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City's newest church attracts 230 new worshippers within nine months

IT started with just 20 people. Now Harbour Church welcomes 250 worshippers each week.

Portsmouth's newest church has only been going for nine months, but has already attracted enough people to become one of the city's largest Anglican churches. Its initial target was to have 200 in its congregation after two years, but it has exceeded those expectations.

Harbour Church was launched in a refurbished department store in Portsmouth city centre last September. Its core congregation was a team from St Peter's Church, Brighton, who had moved their homes and jobs to start a new life in Portsmouth.

Our diocese had invited the team to plant a new church specifically to appeal to young people and students. The average age of its current congregation is 26 years old.

The vicar of Harbour Church, the Rev Alex Wood, (*pictured below*) said: "We're really pleased with the welcome we received from the diocese, and excited that so many people have found a home with us.

"Each Sunday morning at 10am we have around 120 adults and 40 children, and around 90 come to our 6pm service. Of those, about 50 are students, and most of those are freshers. It's great that so many have found a Christian community shortly after arriving in Portsmouth.

"Alpha has been amazing for us. So many people seemed to want to go on an Alpha course, and we think they've just Googled it and ended up here.

I'm particularly pleased with the individual stories of



WE'RE GROWING!

Sunday worship at Harbour Church, in a refurbished department store in Commercial Road

IRAQI IS AMONG NEW BELIEVERS

AMONG those who have found faith at Harbour Church is Dean, who is from an Iraqi family.

He was brought up as a Muslim and had little exposure to other religions, including Christianity. By the time he was a teenager, he had memorised entire books of the Qu'ran.

But as he explored faith, he became frustrated by a lack of answers and ended up becoming an atheist for 10 years.

Meanwhile, at college, he met the woman who would become his wife. She was a native Christian of Iraq, a Chaldean Christian. It was the first time he'd met anyone who wasn't a Muslim and there was something about her faith he couldn't ignore.

"She always prayed for me," he said. "Wherever we would go, she

would enter a church, light a candle and pray for us. I always found that very spiritual and I admired her faith."

When ISIS began attacking government forces in Iraq, Christians were forced to flee their towns and villages. Only one city remained safe: Ankawa, in the north of Iraq.

It became a sanctuary for Christians from all over the country, and neighbouring Syria. When Dean was working in Ankawa, he was inspired by the attitude of Christians around him.

"Despite what happened to them, even at those times, they showed no hostility," he said. "That was another big moment that drew me into exploring Christianity – and one of the greatest influences on my journey."

"There are a few people who have transferred from other churches, although not that many from other Anglican churches. We weren't aiming at them, as we want to reach those who don't

The couple moved to the UK in 2016, and found himself on the Alpha Course at Harbour Church. He was able to explore faith, and find answers to his questions.

"I was fascinated, and deeply touched by the positivity: stories of sacrifice, the cross, our sins forgiven. How Jesus died for us, and we will meet him again," he said.

"The idea of grace and forgiveness didn't make sense at first. But the more I digested it, the more it did. It gives you inner peace, and liberates you from anger, negativity and hostility. I looked for anything spooky, or crazy – but soon realised all I needed to do is love Jesus Christ.

"I'm much more calm, liberated and free. It has a deep impact on me – more than I realised. I'm a better person, without a doubt."

yet come to church. But we talk to other churches and many of those who do transfer are coming with the blessing of their previous church leaders."

The launch of Harbour

Church in Commercial Road was part of our diocese's strategy to create brand new worshipping communities to cater for those who the Church of England hasn't always previously appealed to.

The Archdeacon of Portsdown, the Ven Joanne Grenfell, said: "We are delighted with the work Harbour Church is doing, and pleased that so many are learning about discipleship and serving their community there.

"We had faith that Alex and the team were following God's call to our city. And it shows that there is a hunger among students and young people for an authentic expression of the Christian faith that they can relate to.

"Church-planting is just one model of creating new Christian communities, and pioneer ministry is another. Our aim is that these exist alongside the fantastic work happening in our traditional parishes."

For more details about the church's ministry, see www.harbourchurchportsmouth.org