesterfield Road. Middle: Church hall entrance and car park next to the church. Bottom: New railway station Cambridge North (Photo by St George's church); Church tower seen behind houses on Milton Road.

## Building

---

St George's church is located in a corner of a residential road with little passing traffic. The church was built in 1938, to the design of Thomas H. Lyon, to serve the new housing developments along the Milton Road. The site had been acquired in 1931 and a temporary mission room, later used as a church hall, was erected. Outside, the building has a North European Town Hall feel while inside it is Basilican. Built mostly of red brick, the church has a chancel, nave flanked by low aisles, and a tall south-west tower.

The Grade II listed church building never had pews in the nave. The notable feature of the building is a high cathedral-like ceiling. Rigging has been added in the left-hand aisle of the church to accommodate a thriving circus group that has been using the church space for about five years. Next to the circus rig is a kitchen set in a cubicle that separates it from the church space. Above the entrance is a balcony that provides additional space. A meeting room at the end of the nave has a glass window overlooking the church space. The church building can accommodate up to 350 people.

The church and the space around it have been renovated recently. In April 2018, the outside space was revamped: demolishing an hut that had been in place since the 1940s and creating a cycle and car parking area which is a flexible space which could also be used for events. The church hall was extended in the 1990s thanks to financial support from the City Council to include an additional kitchen and WC facilities. Significant work in the church has been required to upgrade the electrics, to ensure fire regulations are met and to repoint the building. In November 2019, after several years without heating, the boilers were replaced and new radiators installed in the building. A loop system has been installed for those with hearing aids.

St George Chesterton has a large garden, which has been added to with the purchase of an additional piece of land. There is a covenant on this land, protecting it from further building. There is adjoining churchyard yet without a graveyard.

Next to the church hall is a large car park. The outside space has recently been improved. The vicarage is located nearby in Chesterton Road. Apart from during services, the church is only open when being used by various groups.



Top: View of the church nave from the balcony. Middle: Bookshelf and kitchen space. Bottom: Church nave with removed chairs.



1st row: Car park in front of church hall; Large room in the church hall. 2nd row: Meeting room with glass window. 3rd row: Office rooms in the church. 4th row: Kitchen in the church hall; Office space in the church.



# RUNNING

## Team

---

The ministry team of St George church includes the vicar, an associate vicar, three curates, a children and families worker, and a church centre manager.

## Religious Services

---

St George's main service is at 10 a.m. on a Sunday followed by coffee. This service attracts around 40 people who meet at the front steps facing the High Altar and the chairs are arranged in a semi-circle formation. *'The interesting thing about this building is it doesn't feel like you're in a big building when you gather the chairs like that. It's quite a nice space to be in actually'*, adds Ms Adams, the vicar. St George Chesterton has an early service at 8 a.m. once a month and Bible studies group meetings. There is also an Alpha course. The church visits local schools and local care homes.

**Hope Church Chesterton.** St George's sister congregation – Hope Church – convenes at Shirley School. Sunday services at Hope Church begin with refreshments at 10.30 a.m. followed by an informal friendly service for all ages.

## Parish Share

---

In 2019, parish share expenditure was £29,936.

## Fundraising

---

There has been no recent major fundraising. While film nights are admission-free events, collections may be made for local charities (e.g. the food bank) as St George's is helping to raise funds of other charities.

### Income Generation

---

**Recording studio.** St George Chesterton is used as a recording studio, which generates £300 per day. The greatest amount of income is generated by the recording studio, used by groups such as the Academy of Ancient Music and musicians who travel up from as far away as London. There are five recording engineers who regularly use the space and the church has worked hard to develop this.

**The circus group,** Cambridge Community Circus (CCC), hires the church building space on a regular basis, although they pay a lower, community rate. The combined revenue from the church and church hall is about £35,000 per annum.

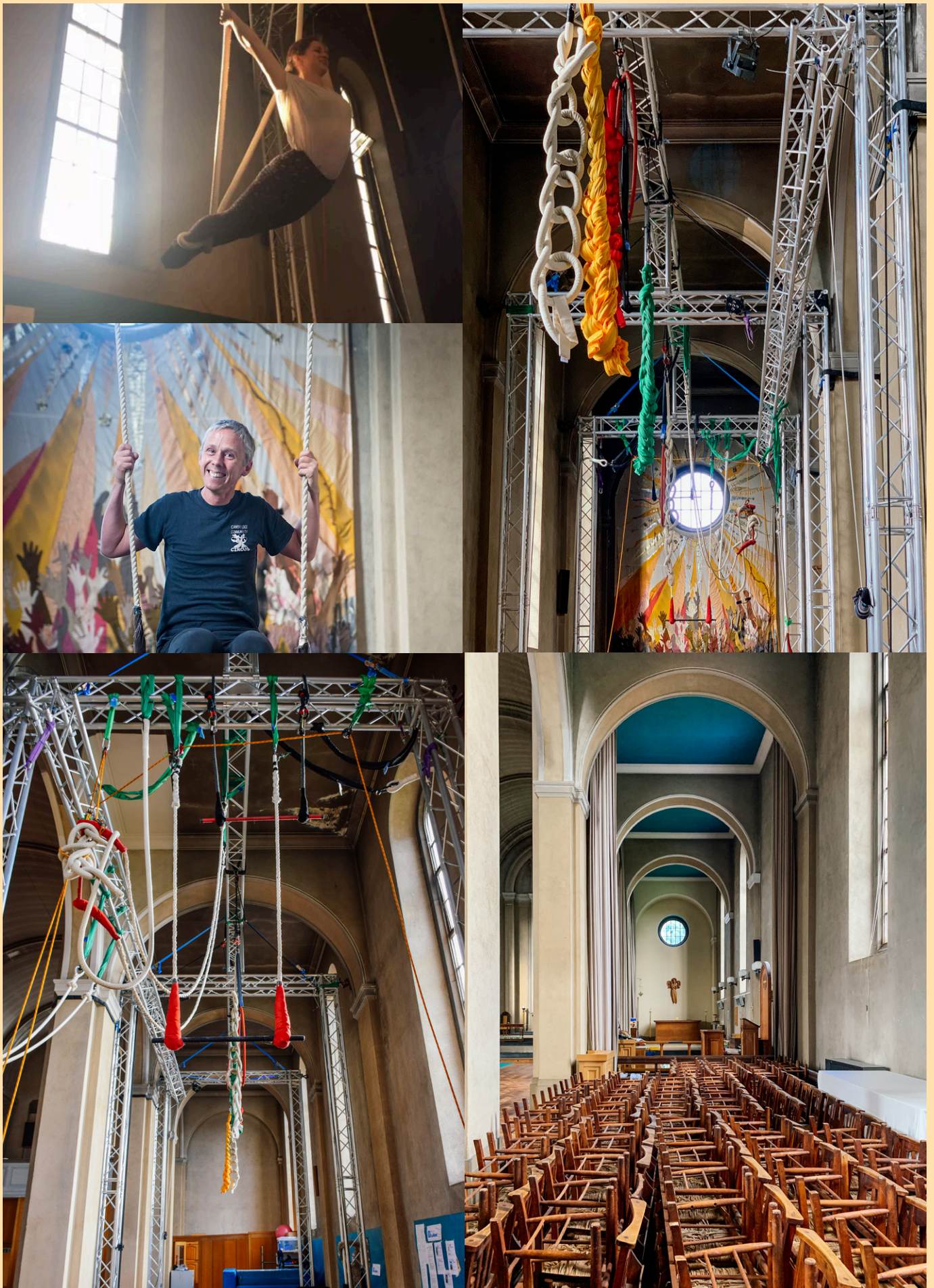
**Church hall rentals.** St George's church hall is well used, hosting, among others, a pre-school group, mums and toddlers, ballet classes, lunch club and a table tennis club. Local ballet and pre-school groups, which were in a neighbouring hut until its demolition, moved to the church hall when it was opened and a car park created.

**Film night** in the church is a free event but there is sometimes a collection for a related charity, e.g., the local food bank. Occasional donations are made on the back of these events (*See Events*).

### Communications

---

The church has a **website** and a **Facebook page**. The church is part of a committee that runs a quarterly **newspaper** *Chesterton News* in conjunction with the other churches and the Chesterton Community Association. The newspaper is delivered to all houses in the parish. It has a regularly updated 'What's On' and 'News from the Churches' pages. **Banners** are hung outside the church to publicise special services.



*Top-left: Cambridge Community Circus team members during the practice (Photos by Cambridge Community Circus [www.camcircus.org](http://www.camcircus.org)).*

*Top-right and bottom: The circus rigging in the north aisle in the church and stacks of chairs in the south aisle.*

"Our local radio guy said to me: Is it not sacrilegious to have a circus rig in the church? And I said no – I find that the circus members both respect the space and enjoy the space. It enhances the space to have them here. We have developed our relationship with the circus as a partnership. We have some strong shared values in building community."

Revd Ruth Adams  
Vicar

"St George's church is a fantastic venue for aerial because of the height, it's easy to get to (just round the corner from where I work!), the circus drop ins are fantastic value, and the courses are very reasonably priced, and I love the community feel of the place. I'd be lost without it. Long live CCC at St George's!"

Circus participant

"For me, aerial circus at St George's facilitates a magical combination of creativity, care, passion, learning, art, friendship, fun, sharing, inclusiveness, support, strength, happiness, and inspiration, and all within a supportive, encouraging and co-operative community of wonderfully diverse people."

Circus participant

"Aerial means so much to me! It makes me so so happy and circus is always full of friendly, inspirational, awesome people. The church is great for aerial, it's tall so silks is very amazing to do, everything works out very well."

Circus participant

# REACH

## Community

---

**Social prescribing and community involvement.** St George Chesterton is considering to be enlisted in the prescribing list of social community institutions. The list enables general practitioners and other frontline healthcare professionals to refer patients to local social and community institutions to provide them with a face-to-face conversation about the possibilities and personalised solutions (See *REACH Ely case study: St George Littleport*). The church is also considering creating a social space (e.g., backyard café) and building up arts activities for NHS arts prescriptions by having a space where people could come and learn different arts skills.

**Partnership for Missional Church** is a programme that is organised by the Diocese through the Church Mission Society. The St George's team are in the second year of the programme, which involves listening and exploring the needs of the community.

**Circus Group.** Cambridge Community Circus has been licensed to use the church for the next five years. This involved setting up a rig in the left-hand aisle of the church. The group use the space five times a week and offer a variety of courses and drop-ins. It has a strong community ethos and charges are kept at an affordable level. The circus is not a religious group and most people in the circus are in their twenties and thirties.

**Neighbours.** St George Chesterton has worked with its neighbours given that

there can be parking issues when there are large events. The neighbours are supportive of the community events and the fact that the church has extended its car park helps here.

**Joint events with other churches.** Joint services are held on Good Friday with the local Methodist and Church of England churches.

## Events

---

**Chesterton Festival** is a community festival in Chesterton, Cambridge, run each year by volunteers from the local community, as well as the churches and the City Council. In 2019, St George hosted 'Songs of Praise' and an 'Open Day' was held in the vicarage garden.

**Film nights.** The church has a partnership with the Cambridge Film Trust, and films are projected on a large outside broadcast screen within the church at least once a year. These are popular admission-free events that attract over 300 people. The films are chosen to appeal to a diverse demographic within the community, e.g. films that appeal to children (*The Greatest Showman*) or films addressing topics such as social justice (*I, Daniel Blake*), or war films (*Battle of the Somme*). On one occasion, the producer of *I, Daniel Blake* visited St George's church and gave a talk. This film was well attended by students and those with an interest in the film's topic of social justice.

**Barbeques** are occasional events that take place in the vicarage garden.

### Engagement

---

**Community survey.** The church is using questionnaires and interviews to discuss hopes and opportunities for the area with the local community.

**Community space.** The church and particularly the church hall have been run as community spaces for many years. St George's church is keen to develop partnerships, such as with the circus group, that will encourage the community to make use of the multi-functional space. *'Changing our outside space has made a big difference to what we can do. It has made [the church] more accessible. It's made quite a big impact on how people see the [church] as a space for them'*, says Ms Adams, the vicar.

**Church and families worker** is a volunteer who runs exhibitions for schools from the church. Last year, a Christmas trail was set up and over 500 children attended as part of their Religion and Education classes.

**Working with the elderly.** One of the church team members spends one day a week in a local care home.

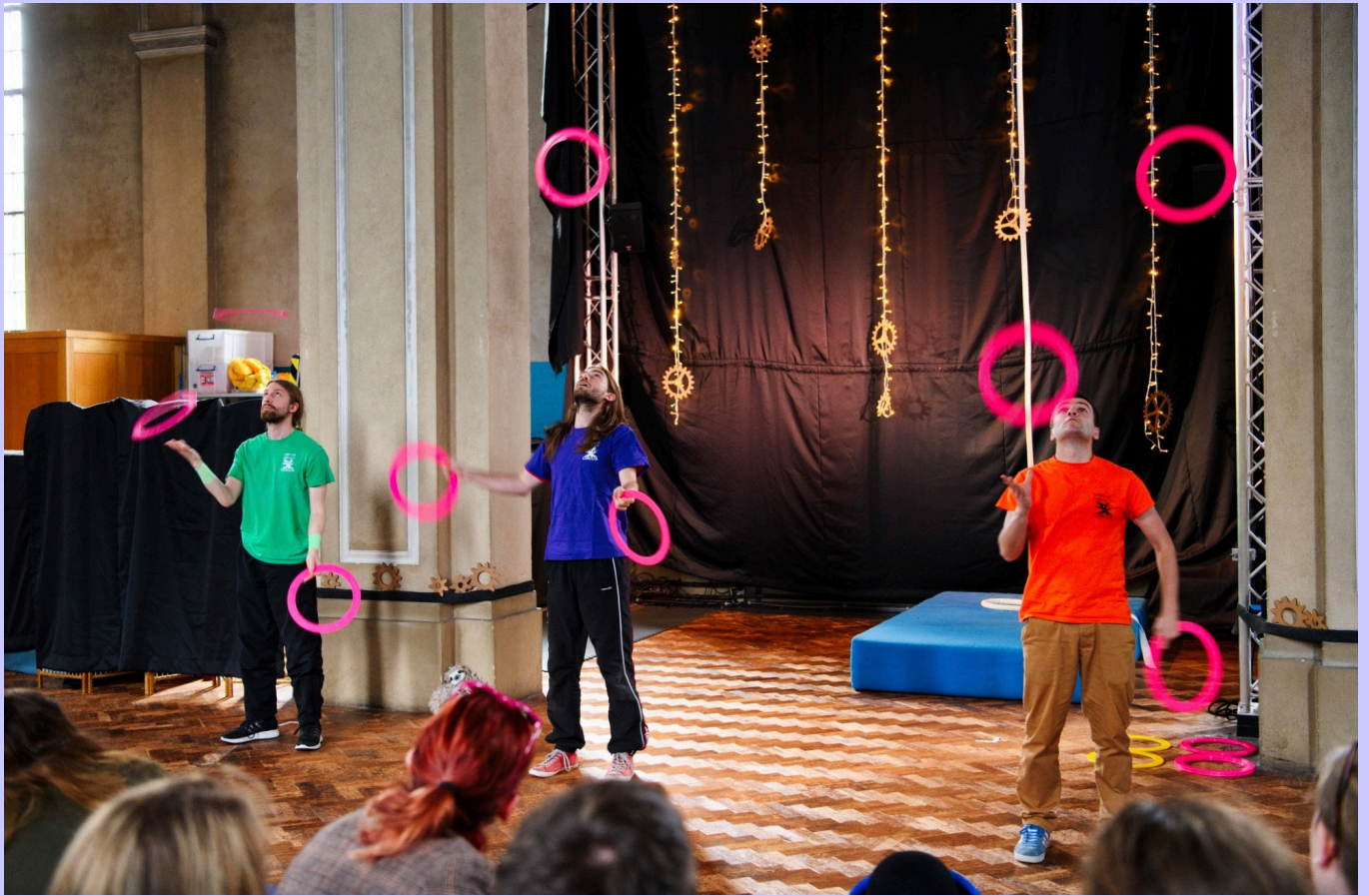
**Reaching out into the community.** The Hope Church initiative was established to reach out to areas within the parish that were seen as underserved. One of the members of St George's staff works part-time as Chaplain to Cambridge North and the Science Park.

**Pioneering curate.** One of the curates is known as a 'pioneering curate' with responsibility for starting new initiatives. The team is generating a lot of new ideas.

**Parallel Lives: Addressing inequality.** As an output of a listening exercise in the community, the church is considering a joint project with the City Council 'Parallel Lives' to bring diverse sections of the parish community together, both the privileged and the less fortunate. The idea is that the project 'Parallel Lives' can bring together the arts, sciences and business opportunities.

“This year we have been doing some listening and observation in our local community. Something that has come across to us again and again has been that many people are living what we might call parallel lives. So there’s some people with quite a lot of wealth living right beside somebody who’s got nothing. But it is quite possible that they never meet or encounter one another. The challenge to us has been to become a place of meeting and encounter. We have been in conversation with the City Council about developing an arts programme that might meet address this topic and are excited to see what might come of these conversations.”

Revd Ruth Adams  
Vicar



Cambridge Community Circus performances at St George Chesterton (Photos by Duncan Grisby [www.grisby.org](http://www.grisby.org)).



# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

---

### Church location

The church building is situated on a residential road and lacks visibility. The church tower can be visible from miles around but among the houses it may seem hidden.

### Addressing poverty, wellbeing and youth disaffection

The church is looking to work with the City Council on issues around food poverty and detached youth work. Vicar's previous experience in the City Council as a Mayor's Chaplain should be helpful in fostering potential joint projects.

### Lack of churchyard, memorials, and meeting places

There is nowhere in this part of Chesterton where people gather to remember their loved ones. The PCC of St George Chesterton is actively looking at creating a space of social significance. St George Chesterton is also considering how it might provide a meeting space for local people. A café is not seen as a viable proposal as the church has little passing traffic. The church may provide a self-service refreshment area within the church, with tables and chairs. This area could also be used for arts skills classes.

“Providing good places to meet each other around here is important. We’re particularly conscious that we have no graveyard here and no war memorial. So where do people go to remember? We have wondered about creating a memorial garden between our church and hall, so we are asking our neighbours what helps them when they want to remember.”

**Revd Ruth Adams**  
Vicar



## Lessons Learned

---

### **To work in partnership**

St George Chesterton has developed strong partnerships with the city council and with its own users.

### **To integrate the church and the community**

The team is continuing the work done to integrate the church and community via a listening programme. Non-worshippers are welcomed into the church for film nights and circus skills classes. The team are noticing that the space provided by the church buildings is more appreciated as this user base grows.

### **To adapt the church building for more flexible and a wider use**

This has required careful planning and negotiation with groups with long-standing links to the space. Seating arrangements for services are tailored to the size of the group, creating a more intimate space at the front of the church. The space within the church is flexible enough for both larger services, such as Christingle, and smaller regular forms of worship, given that there are no pews to work around.

### **To provide affordable and creative opportunities to the local community**

Free film nights have proved very popular to many sections of the community. The circus provides healthy pastime and promotes physical activity for young people. To further develop the space as an arts venue, the church plans to apply to the Arts Council for funding and support.

### **To enhance the attractiveness of the space to new hirers**

As well as improving facilities, the St George's church team is looking to benefit from the location of the new station at Cambridge North and to create incentives for new users, such as recordings, and for those staying at the hotel planned for the new station area.

### **To help other local charities**

By providing an opportunity during film night public events to accept collections for the food bank, for example, the church is helping other local charities.



“[The circus] enables community, and there’s lots of people who’ll say I didn’t know anybody when I moved to Cambridge, I came to Circus, I’ve got friends, I’ve got a place to belong. That’s absolutely in line with some of our values around being a community resource.”

**Revd Ruth Adams**  
Vicar

**REACH Ely: Reimagining Churches as  
Community Assets for the Common Good**

**Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation**

Cambridge Judge Business School  
University of Cambridge  
Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1AG  
socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk  
www.jbs.cam.ac.uk

**Diocese of Ely**

Ely Diocesan Office  
Bishop Woodford House  
Barton Road  
Ely CB7 4DX  
T: +44 (0) 1353 652701  
www.elydiocese.org

[www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)