



## St Paul's Weston

New mission opportunities in a newer university

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*"I got in touch with the uni and booked a space at the Freshers Fair, then I handed out loads of doughnuts and invited as many students as I could to a roast dinner... We had 30 or 40 at the first meal and now we're getting more and more students engaging with us through the dinners."*

Former curate Adrian Wolton in Fusion's Fuse magazine, Spring 2017

When the local further education college announced its plan to become a university centre, St Paul's Church in Weston-super-Mare spotted a new mission opportunity.



With increasing numbers of students due to be moving to the seaside town over the next few years, the church wanted to do something. St Paul's student ministry began in 2014 with (former) Curate Adrian Wolton simply handing out doughnuts at the university's first Freshers Fair.

Since then, a popular student dinners programme and various other ways of engaging young adults have emerged.

This case study of St Paul's student ministry highlights:

- The fresh opportunities for **student mission in newer universities**
- The power of **unconditional hospitality and acceptance** in student ministry
- The need for a **culture of invitation** linked to opportunities for non-churched young adults to hear and experience more of the Christian message
- The value of passing the leadership of student ministries onto **younger leaders**

## Introducing St Paul's Weston

**Where:** Weston-super-Mare

**Denomination:** Church of England

**Date started:** 2014

**Target group:** Students and other young adults

**Number of people involved:** Student meals attended by up to 50 people. 30-40 young adults attend St Paul's evening service.

**Staffing / funding:** St Paul's student ministry was established by St Paul's former curate, Adrian Wolton. As the work grew, St Paul's appointed a part-time student worker, Rachel Wilshere (fully funded by St Paul's). Rachel has recently moved on but St Paul's plan to replace her next summer.

**Premises:** Church buildings

**Website:** [www.stpauls-weston.org.uk/students](http://www.stpauls-weston.org.uk/students)



## Student mission at St Paul's Weston



St Paul's initial point of connection with students in Weston was handing out doughnuts at the new university centre's first Freshers Fair.

As a small town with only a relatively small number of students (just 150 living in the town in 2017), Weston didn't have a large and vibrant student social scene. So when

Adrian invited new students to a roast dinner at St Paul's, many responded.

Soon after that, a regular pattern of monthly free student dinners was established.

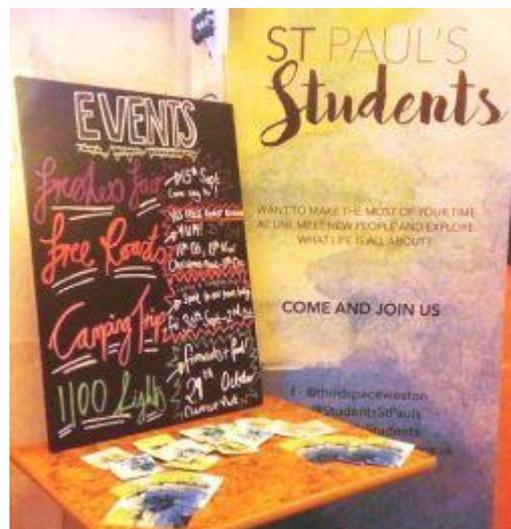
When we visited in June 2017, the end of term student dinner was attended by 39 people. The buffet-style menu included pizza, scones and ice cream, with a choice of beer, cider and soft drinks, all for free.

While the main aim of student dinners is simply demonstrating hospitality and getting to know students, St Paul's Church places a strong emphasis on inviting people to other church activities and events. As Rachel (student leader) explains:

*“We’re always thinking what is the next step and why do we do this. Everything has a progression.”*

Therefore, many of the students attending student dinners have also had the opportunity to attend a variety of other St Paul's events which have more explicitly Christian content. These include:

- **Weekend camping trips**
- **Alpha courses**
- **St Paul's evening service** (this used to be called 3rd Space and was targeted specifically at young adults; it has recently become more multi-generational, though it continues to be led by young adults)
- **Smaller groups, student hangouts and other social gatherings**



## Evidence of growth

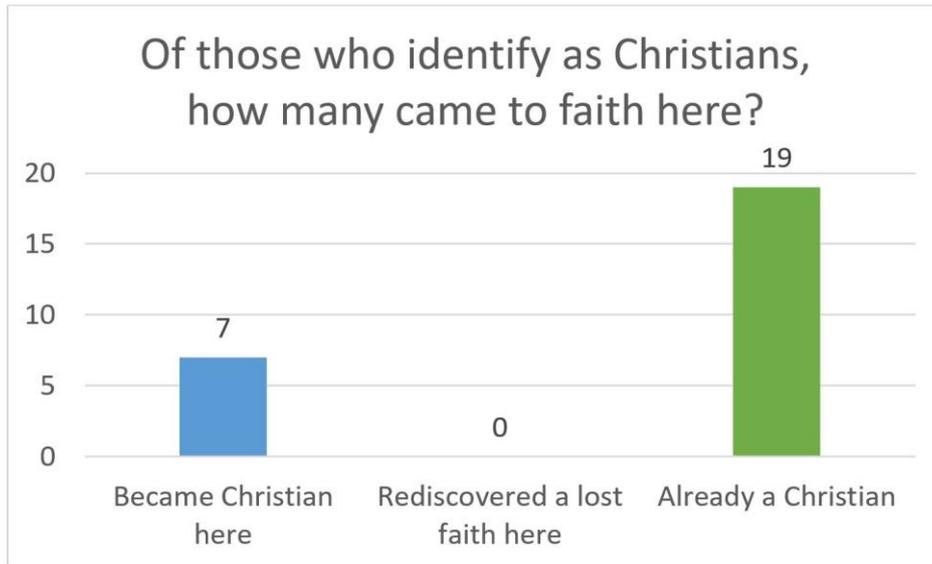
*“About 150 students actually live in Weston, and we have a connection with about 50-80 of those, so we’re hitting good proportions.”*

*Former curate Adrian Wolton in Fusion's Fuse Magazine, Spring 2017*

St Paul's student dinners attract up to 50 students a month, the vast majority of whom are non-Christians. Some of these have gone on to explore Christianity, make commitments and attend St Paul's evening service.

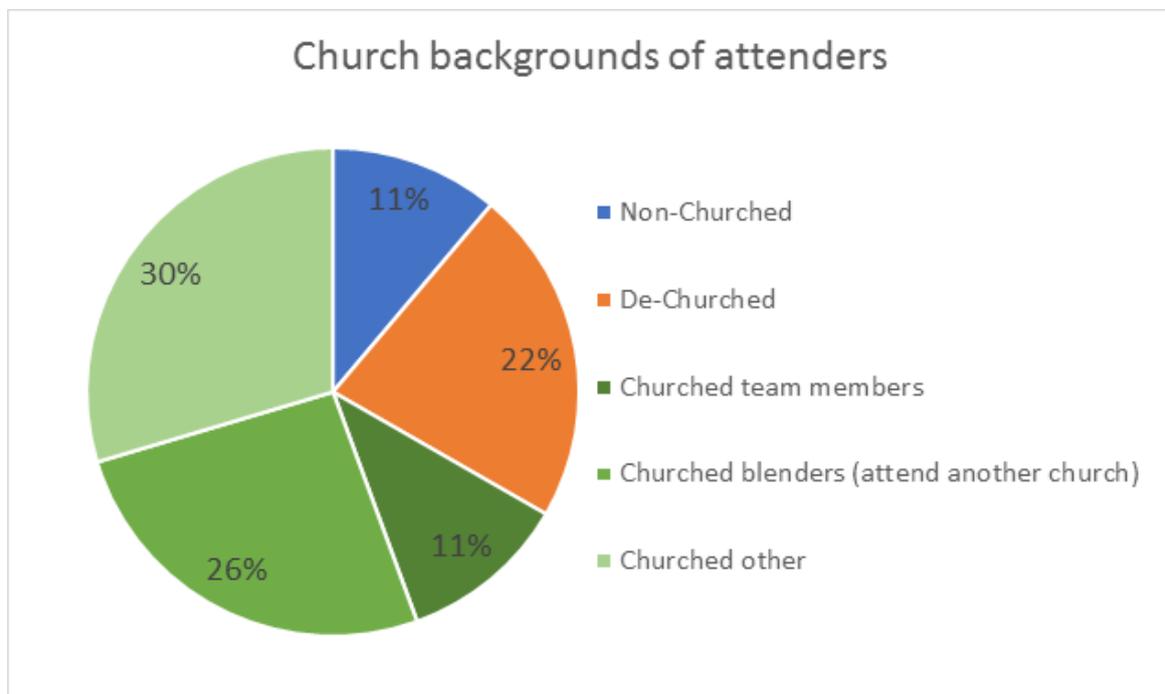
Our June 2017 survey at 3rd Space (the previous name of the young adults service) found that of 29 people attending the service:

- 7 said they **became Christians** though St Paul's / 3rd Space
- 2 others were **exploring Christianity** with St Paul's / 3rd Space
- 1 other said 'not a Christian' but still attends?



When we visited in June 2017, the 3rd Space service was attracting 30-40 people per week.

While some of its attenders were newer Christians from non-churched backgrounds, the following pie chart suggests that the majority of members were more long-established Christians.



For a further explanation of the categories in the pie chart above, please see our [summary report](#) (Appendix 2).

## How have people come to faith?

*“When we radically love them, they grip onto that. Being accepted and part of the family is a powerful experience.” Rachel Wilshere, student leader*

Rachel reflects that many of the students she has met suffer from low self-esteem or some sort of mental health issue.

As she explained in a recent interview for Fusion’s Fuse magazine, the typical Weston student isn’t your ‘average’ student: “They are often the ones who aren’t naturally academic. They’re studying something they love and are amazing at what they do, but they haven’t always got much confidence in who they are.”

She goes on to say that the experience of being loved, accepted and drawn into community at St Paul’s has been a key factor in the faith journeys of young adults who have become Christians there.



Similar themes (about positive experiences of community) also came out strongly when we interviewed young adults who had become Christians or started exploring Christianity at St Paul’s. Channy’s story is one example of this.

## Channy's story

*"I first came to church because of the social side, but the more I came, the more this God became more real to me."*



As a child, Channy's only experience of church and Christianity was attending a Church of England primary school. But she was open to new ideas when she came to university and met people from St Paul's at a Freshers Fair in September 2016.

She felt a connection with them and was impressed by their care and concern. They invited her to a freshers event at St Paul's with live music and games.

Attending this then led on to further invitations to other St Paul's social events. There she got to know Rachel (St Paul's student worker) and they met for a coffee a few times before Rachel invited Channy to St Paul's evening service.

Channy says that at first she was attracted by the social and community side of St Paul's. She comments that student accommodation was a lonely place and she felt quite isolated, but:

*"When I went to church, it was like people really cared about how your week was and how you feel. It was like going home to your parents and them being 'I haven't seen you for a long time. How was your week?' It was just the way everyone's so caring and so loving."*

This experience led to Channy deciding to attend an Alpha course, which was "good for getting my head around who Christ is".

As well as continuing to attend the evening service, Channy has got involved in various other aspects of St Paul's church. She regularly helps with both Messy Church and an after school kids club called 'Super Sonic', seeing these as a "fantastic opportunity to give something back".

## Conclusions

### New mission opportunities in newer universities

As a new university centre in a small town, Weston did not have a particularly vibrant social scene.

St Paul's Church saw a mission opportunity and got in early, reaching out to new students with generous welcome and hospitality.



### Genuine care and concern

The stories of Channy and other young adults we spoke to at St Paul's reveal the power of taking a genuine interest in new students and demonstrating love, acceptance, care and concern.

Rachel (St Paul's student leader) offers the following advice:

*“See a student as a person - not a ‘non-Christian’ or ‘Christian’. Love them for who they are. Help them realise they’re in a transition of life that is challenging and messy, and that we’re trying to help them. See the student as a student, as a young person, as (whatever their name is), as a child of God.”*

### Intentionality in sharing faith

Alongside this strong emphasis on care and concern, St Paul's have also been very deliberate about inviting students to other church events where they can hear and experience more of the Christian message.

### Handing on leadership



St Paul's former curate, Adrian Wolton, started and pioneered the church's student ministry.

But he and St Paul's also had the wisdom and foresight to hand the leadership over to a younger leader, “someone who was young, had recently been a student and was passionate about student work” (Rachel Wilshere).

## Limitations

St Paul's approach has many strengths, but one potential limitation is that most of the hospitality appears quite one way. Initially at least, it is all about the church doing something for students.

While in some ways, St Paul's emphasis on generous hospitality (e.g. in the provision of free student dinners) is a strength, there is a risk of it unwittingly setting up an unhelpful 'provider-client' power dynamic.



## To find out more

For more about St Paul's student ministry, visit

[www.stpauls-weston.org.uk/students](http://www.stpauls-weston.org.uk/students)

You can also connect with St Paul's Weston on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

The article about St Paul's Weston in Fusions *Fuse* magazine, Spring 2017, is [here](#).