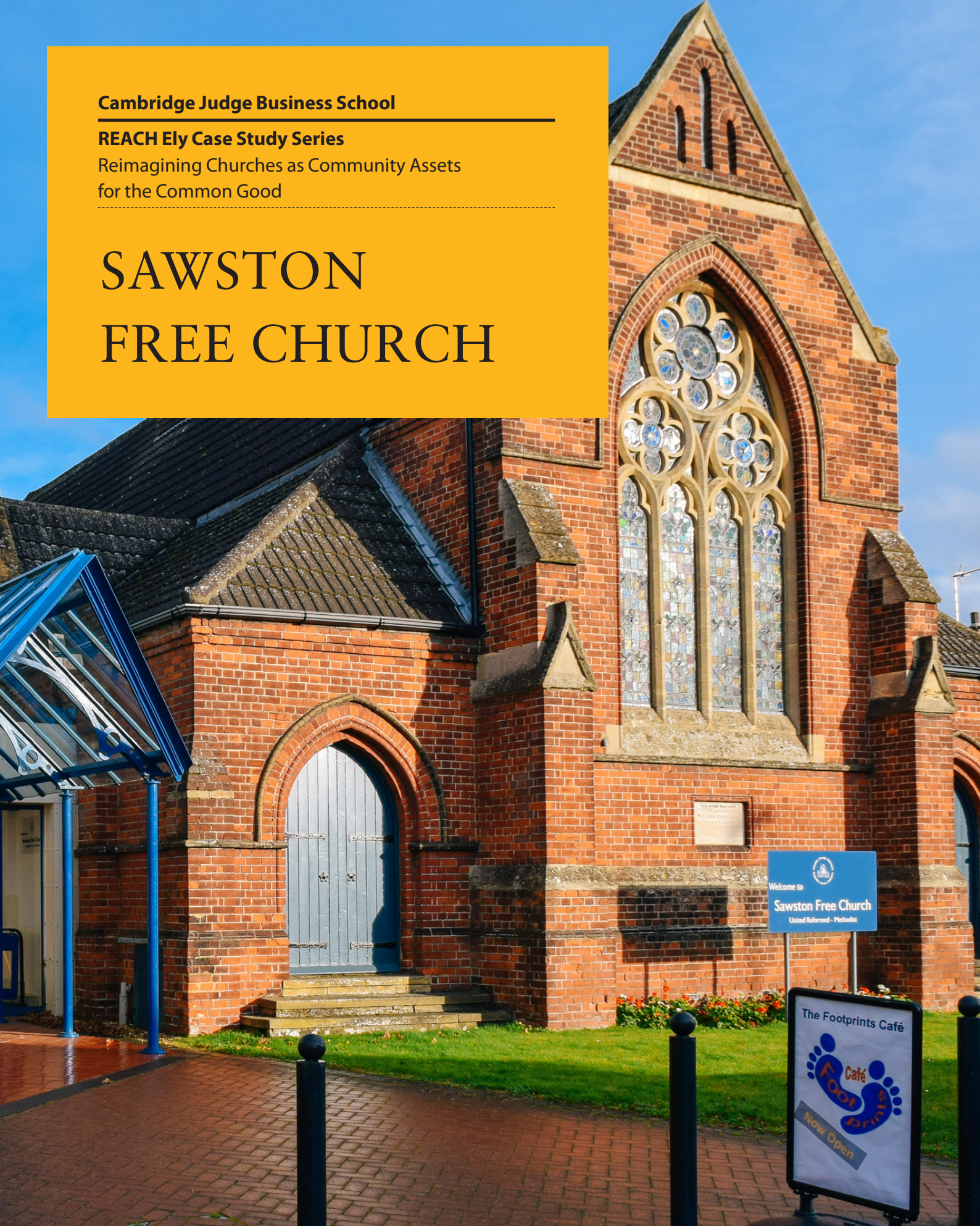


Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

SAWSTON FREE CHURCH



Text, design and photography

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**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.

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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

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

On the cover: Exterior of the West window of Sawston Free Church.

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SAWSTON FREE CHURCH

Church Category: Rural

Address: High St, Sawston,
Cambridge CB22 3BG

Website: www.sawstonfreechurch.org.uk



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Reb brick with Bath stone dressings; Concourse entry; Public café Footprints; Pews replaced with chairs; WC and kitchen facilities; Toddler Play room; Small side chapel; Pine pews; Car parking

Congregation to Population Ratio: 50 / 7,145

Fundraising: Donations; Papworth Trust; Vent Tower Appeal; Collection outside the Co-op; Car Boot Sale

Income Generation: Rental income

Communications: Website; Facebook page; Weekly Notes; Church monthly magazine *Contact*; Village newsletter *Sawston Scene*; Posters and noticeboard

Community Engagement: Footprints Café; Café Support Groups; Sawston Fun Run; Remembrance Sunday parade; Sawston Summer Fayre; Messy Church; Craft Group; Time for Tots; Boys' and Girls' Brigade; Tea Dance; Community survey; Integration into village activities.

ROOTS

Profile



Sawston is a large village in South Cambridgeshire situated on the River Cam about 11 km (7 miles) south of Cambridge. It has a population of 7,145 according to the 2011 Census. Sawston has seen substantial development since the end of the Second World War and a number of large housing estates have been constructed, most notably to the north-west, north-east, and south of the village. This development has led to the area of Sawston spreading into the small nearby village of Pampisford. Sawston has recently been earmarked for development to meet Cambridgeshire's ever-growing housing needs and is close to both Addenbrooke's and Papworth hospitals, which are major local employers, as well as several research parks to the south of the city of Cambridge.

Sawston is well located for transport links, being close to the A11 and M11 motorways. There are railway stations at Whittlesford Parkway and Great Shelford with links to London's Liverpool Street Station and to Cambridge and beyond. The village is at the southernmost end of a chain of dormitory settlements leading into the city of Cambridge, including Stapleford, Great Shelford, and Trumpington.

For the last couple of hundred years, the two principal industries in and around Sawston have been paper and printing and leather. The original paper mill is on the site owned for many years by the stationery company Spicers. This 550 acre plot was purchased by Huawei in 2018 for £37.5m. In February 2020,

Huawei submitted revised plans for a new research and development centre in Sawston that would create 350 new full-time jobs. There are small industrial and retail areas located on the southern and eastern fringes of the village.

Sawston Village College, offering secondary-level education, was the first ever village college to be built, by Henry Morris in 1930. It houses a sports centre, including a swimming pool and gym, and an arts centre. In addition to this, the village also has The Bellbird Primary School, Icknield Primary School and a few nursery and preschool groups. The village has three churches: Sawston Free Church, St Mary's church and Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church. In addition, Christ Church, an evangelical church in Cambridge, uses some of the village college on Sunday mornings (*see REACH Ely case study Christ Church Cambridge*). For several years, Little Abington URC was a partner church, but they regrettably had to close in 2019 due to diminishing numbers. Sawston has a large state of the art medical centre, a range of shops, including a supermarket, a post office, and a few charity shops and restaurants.

There had been a Methodist church in the village but by 1975 it had closed due to insufficient membership and building maintenance problems. Many of the Methodists had already transferred to the Congregational Church which then became the United Reformed Church (URC) in 1972. In 1980, a Sharing Agreement was reached between the Methodists and the URC which continues to this day leading to its renaming as Sawston Free Church.



Top: View of the church from the west with the concourse entry to the café. Bottom: Area behind the church with the café entrance doors.

Building

Sawston Free Church is in a prominent position in the High Street. The original dissenters' meeting house, a barn in Common Lane, was demolished. In 1811 a new church was built at the rear of the current site. This first church was built about hundred feet from the High Street and was approached along a narrow alley. That church became too small and in 1879 the foundation stones were laid for the current church building which fronts the High Street. In 1880 the original church became school rooms. It was known as the Lecture Hall. When war was declared in 1939, the Lecture Hall was requisitioned by the military. It was used for recreational purposes and they continued to run a cinema in it. In 1980, the Lecture Hall was demolished. A new separate side hall was built in 1986.

Electricity was installed in about 1930 and gas in 1980. There is also a manse and a caretaker's cottage on the site. The manse was rebuilt in 1994 and the caretaker's cottage was refurbished, creating break out and meeting rooms. The Citizen's Advice Bureau, which is long gone, used rooms for counselling sessions.

The current church building is constructed from red brick with Bath stone dressings. It was said that it was built in a hurry and that as a result the walls lean outwards indicating that the weight of the roof has spread them apart. The quality of interior brickwork was also considered to be poor. To make the inside look presentable, a separate mortar lining was attached to the bricks to give them the appearance of a higher quality. By 1978, the church needed significant refurbishment with leaks in the roof, dry rot under the organ and choir, and very active woodworm in the pews. In 1978, it was necessary to remove one third of the floor at the front of the church to stop the spread of dry rot fungus. Much of the work was done by volunteers in partnership with a local builder.

In 2004, a new foyer, new WCs and easy access facilities were constructed along with the café

at the rear of the church (*see Community*). Alterations to the church buildings were made with the disability friendly thinking behind every part of it. Considering the public café as part of the church mission, the built long concourse became the entry to the café as well as the church. A separate room was added to accommodate the playgroup and children's groups, built with a glass wall to give a more open aspect. This work was partly funded by South Cambridgeshire District Council, the United Reformed Church, private donations, other charity donations, and with the support of the Papworth Trust. There is also a small Side Chapel where people may worship and listen to peaceful music. The Side Chapel is also used for quiet prayer.

The pine pews were removed in the late 1970s as part of the major refurb. Individual chairs were then introduced making that space multifunctional – the chairs can seat about 300 people for a full church service or stacked and moved to the side, for example, for a Time 4 Tots meeting or small meetings. A folding partition was added which enables the church space to be divided in two – one end as a smaller church and the other end as a small hall. The partition can be open or closed as required in a matter of seconds. Both the partition and chairs have been replaced in recent years due to wear and tear. Parking is available to the rear of the church.

Artefacts

Relatively plain building interiors meet the needs of the Congregational and Primitive Methodist practice as there should be as few distractions as possible during worship. The organ has a prominent place (originally centre front) and this reflects the importance of music and of singing hymns in these traditions.

The site of the present church was once used by the United States Air Force for some of their airmen stationed at nearby Duxford. There is a silver plaque inside the current church recording grateful thanks for the hospitality shown them at that time.



Top: Messy Church event in the church. Bottom: Café outdoor area behind the church building.

RUNNING

Team

The team includes six elected elders – the church’s spiritual leaders and pastoral carers – whose number is on the low side currently and has in the past been nearer ten elders, and two treasurers. The Free Church does not currently have a minister in post and services are led by an interim moderator. Volunteers lead the boys’ and girls’ brigades and the toddler group. Management of the fabric of the buildings is entrusted to a Fabric Committee who are elected from members of the congregation at the Church Annual General Meeting.

Religious Services

There is a Sunday morning service at 10.30 a.m., and, twice a month, a Sunday evening service at 6.00 p.m. Services are also led by lay preachers. Up to 50 people attend services at the Free Church on a Sunday morning. Services over the Christmas period can attract up to 200 worshippers. There is also a praise and worship night once a month. A partner church, Castle Camps URC, occasionally holds joint services at either church as part of the linked pastorate. A creche is run in the toddler Play Room adjacent to the foyer. Messy Church takes place on the first Sunday of the month at 3 p.m. (*see Events*). Sawston Free Church is part of the URC Cambridge Area Partnership which is within the Eastern Synod of the URC including East Anglia and some parts of Essex.

Covid-19 impact. During the 2020–21 national pandemic, the church building was closed for services and private prayer. To keep in touch with the community, services were relayed via **Zoom** on a weekly basis for everyone. A church family organised the services and edited video recordings, which were later published on the **church’s website**. News, service updates, supporting messages, cooking recipes, video sermons, and images were published on **church’s Facebook page**. In addition, contact **phone numbers** and website contact form were advertised on the church website. While the church remained closed, **volunteers** donated plants and flower arrangements to decorate the front of the Free Church to keep it looking cared. In summer 2021, the church had to **replace the floor** which was damaged by rot during the the period of non-use of the church in Covid-19 pandemic (*see Reflections*).

Fundraising

The church has successful experience in raising funds. To further keep the church as a hub of the local community, it was decided to make the church a safe and caring environment for the elderly, people with learning difficulties as well as an educational space and a community hub serving Sawston people (*see Community*). The plan required making disability-friendly alterations to the church building with a new concourse entry, a corridor area, playground and child rooms, and a public café. The Papworth Trust supported the building of the café by giving the church expertise advice on the architecture to make everything accessible. The charity is known for providing leisure, learning and work-related activities to disabled people in the East of England. As part of the partnership between the charity Opportunities Without Limits (OWL) and the church, a professional fundraiser was employed because of the immense amount of funds required. In addition, the church established partnership with the Cambridge Regional College which used the café as a space for educational events for students until 2015.

“Once the children moved beyond the school system, there was nothing for them. It was like a sudden cliff edge and a great big hole and there was nothing particularly in Sawston at all. I mean the college was doing a pretty good job of working with students who had learning disabilities and other disabilities, but after that it was like where do they go?”

Bruce Waldron
Former minister

Fundraising (cont'd)

The OWL Café was functioning between 8.30 a.m. and 3.30 p.m. and outside of those hours it was the church's property. Initially the partnership was with OWL. Then in 2010 OWL merged with Papworth Trust. The partnership with Papworth Trust/OWL lasted from 2010 to 2018 when the café experienced a financial loss and the 15-year old lease was not renewed. Thanks to the active work of many volunteers including non-church members and a generous donation from a community member, the café reopened in 2018 (*see Community*).

Vent Tower Appeal. To address the problem related with the aged vent tower on the roof, constructed with the building in 1880, the church launched an appeal in 2020 to raise £6,500 to remove the tower which is no longer functional as adequate ventilation of the roof space could be achieved by vented tiles. The vent tower was removed in November 2020.

Other fundraising events include Collection outside the Co-op shop in the village and a Car Boot Sale during Christian Aid Week in May.

Income Generation

Café catering income. The café offers catering for private events such as birthday parties and funeral wakes and the income raised is fed back into the running of the café, which operates as a training centre for those with learning difficulties. The café is not run on a profit-making basis, but aims to be self-funding, which has proved a challenge throughout its existence.

Rental income. The church receives rental income from the letting of its halls and its various meeting rooms. The hall can seat up to a hundred people and the caretaker's

cottage has rooms that can accommodate small groups – two rooms downstairs and two upstairs. There is access to WC facilities for adults and a special WC geared to young children. There is also a small hall to the rear of the church that has a kitchen and can be used for small meetings.

In September 2020, the church welcomed back some of the lettings with the Musical Bumps starting to use the church space once a week. However, due to complications caused by the Covid-19-related social distancing restrictions, Sawston Free Church had to end the long-term letting with the Papworth Trust, which had been using the church space for its activities, however a one-off letting option remained.

Communications

The church has a well-developed **website** that published videos of virtual church services. The website also contains an **archive of audio sermons** for the last three years. The church regularly updates **Facebook** page and produces **Weekly Notes**. These are published on the website and include church news updates, prayer requests, and useful links to online resources on children's activities and worship, church virtual services, book recommendations, Interim Moderator's blog, music and songs, and prayers focussing on coronavirus.

Sawston Free Church has a monthly **magazine** *Contact* jointly produced with Little Abington URC and Castle Camps URC. Sawston village also has a popular **newsletter** *Sawston Scene* which has been running for more than fifty years. The church has regularly used **feedback** from worshippers on future developments and from users of the café on their experience of the service provided and how it could be improved. Footprints Café's welcome **posters** are set outside the church.



Top: View of the church from the east. Bottom: Church and café entrance in High Street.

REACH

Community

OWL Café

During the 1990s, a charity was set up in the village called Opportunities Without Limits (OWL) – a group for disadvantaged adults, including those with learning disabilities. Over time, the church built up links with OWL and eventually they started to talk about a café on the church premises. The starting point in setting up a public café in 2002 was the idea, proposed by a local family in Sawston, of creating a safe environment for people with learning difficulties in the church, known for being the heart of the community. Thinking from the point of view of the existing facilities, members of congregation envisioned building new and adapting the existing facilities. Instead of having a café where people with learning difficulties could meet together periodically, the developed plan included a space functioning as the community hub where people with learning difficulties worked in and came to, and at the same time such space would serve the community of Sawston.

With no funding available, partnership and sharing agreements were drawn up and a building project embarked upon. The vision was to have a café as a training centre for members of OWL and a facility for the community of Sawston, at the same time making all the facilities accessible for those with disabilities. After many discussions and much fundraising, building work started on the church premises which resulted in the concourse area and café space. The new OWL Café, a concourse linking all the buildings, and new playgroup/crèche facilities were officially opened in September 2003. The OWL was financially independent of the church. OWL had rent free use of the café during the day Monday-Friday (8.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.) and the church has use at all other times.

The OWL café offered Meals on Wheels to approximately 30 residents and a meeting place for young families to drop in for a meal and a chat. OWL was launched with a high-profile patron and was well publicised, with a department store John Lewis in Cambridge donating most of the white goods, blinds and cutlery. Eventually OWL linked up with Papworth Trust who then ran it, but after several years announced in 2018 the closure of the café.

Footprints Café

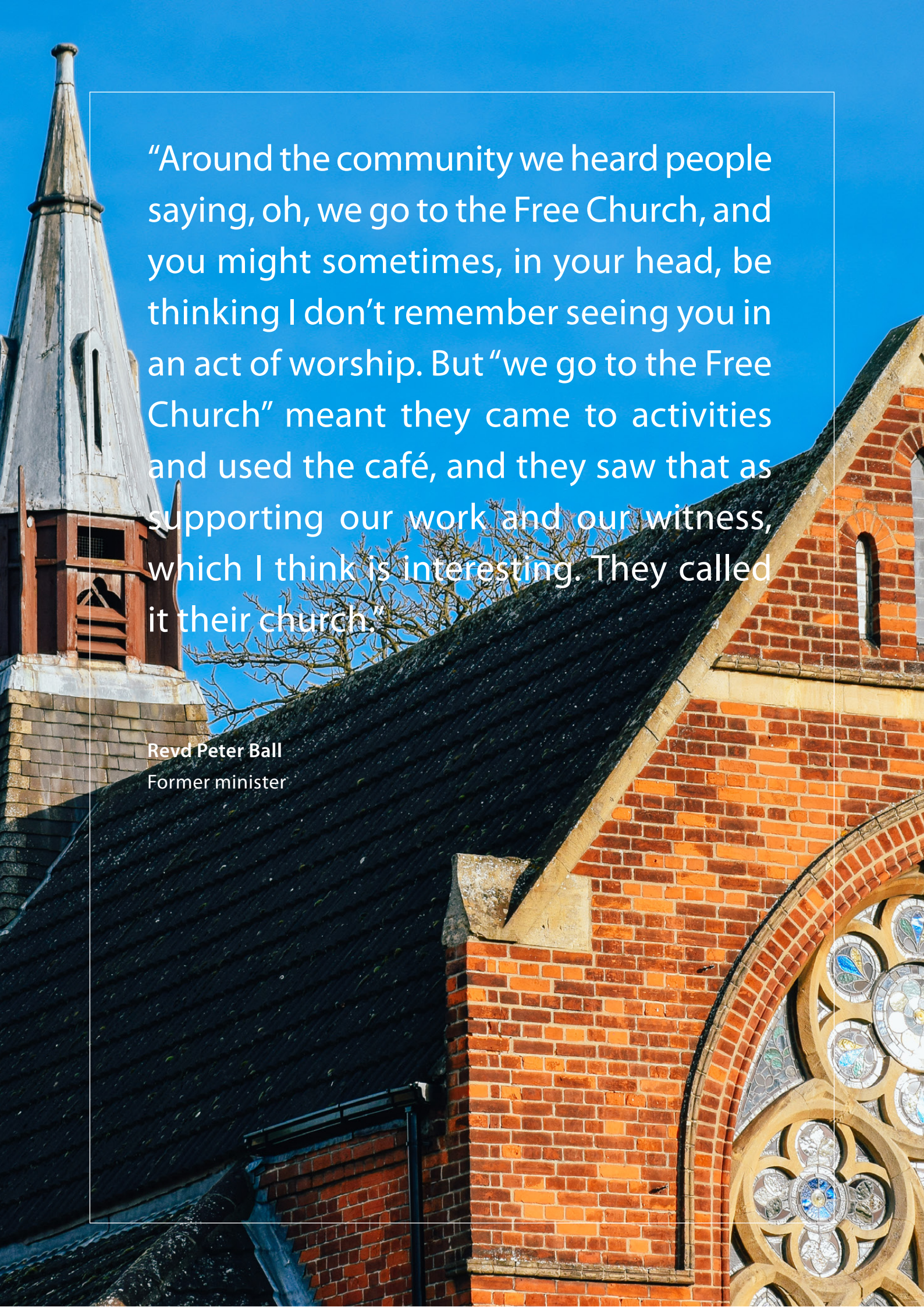
At a church meeting in 2018, the church expressed a wish to continue the mission and create an alternative. At this time a church member came forward with a financial interest and a café, renamed as Footprints, was created and renovated – the renovation involving many volunteers including non-church members. Social services funding was again approved to enable the café to take more students and secure the mission and long-term future of the project.

Although the church owns the building, Footprints rent the café during working hours. Footprints is financially independent of the church.

At present, Footprints is a community café and training centre for young adults with learning disabilities serving tea, coffee and light meals. The café space includes a play area for children and a space for baby buggies and mobility scooters. Free wi-fi is available for customers. Parking is available behind the church. Footprints Café is located at the back of Sawston Free Church, where the OWL Café used to be. A support group consisting of members of the church and members of café staff meets regularly to provide support to the new management and to reinforce a Christian atmosphere in the café and encourage good business practice with respect to running the café.

Café Reimagination and Café Support Groups. The OWL Café provided a safe environment for up to 20 young people with learning difficulties to train for employment and also helped to reduce isolation in the community; hence, there was dismay when the OWL Café closed in May 2018 due to the withdrawal of the support of the Papworth Trust. During its period of closure, active church members reached out to the people connected with the Free Church and formed a **Café Reimagination Group**, that included six members, to explore options in keeping the church as a community hub and plan funding opportunities. Some options such as creating the internet, reading, and arts and crafts space did not seem feasible due to the lack of people power to run such activities and potential competition with existing activities in the village. Plans and ideas were openly discussed at regular church meetings and funding was secured thanks to a generous donation from a local community member. *"We sat down and we said what can we use this space for, we did not say we've got to reopen the café,"* adds the Revd Bruce Waldron, former minister.

It was agreed that keeping the café open reflected the church mission and the space could be used for a variety of church and community activities. The café was reopened in July 2018 with the new name Footprints which draws inspiration from the poem of the same name. From its opening day, the Reimagination Group concluded and a new **Café Support Group** was formed to support the progress of the café.



"Around the community we heard people saying, oh, we go to the Free Church, and you might sometimes, in your head, be thinking I don't remember seeing you in an act of worship. But "we go to the Free Church" meant they came to activities and used the café, and they saw that as supporting our work and our witness, which I think is interesting. They called it their church."

Revd Peter Ball
Former minister

Events

Messy Church. This group comes together to allow children and their families to share songs, stories and crafts on a Christian theme. There are sometimes puppets, always food, and it takes place on the first Sunday of the month at 3 p.m. During the 2020–21 pandemic, children were encouraged to continue to engage in activities at home or on walks.

Craft Group is an informal group open to all that meets between 10 a.m.-noon on alternate Monday mornings during term time in the back hall of the church. Each person works on their own craft, but ideas, materials and support are exchanged between members.

Time for Tots group runs on a Thursday morning from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. It is very popular, with up to 40 children and their parents and carers attending on a weekly basis.

Boys' and Girls' Brigade. Up to 100 young people attend these groups. The Footprints café is open to parents during the sessions, offering a meeting space with free coffee and a play area for younger children.

Tea Dance. Free Church's members organise and participate in this annual event held during Christian Aid Week in May.



1st row: Footprints Café logo; The Revd Bruce Waldron with café staff, students and customers (Photo by Keith Jones, www.cambridge-news.co.uk);
 2nd row: Trainees and volunteers working at the café. 3rd row: Café staff.
 4th row: Crafts group members at outdoor tables (Photos by Sawston Free Church).

Engagement

Community Survey. The church has used email to survey the community, including local schools, for suggestions for alternative and new uses for the church buildings. Church user groups were also polled on their views on how the buildings might best continue to serve their community. Regular newsletters were sent out during the planning stage of the OWL Café, encouraging the community to take ownership of the space and garnering support for the initiative. In addition, short questionnaires seeking feedback on customer experience and ideas to improve the service were collected in the café.

Focus on families and younger people. The church provides opportunities for children and young people of all age through its clubs and groups, including Messy Church, Time for Tots and Boys' and Girls' Brigade groups.

Integration into village activities. The church is keen for the church to be seen and used as a community hub, whether they are worshippers or not. Up until quite recently, the OWL café provided Meals on Wheels for up to 30 residents.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Sustainable operation of the café

The Footprints café needs to be self-funding to be sustainable, even though the aim is not to make a profit. In 2011, the Papworth Trust had taken over the lease and the management of the café. However, their overheads had become so great that they decided not to renew the lease when it came up for renewal in 2018. The café was closed for two months during which time a Café Reimagination Group planned a new financial structure for the operation. The café reopened with a small number of trainees.

Church building condition

In 2020, the Fabric Committee have considered the problem with the vent tower on the roof of the church, which was constructed with the building in 1880 and has aged, shedding nails and threatening to allow pieces of lead to detach and fall. The church was successful in its application for a grant from Synod and in fundraising from within membership. The vent tower was removed in November 2020.

In summer 2021, Sawston Free Church was in the middle of replacing the entire floor in the church because of rot that developed when the church was empty and unheated during the pandemic. Some of the members who were involved in the refurbishment in 1978 are very actively involved in replacing the floor.



Top three: Customers at the café and community events. Bottom three: Plant sale; Baked cake at the café; Displayed menu of the day
(Photos by Sawston Free Church).

Lessons Learned

To work in partnership

Over the years, the church has worked with a variety of organisations and funders to bring the café and training centre to fruition. This has not always been easy and has required persistence and commitment from church members. The vision for the café is to integrate people with learning disabilities into the community and that this is an educational opportunity for the community as well as for the trainees.

To be open and responsive to change

Sawston Free Church has frequently asked its congregation and the community how the church and its buildings can better serve them. Members of the congregation volunteered to refurbish spaces as they become tired and transformed them for new uses.

“We are a small church and not wealthy at all – aside of the café etc, whenever we have had to refurbish our west window, build a new manse, refurbish the church kitchen, build the ‘new’ side hall, or remove our vent tower, we have “had to dig very deep in our pockets”, try to apply for grants from the URC and others, and pray. And we have a very active fabric committee and also a finance committee.”

Maggie Jones
Secretary

Lessons Learned *(cont'd)*

To create a living church

Having the Footprints café on site brings a large number of people to the church, and keeping it open during the evenings provides access for families and other users. In this way, stronger relationships were built with the parents of the young people attending the brigade groups. Having the café open allows the community to have some ownership of the church and seems to have resulted in larger congregations, particularly at Christmas services.

To balance the demands placed on volunteers with the life of the church

The setting up of the café, the refurbishments and the demands placed on volunteers in running the church had been quite costly both emotionally and financially.

To be open to people who might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the church

The café provides a safe space for both its trainees and members of the community who might not wish or feel comfortable to attend a service. Serving in the café helps the trainees to become more confident and outgoing as well as providing them with useful skills and a purpose. The larger footfall created by the café means that anyone coming to the site for a counselling session, for example, can do so in anonymity.



“I would argue more and more – we have no right to expect the respect of people in the communities that our churches are in – we have to earn it.”

Revd Peter Ball
Former minister

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