

A Profile of Market Harborough Congregational Church August 2023



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Welcome

If you came to visit our church in Market Harborough we hope you would find a very warm welcoming atmosphere.

We are a very open, friendly, and inclusive church fellowship and we try hard to be a welcoming church to people of all faiths and those who are enquiring. We have a well established church fellowship and we offer a wide range of activities appropriate for all age groups. We are delighted that since the pandemic our congregation has grown.

As a fellowship we carry out God's work in our church based on the Congregational principles with all members spiritually equal and bound together in a voluntary covenant. Decisions are made through our regular Church Meetings in which everyone is encouraged to be involved and everyone is valued equally. The business of the church is managed through the church Steering Group and the group is accountable to the Church Meeting.

Our Minister Rev Stephen Haward retired in July after spending 8 years with us in Market Harborough and so we are beginning our journey to call a new minister. We trust that you may find this Introduction to our Church Profile of interest.

The Town of Market Harborough

Market Harborough is a market town with a population just over 25,000. The town has grown rapidly in recent years and continues to grow, with large housing estates being built on all sides of the town. The town is mid way between Leicester and Northampton with good rail links to London and Nottingham and easy access to the M1, M6 and A14.

In Market Harborough and the adjacent villages there are several pre-schools and eight primary schools several are well regarded.

The building of a new Primary School to serve the needs of the new estates is currently going through the planning approval process.

There are two secondary schools in Market Harborough. One, Welland Park Academy, takes pupils from ages 11 to 16, and the other, Robert Smyth Academy, from 11 to 19. Those from Welland Park Academy wishing to continue their education to age 19 usually transfer to Robert Smyth Academy at age 16, although some choose to travel to sixth form and FE Colleges in nearby Leicester.

Fee paying schools abound in the area, and schools with a national reputation can be found in Leicester, Maidwell, Uppingham and Oakham. Brooke House College is based in the town and has pupils from across the world; the college uses our buildings for large events.

There are two GP practices in the town and a small hospital offering rehabilitation and palliative care in-patient facilities. The hospital also has a small Minor Injury Centre and holds regular Out Patient clinics linked to the main Leicester Hospitals NHS Trust.

The Leisure Centre offers swimming, gymnasium and exercise classes and there are numerous sports clubs in the town. Market Harborough has a small but thriving theatre providing a range of local and visiting amateur theatre group productions, as well as hosting the local cinema programmes. Choirs and bands are popular and there are many opportunities to socialise within interest groups and also a wide range of U3A groups. Our proximity to Leicester means that we also have access to many of the resources and facilities that you would expect in a large and thriving city.

We have six supermarkets and a thriving High Street with some independent shops. There is a monthly farmers market, an indoor market Tuesday to Saturday and a very well supported Carnival in June and Market Harborough Christmas Fair in December.

The feel of the town is one of affluence but our work with the Foodbank, which was established by our church in 2010, has shown that this is not the case for everyone. Recent statistics have shown that the Foodbank provided food for 10,737 meals from January to April 2023. The Foodbank is no longer managed by the church. Due to the increasing stocks of food needed to meet the demand, larger premises were required to provide more financial stability and be able to access grant funding the Foodbank has very recently become a charity in its own right. The church maintains strong links with the Foodbank and several members of the church are volunteers.

We have excellent parks; a spur of the Grand Union Canal ends in the town at the Canal Basin. There are many opportunities to walk in the countryside via footpaths out of the town. Overall we feel that Market Harborough is a pleasant place to live with a good community spirit in an attractive part of Leicestershire.

A Brief History of Market Harborough Congregational Church

In August 1662, Thomas Lowry of Market Harborough and Matthew Clarke of Narborough were among several thousand ministers ejected from the Church of England for refusal to agree to the forms of worship and organisation of the national church. In Harborough and surrounding villages, groups of Congregationalists began to meet in homes, cowsheds, woods and anywhere they could avoid those trying to enforce the law which banned the assembly of such groups. Matthew Clarke was one of a number of ministers who led worship and provided support. For doing this, Matthew spent several periods in Leicester Jail. However, in 1689 the Act of Toleration allowed him to be licensed to preach and in 1694 he and his fellow church members built a Meeting House in the town. Worship continued in this building until 1844, when the old Meeting House was pulled down and the present chapel built.

In the 19th Century the Congregational Chapel sent missionaries to what is now Zambia, Madagascar, India, Samoa and Kiribati.

In 1972, when many Congregational Churches in England and Wales joined with the Presbyterians in the United Reformed Church, Market Harborough decided to remain an independent congregation. It joined with churches that had made a similar decision to form the Congregational Federation. Strong links with the Baptist and Methodist Churches in the town continued throughout the twentieth century and this cooperation was widened as the 21st Century approached to include other churches in the town. We are an active member of Churches Together in Harborough in the town. Our work together includes the Cube youth centre, and the Bower House Christian Counselling Service in addition to the opportunities to worship together.

A fuller version of the history is available on the church website.

Our Church Family Today

Currently we have 51 active members in the fellowship plus 10 people who are in Residential or Nursing Homes and 3 or 4 members who rarely come to church due to health problems and frailty. Our regular Sunday congregation averages between 40-45, not all are church members. The majority of our members are retired people over the age of 70 years, we have



“Very much a family”

three people who are still in fulltime paid employment, and nine in part time employment and about a third of our fellowship live alone. We have 9 members who live outside the town. We are very fortunate in that we have 3 retired Ministers in our Fellowship along with two members who are Preachers.

Our Fellowship is very much a family, reflecting a range of views, but joyfully worshipping and serving God’s purpose for us closely together, accepting of each other’s differences in theology and lifestyle.

We are a ‘Sight Loss Friendly’ church.

Several years ago the church membership chose to have a Steering Group rather than a Diaconate; this is composed of six church members, the Minister, the Secretary and the Treasurer. The Steering Group manages affairs between Church Meetings.

The Church Meeting and Steering Group meetings are held monthly. Members of the Steering Group have dedicated roles that reflect the needs of the Church and the individual gifts of members.

Two members of our fellowship edit our bi-monthly church magazine ‘Contact’. The magazine is provided for all members of the fellowship and is made available for members of the public who use the Church Centre too. ‘Contact’ carries articles of interest from members of the fellowship, items of church news, and other regular features.

We have an informative website and media presence.

Worship

We have regular weekly Sunday morning worship, a monthly Communion service and occasionally we have Cafe Church. Services during the year reflect and celebrate the Christian calendar and in recent years we have held a Communion service on the steps on Maundy Thursday along with other special services.

During the Covid pandemic we were blessed to have several people who were quite expert in IT systems which meant that we were able to record services each week and share them online, this is something we have continued to do and is welcomed especially by those unable to come to church regularly.

One service each month offers Junior Church and we occasionally have children visiting. Although we have a very active weekday Toddlers Group and regular events and activities for families and young children in the church garden, we lack families with young children regularly attending the Sunday Services. The church members are very eager to develop outreach work from the church to encourage stronger links and integration within the church from families and children.



Occasional Café Church Meeting

Until the Covid Pandemic we had strong links with a local Primary school and the Head of school has indicated a willingness to re-establish the links. The church members would like to develop and strengthen these links again

We have an organ and a Clavinova and three Sundays each month we have visiting musicians. The remaining Sundays we enjoy using hymn videos with lyrics.

We are part of Churches Together in Harborough and additionally worship together with both the Methodist and Baptist churches during the year where appropriate. We contribute and help to lead joint Lent services, Christian Aid activities and World Day of Prayer services.

Christian leaders of all denominations from across the town meet together at regular intervals.

We conduct infant baptism for the children of believers and have also offered dedication or a thanksgiving service if that has been more appropriate. Some members of the congregation have been baptised as adults in recent years.

A decision was taken through the Church Meeting to apply to register the building to conduct Same Sex marriages. In May 2017 the Church's application to become registered to conduct Same Sex marriages was approved by the GRO. Since May 2017 there has been one Same Sex marriage conducted in the Church and another former Minister was invited to take the service. There is a second marriage which will take place in 2024.

Church Groups & Activities

- ❖ The Bible Study group meets monthly and is led by members of the fellowship using a variety of themes and texts from the Bible as a basis for discussion; this is a fairly new group with plans to develop further in Autumn 2023.

- ❖ The church Toddlers' Group meets on Fridays in term-time and offers craft activities, singing and play for pre-school children and their carers, it is a very well established group and well regarded by those who attend and those who have attended over the 30 years it has been running. The church volunteers who lead the group also provide a 'Listening Ear' for the carers who may be in need of support especially at this time where life for families can be so difficult.



Toddlers

- ❖ 'On the Steps': In order to keep a link with the children who outgrow Toddlers' Club we have approximately 6 events annually on Saturday mornings. These events are held on the church steps at the front of the Church, rising from the busy High Street. These have a theme often related to the festival and attract 10-12 families, sometimes these combine with a coffee morning for members of the congregation.



On the Steps

One is held during the town's Christmas Fair evening, others have coincided with Harvest or Christian Aid Week.

- ❖ The 'First Wednesday' Fellowship is in its second year and is a monthly meeting open to all and especially welcoming those who might be enquiring about the faith. The meeting has a guest speaker most months, who is someone with a story to tell linked to their journey of faith and their work, a recent example would be a speaker from the Farming Christian Support Charity. The meeting is prayerful, and offers time for a chat and always concludes with afternoon tea.
- ❖ The Men's Breakfast Group meets monthly at a local Farm Leisure Cafe, it provides a welcome opportunity for men to meet and share a meal with friends, some of whom live alone and find the company very supportive.
- ❖ The monthly Tea at 2 meeting is in a local Cafe in the town and again provides an opportunity to share food and drink in a friendly welcoming atmosphere with others.

- ❖ The Sunday Lunch group held in a local cafe is a fairly recently established group mainly for people from the church who live alone and want to enjoy Sunday Lunch in fellowship after the service.
- ❖ In the summer of 2022 a weekly language support group was set up to help Ukrainian refugees learn English. The group continues and usually has 8-10 people attending each week with people from the church helping as well as others from outside the church. The meetings have provided very worthwhile opportunities for social meetings within the group as well as helping with language skills.
- ❖ We are part of the Eco Church which includes Churches of all denominations in the town and we have committed to several environmental projects and hope to continue to support and develop these initiatives.

All the church groups have a faith basis and their leaders are very mindful of both pastoral and wellbeing needs within the groups offering support when needed. The groups have well established leadership and leaders and welcome the support and interest of the Minister.

The Congregational Church Centre



Church Lounge

Dating back to the 19th century, and extensively refurbished in 2000, the Church Centre is part of our church premises and includes the large Jubilee Hall, along with smaller popular rooms and facilities for many community, charitable, and professional groups e.g. Slimming World, Fitness classes, AA, and NA support group meetings.

A paid Lettings Administrator is currently employed by the church for 13 hours per week, to manage the lettings and a part-time Caretaker is also employed by the church. The building is maintained to a high standard.

From October 2022 to March 2023, 47 different groups and companies hired rooms in the building. Over an average month there are approximately 2,000 people use the building, this includes hiring of the Jubilee Hall by Christchurch a local Evangelical Church every Sunday afternoon and also a hiring a smaller room for Friday Prayers by the local Muslim group each week. The Church Centre is a very busy facility and lettings fees are the biggest single source of our Church income at around £45,000



Fully equipped kitchen

Witness and Mission

Members of our church volunteer with various groups and services in the town linked to Churches Together in Harborough. As a church we offer support where and when we can to all of them.

In 2018 it was agreed to commence a long term charitable project to offer support to the Citadel Church in Targu Mores Romania. Our church family have been, and continue to be, very generous in their giving and support for this project and we have developed a strong partnership with the Church in Targu Mores. The Citadel Church Minister and his team are able to use the donations given to provide additional support for several poorer families and members of their church who have ongoing health and social needs. The previous Minister and his wife and a member of their church visited Market Harborough in 2019 and our Minister and two members of the church family have visited the Citadel Church on two occasions. We plan to continue the partnership and are hoping that our friends from the Citadel Church will visit Market Harborough again in September 2023.

Our church family is very eager to develop God's work through Mission and Outreach work into our local community. In 2022 we were very blessed to be left a legacy of just over £84,000 by one of our church members. Over the past year through prayers and thoughtful discussions it was agreed that some of this legacy money should be used to employ an outreach worker to support the church to develop outreach work. For the time being, and until a new Minister joins our church family we have put this project on hold but it is ready to be taken forward again when the time is right.

The Manse





The Church currently owns a four bedroomed Manse quite close to the town. We are aware that any future Minister may or may not want accommodation to be provided and we are open to discussion on this matter.

Where is our church today

We recently held weekly house groups to provide an opportunity for the church fellowship to share their views on calling a new minister, between 25 and 30 people attended.

A SWOT analysis was carried out as part of the meetings and some of the main themes are listed below:

Strengths

-  We are a hospitable and inclusive church, innovative and open to change, with an efficient business like Steering Group and very hard working volunteers serving the church.
-  The church family is generous and supportive of charitable giving.
-  The financial management is strong.
-  Ministry has been strong and we have valued the inspirational Sunday sermons.

Weaknesses

- ✚ Our increasing elderly church community requires more pastoral care.
- ✚ We lack families and young people and people of working age.
- ✚ Outreach work in the community is needed to encourage growth in the church family, along with an increase in advertising and sharing information about what we offer.

Opportunities

- ✚ Explore ways to grow the church through outreach work with the many groups who use the Church Centre, and the Church Toddler Group, as well as with people living in the new housing developments, Care Homes, Sheltered Housing, Schools and the local International College.
- ✚ As a Church we would like to support initiatives that lead to greater inclusivity in our community.

Threats

- ✚ The National decline in Church attendance.
- ✚ The church may become impacted by the current financial situation in the country and its effects on individual finances.

Our new Minister

We are looking for someone who is in sympathy with our Congregational tradition, strong in leading worship and preaching in a way that is relevant to the experiences of the congregation.

We feel that the minister should be approachable and encouraging of others in all aspects of their faith journey, be a team worker and facilitator who leads from the front.

We are a caring church family and place pastoral care and involvement from the minister with this, as a high priority. We feel that we must be supportive of the pastoral needs of all members of our church family in conjunction with our Pastoral Team.

We would value someone who is aware of contemporary issues and is willing to be inclusive and outward looking. We would like to ensure that opportunities for outreach work are taken forward to grow our church family and spread God's word out into the community. We believe that a planned role of an outreach worker will be an important part of this.

We would see networking and links to the Congregational Federation and the local Churches Together as important links to be maintained.

The Process of choosing a new Minister

Calling a minister is one of the most important decisions taken by church meeting and the candidate. We want to ensure that there are opportunities for the candidate to lead worship but also to meet members informally and to see the church at work during the week.

This profile has been prepared to give you a sense of Market Harborough Congregational Church and, after reading it, you may believe that God is prompting you to investigate this opportunity.

If that is the case you should contact the General Secretary of the Congregational Federation or the Church Secretary (magala1@outlook.com), providing a résumé, outlining your experiences so far and your expectations - for example full or part time ministry.

The closing date for applications from within the Congregational Federation is 31st October 2023, applications from outside the denomination will not be considered before that date.

Applications will be considered at that date and shortlisted from that point, the church meeting will only consider one applicant at a time.

If it is appropriate we will either invite you to meet with the Steering Group in confidence or to preach as soon as possible, with hospitality so that you can meet some of the congregation informally.

If you still wish to proceed after leading worship, Church Meeting will decide whether to invite you to preach with a view to becoming Minister of the church. A simple majority is required.

When a candidate is invited to preach a second time, we expect that you will spend time with us to include a session with the Steering Group and an informal opportunity to look around the town and of course Worship on Sunday. You may wish to visit us during the week to see some of our activities.

A Special Church Meeting will be called after the visit, when the decision will be made whether to offer an invitation to the Ministry of the Church. The constitution of the church requires that 85% of those members present vote in favour of the call. It may be that a further visit is requested either by the members or the candidate.

Ideally we wish to call a full time minister but we are open to discussions about a part time appointment subject to a minimum of 50% of a full-time post.

We are happy to discuss our financial situation with anyone expressing serious interest in the role.

The Church currently owns a four bedroomed manse, and we are reviewing whether this is still appropriate, but the church is committed to providing either a manse or an allowance towards housing costs.

We look forward to testing this calling with you and place our trust in God who inspires and leads us into the future on this journey.

