



## Unlimited Church

City centre encounters leading to genuine, lasting relationships

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In 2007 the Diocese of Exeter realised that the majority of young people in the city had little or no experience of church, and more importantly, of faith in Jesus. James Grier was appointed as diocesan youth adviser and soon started Unlimited Church with a remit to do something about this.



Unlimited Church went through a number of forms in the early years but in 2012 it officially became a church and was granted a Bishop's Mission Order (BMO).

Unlimited Church is a church for all ages which exists to reach young people.

It's fair to say there's a lot going on at Unlimited Church. Their Sunday afternoon gathering and Tuesday evening Uncovered group serve the whole church. They run a Wednesday afternoon café and a Friday night drop-

in for youth, as well as a number of events in local schools.

And there is Night Café which runs during the 'partying seasons' of freshers week and Christmas, having previously run all year round.

Unlimited Church also occasionally organises a party at Exeter cathedral called Upload, which in 2016 was attended by 1,500 young people.

This case study highlights:

- The benefits of having a **city centre location**
- The need for long-term commitment in forging **genuine lasting relationships**
- The value of **reshaping Sunday gatherings** to be more friendly to non-churched young adults

## Introducing Unlimited Church

**Where:** Exeter city centre

**Denomination:** Church of England

**Date started:** 2007, BMO (Bishop's Mission Order) since 2012

**Target group:** Students and youth  
**Number of people involved:** 45 at Sunday gatherings

**Staffing / funding:** One full-time stipendiary leader, two further part-time trainee youth workers, plus one voluntary intern. Church income exceeds expenditure, though this includes grant income.

**Premises:** City centre Anglican church, leased by Unlimited

**Other points of note:** Has a Bishop's Mission Order

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



## Mission at Unlimited Church



Most of Unlimited Church's mission, particularly Night Café, takes advantage of their city centre location. A stone's throw from Exeter's main shops and clubs (and just around the corner from the oldest pasty shop in the world), St Mary Arches church, where Unlimited Church meets, is an excellent location to open their doors to the young people of the city.

Night Café provides a safe place for people to come during nights out if they get separated from their friends or find themselves vulnerable. During freshers' week 2017, over 350 people attended the Night Café. In this kind of environment, discussions about faith come up a lot more easily.

The team also run a considerable number of groups in local schools, aimed at doing mission with a younger age cohort. These include a Romance Academy, teaching about relationships and sexuality, a chaplaincy, a mentoring programme and assemblies.

This is a long-term strategy, aimed at building good rapport with young people by the time they attend the local college, and they hope to see a fruitful harvest in years to come.

Underpinning mission at Unlimited Church is the value of encounter. The team regularly go into the city centre and meet with people where they are and build relationships. This is no gimmick, but an attempt to form genuine, lasting relationships.

Unlimited Church is now 10 years old, and leader James Grier still regularly meets up with young adults he first encountered through schools and outreach work in the early days.

The aim of Unlimited Church is for non-Christians to feel more comfortable attending than Christians. This has led the team to reflect on Sunday gatherings and reshape the way they do things. James says:

*"We've had to rethink the whole way we do Sunday because it was becoming too comfortable for the Christians..."*

"As a Christian you feel happier in a church than a non-Christian, which is inevitable, but we were saying that's not okay. It needed to be that an unchurched youth can feel more comfortable here as we worship. So we're stretching the teaching and pitching the language away from us."

When you walk into Unlimited Church you're greeted by friendly faces, offered a coffee and a cake and as a visitor I felt very welcomed. There is table football and a pool table to nurture fun and community, and part of the Sunday gathering is given to playing a team building game to get to know people around you.



Unlimited Church also runs mentoring for youths, which takes place in conjunction with local schools. Mentors meet up with pupils, many of whom are facing difficult experiences, for an hour every fortnight. As well as being effective mission, in many cases this has improved pupils' grades at school or kept them stable against all odds.

## Evidence of growth

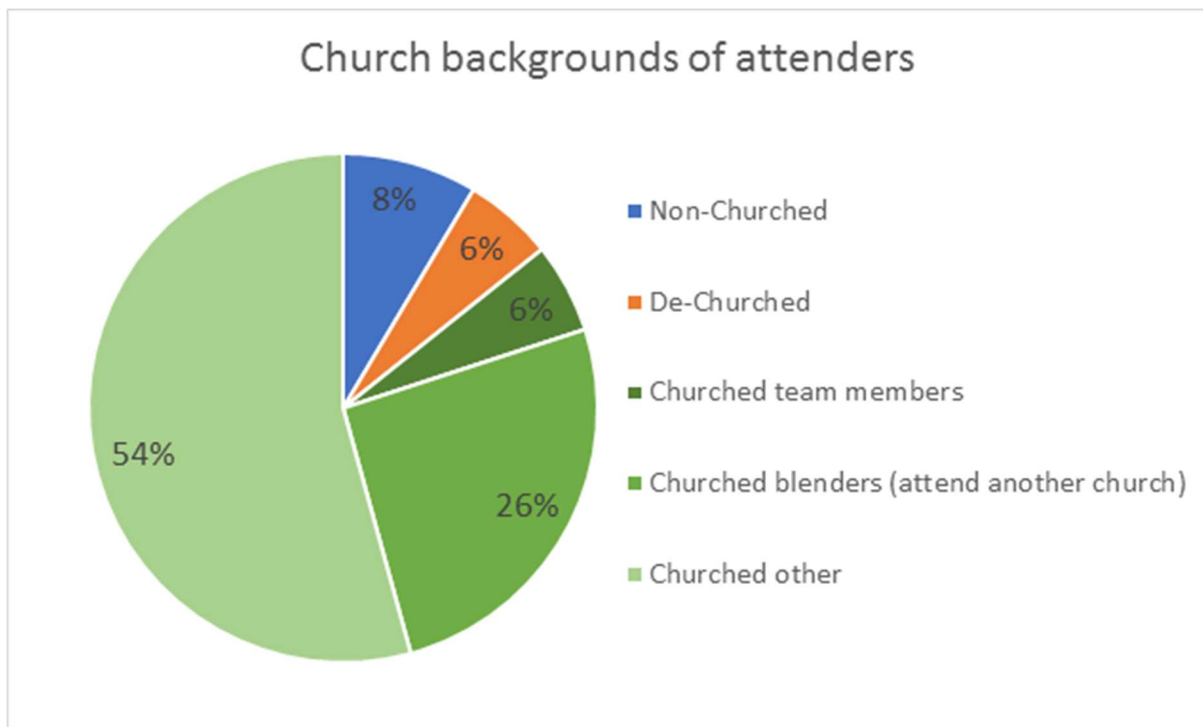
Given the variety of groups run by Unlimited Church, it is difficult to keep track of numbers accurately at any one time. However, the Sunday gathering, which is the main expression of church for young adults, has continued to grow in number over time, currently averaging around 45 young people every week. Almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its attenders are aged 18-24 (72%).

The gathering is popular among students, who account for 56% of attenders, and graduates, who comprise a further 28%. There is a fairly even gender balance: 45% male; 55% female.

4 people surveyed identified as coming to faith at Unlimited Church, with a further 4 stating that Unlimited Church had helped them rediscover a faith they had lost. In 2016, 7 people were confirmed and 2 baptised, while 4 people came to faith in 2015. Over the years 9 people have been baptised. It is difficult to quantify the number of people who have come to faith, but James is confident the number is in double figures.

Of existing churchgoers surveyed, almost half (47%) started coming because they moved to the area (in many cases for university) and were looking for a new church, while 30% of existing churchgoers still attend another church; this may refer to university students who attend another church in their home town.

Only 17% of existing churchgoers transferred from another church as they thought Unlimited Church was better for them.



For a further explanation of the categories in the pie chart above, please see appendix 2 of our main findings report, available from the **Mission with young adults** home page.

Though our attenders survey suggests that most of the people coming on Sundays are existing Christians, this doesn't tell the full story of Unlimited Church's missional impact.

Unlimited Church runs a weekly café on a Wednesday, a drop-in for youth on Friday, a monthly outreach service and the seasonal Night Café, all of which attract far greater proportions of non-churched people than Sunday gatherings.

Unlimited Church isn't just serving as a magnet attracting young people away from other churches in the city.

There is also great merit in retaining churched students during their university years. Fusion (an organisation that empowers student mission) estimates that 73% of students lose their faith at university (statistic sourced [here](#)).

## How have people come to faith?

*“Taking people out for coffee has always been our heart... that is more fruitful than big rally type activities.” James Grier*

Despite helping to run a huge event in Exeter cathedral (Upload), James has found that this ‘big events’ type of mission, while good for other churches in Exeter, has not been effective in leading people to faith at Unlimited Church. Rather, building relationships over time and mentoring young people has been the key to mission.

One of the values at Unlimited Church is being ‘unlimited’ in openness to and love of people, and this manifests itself practically in the way the team walk alongside young people in their daily lives.

### Kyle's story



Kyle was born and bred in Exeter and had almost no prior experience of church before Unlimited. “I did occasionally go to Sunday school, but that was only because they gave free sweets away. I didn’t really listen to that; because I’ve got ADHD my mind would just go off... I’d be in my own little world.”

Kyle came into contact with Unlimited Church through their presence in the city centre: “I was just in town and the Wednesday café they do was in the cathedral green. I’m nosy so I went over and was like: ‘What’s this all about?’... They prayed for me, I got intrigued, started coming more and learning more. 8 or 9 months later I became a Christian... I’m 100% Christian now!”

Kyle has now been a Christian for 5 years and being part of Unlimited Church has helped him discover his gifting as an evangelist: “I find it really easy to talk to people about faith, God, the Bible... I’m very evangelistic.”

*Kyle says Unlimited Church is “my second family, 100%!”*

## Josh's story

Josh grew up in the area but “I moved all over the place as I’ve been in foster care. I went off to university back in 2013... I’m now on a gap year. I work for the church here as an intern.”

He attended church as a child but had a break from church for roughly 10 years before attending Unlimited Church after university. “[During this break] I was an anti-religion agnostic for a while. I hated religion and all that it stood for ... but I believed there was a God.”

Josh attended a couple of churches infrequently after being invited by friends, before finding Unlimited Church in January 2016. He has come every week since.



Josh also has found Unlimited Church to have a family dynamic: “Unlimited Church has shown me what living as part of God’s family is like ... it’s a tight knit community.”

Josh found Unlimited Church a safe space to explore his doubts about God:

*“People here are really great at answering the difficult questions, the slightly more controversial questions ... it’s really great in its ministry and its discipleship.”*

## Chris' story

Chris' story tells of how he came to Unlimited Church through Night Café before becoming a Christian at Soul Survivor. To see the video, click [here](#).

## Conclusions

### City centre encounters

Unlimited Church takes advantage of its city centre location in the way it goes about its mission. The Night Café, for example, offers a safe space for revellers during the partying season, while the team often meet passers-by in the city centre and strike up conversations.

The city centre location is also helpful for young adults and youth who live in surrounding rural areas and have to travel by bus.



Building relationships with others and creating a safe space for young people to meet in and encounter God have been integral to the Unlimited Church story and are certainly transferable principles.

### Genuine lasting relationships



James Grier firmly believes that investing time in regularly meeting up with a young person can change their life. Sometimes this requires a long-term commitment.

It's now 10 years since James was appointed as diocesan youth advisor and Unlimited started to take shape, and he still regularly meets up with young adults he met in the early days.

### Reshaping Sunday gatherings

Unlimited Church changed the style of their Sunday gatherings to be more friendly to non-Christians and new people. Most churches claim to be welcoming, but Unlimited Church is genuinely so, allowing time before the gathering for conversations, tea and cake and the odd game of pool, and time during the gathering for a team bonding type of activity.

Language has been modernised to avoid jargon, and the aim is for non-churched people to feel as comfortable as possible.



## The downside of this approach

James is aware that his leadership of Unlimited Church has been greatly helped by his status as an ordained minister in the Church of England, giving him more weight behind decision-making in the wider Church.

In light of the findings of Church Army's Research Unit that over half of all fresh expressions of Church are led by lay people, the question of how the church can enable gifted lay people with a call to reach young adults to start a church is a pertinent one.

Furthermore, while Unlimited Church has a wide missional reach, the vast majority of attenders at Sunday gatherings are existing churchgoers.



### To find out more

For more about Unlimited Church, visit

[www.unlimitedchurch.org.uk](http://www.unlimitedchurch.org.uk)