**The House that God built**

**Psalm 127 v 1 – Except the Lord build the house, they**

**labour in vain that build it**

**A short history of The Bower House**

**Harborough Christian Counselling Service**

**32 Coventry Rd**

**Market Harborough**

**LE16 7BZ**

**CHAPTER 1 God laid the foundations**

Market Harborough in the 1980s was a small thriving market town. On any scale measuring deprivation or social need it barely scored. It was white, middleclass with full employment and apparently idyllic. But this appearance covered a multitude of problems such as personal and family pain , concerns and anxieties, long standing issues and grief. There was an awareness of this among the various statutory organisations such as health and social services but also among the voluntary sector such as Homestart, Drug Action team, CVS, Volunteer Bureau and Citizens Advice to name but a few. The Churches, through their pastoral role were also aware of hidden need.

At this time the local churches were grouped together in what was then the Council of Churches and worked ecumenically with a degree of enthusiasm but they were slowly moving forward to greater co-operation and stronger fellowship. It would eventually in 1990 become Churches Together in Harborough and enter into covenant rather than just cooperation.

Within these churches some Christians were experiencing Christian counselling or prayer ministry either for themselves or as part of their gifting flowing out from a deeper awareness of the power of the Holy Spirit and the working through of the charismatic movement. Because of this the Spirit began stirring the longings of the people for a Christian Counselling Service in Market Harborough. But how to start the process?

A small group began to meet and pray together. Eventually they called a meeting, notification of which came through the different church leaders.

Meanwhile quite unconnected from this movement, a Christian couple, Jadzia and Paul Bower, were talking together about their desire to do something for other people. Jadz quite suddenly “saw” the need for a counselling service. She spoke to her Pastor who said “That’s strange. I think I have a flyer about a meeting. I thought it was last week but it’s this coming Saturday at the Methodist Church. Why don’t you go”?

Quite a good number turned up to that first open meeting –35 –

representing many different denominations. There was a real sense of the rightness of the idea and a small subgroup was set up to take it forward.

**CHAPTER 2 God built the walls**

This group met to pray together but also began to make concrete plans. There was a need for premises so every church was visited and spare rooms looked at but there was a strong feeling that for the service to be accessible to anyone – churchgoer or not – some neutral non church based premises were needed. So the local “Harborough Mail” was regularly perused and the adverts for property mulled over. One such set of offices was on St Mary’s Road and could have been a possibility but access was up some steep stairs. So it was rejected. How were they going to find what they needed at a price they could afford? However, during a prayer time a member of the group said she could see a picture of a house with an archway at the side of it, north of the river. Next week’s paper had an advert for a house for sale and there was a picture of it – yes, it had an archway at the side of it! It was 32 Coventry Road! Its central position made it ideal for its purpose but also it is so discreet that no-one seems to know where it is until they need it. Indeed the group didn’t know where it was and couldn’t find it!

This property belonged to a local building firm. It had been their family home but latterly had been broken up into bed-sits and, with the misuse of its tenants, was in a sorry state. The tank in the attic was about to burst; the electrics were likely to give you a shock when decorating, the building was cold and damp and it was dirty – very dirty. However those of the group with an eye for possibilities declared it ideal and the owner was approached. He agreed to let it rather than sell and the step was taken. The property was rented and work began.

Working parties from the churches with up to 28 people came and washed and scrubbed, repaired and painted and the building took on a more acceptable look. So then it needed furnishing.

An appeal went to the churches and an amazing array of goods and chattels were given. It was wonderful how many people had excess furniture in their homes and thought it a worthy cause to give. Sofas and tables arrived for the counselling rooms. Curtains rugs and pots and pans – everything that was needed was given. If there was a lack such as the fridge, God was asked to meet our need. Shortly afterwards having a conversation in a car it came up that the driver’s husband had to go to the tip to get rid of a fridge. It was rescued from that fate and still sits in the Bower House kitchen. Similarly a carpet was prayed for and next day a perfectly good carpet was seen hanging over a dustbin outside someone’s house. The owner was asked if we could have it and he offered a much better pink one from his garage and he helped carry it round! A nearby agricultural college at Ashby Magna was closing down and a set of chairs was gratefully received to furnish our meeting room at the cost of £50. They were transported in a borrowed trailer and it poured with rain. The plastic covers blew off but by some miracle the rain stopped and only recommenced when the chairs were safely under the entrance arch of the house! Another set of 17 chairs was given to us by the Evangelical Church as they were upgrading. What was so lovely was that so much that was given randomly actually colour coordinated with other things and the house looked lovely. For instance , two pink settees were transported from Norfolk which with the pink carpet furnished what became the rose room.

At what point was the house ready for use? At what point were the volunteers ready to begin?

**CHAPTER 3 God called the people to work in the house**

In 1997 and 1998 all the people who had expressed an interest, attended the Association of Christian Counsellors Manna House Level one counselling course of 50 hours so there was a minimum level of training to equip both counsellors and support workers.

It was at about this time that issues on what we were really about were coming to the fore. As a Christian organisation some of the team were very clear that we should be embarking on Christian counselling – Biblical counselling which directed people to the truth as expressed in the Word of God and also prayer ministry which might involve deliverance ministry. This caused some anxiety in the town church leadership and made it hard to persuade Churches Together to accept the counselling service idea. Another part of the team felt equally strongly that this was a counselling service run by Christians to share the love of God in what they did rather than what they said and that it needed to be clear that we were not an evangelising organisation. It was felt that for the service to have integrity in the wider community and with the GPs the clients needed to be offered the choice to have secular counselling or explore the spiritual aspects of their lives – but only if they so wished. The outcome of this dichotomy was a split in the team. It was unfortunate and caused much distress at the time but it enabled the more secular model to proceed and this was accepted by the churches.

At a Churches Together meeting in October 1998 after several meetings talking about it, a vote was taken and support promised – prayer, financial and goodwill – for the counselling service. This was so encouraging to have their support although this was not essential as an independent charity was set up 28th June 1999

A structure had been determined of an overarching Governing Body which was to be the group of Trustees of the registered Charity which we became, and a management group who would be responsible for the day to day running of the service. John Sparks who chaired the governing body organised Rev Nick Lang to come for a weekend to facilitate the beginning of the service. With him the team explored where we had got to in preparation, what we needed to do before we opened for business and finally what was stopping us! He gave us the courage – or rather gave us a kick up the backside – to see that we could open in six weeks. And so we did – on 19th April 1999.

During that weekend Nick led us to look at Henri Nouwen’s book on “the Prodigal Son” - meditations on the Rembrandt painting of that name. The team felt very strongly that this picture was our motif and a large reproduction of it was bought and framed and it hangs in the main meeting room to remind all comers of the Fathers love for all who turn to Him.

And so the house opened. Initially the hours for opening were 10-12.30 Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays with an open evening on Wednesdays. The team that started were four counsellors, a few support workers and some practical volunteers! 150 hours counselling were done in that first year. Clients came mainly from the churches as there was no advertising – there was such fear that we might be overwhelmed and unable to cope. Right from the start the mix of volunteers has been from Catholic to House church, Anglican to Baptist and Methodist, Evangelical to Congregational.

The peculiar character of the Bower House continued to develop. The name was chosen for several reasons. Firstly it was to honour the memory of Paul Bower who tragically died before the centre opened but whose enthusiasm had driven the project forward in the early days. But the word Bower also means a safe leafy haven according to the dictionary and it was this that we wished to establish. The strength of the sense of community through work and prayer grew as did the fellowship and mutual care and support leading to the understanding that something very special had started.

Under the skilled leadership of John Sparks and the governing body, the management team developed and began to grasp its responsibilities. The expertise of Ray Smyth enabled us to develop a set of policies , protocols and procedures which are only just being revisited ten years on.

Room names were adopted. The Vine room reflected the words of Jesus that He is the true Vine and we are the branches. This theme is echoed in the entrance hall with a delightful vine mural painted for us by Liz Minichiello which also includes bower birds building their nests. The other rooms are named after flowers and reflect the colours or mood of the room; the Rose room is pink! The Sunflower room was left without a carpet so messy paint or craft work can happen in there and so it is used predominantly for work with children and is bright and cheery. All the rooms are arranged so as to be non clinical, non institutional and non threatening. Tremendous efforts have been made to provide a house that is welcoming but has a sense of peace and hope

**CHAPTER 4 God then started sending people to His house**

A verse from Corinthians was like a beacon for us and was chosen to go on our letterhead and correspondence

**2 Cor. 1:3-4**

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

Or as it reads in a modern translation

All praise to the God and Father of our Master, Jesus the Messiah! Father of all mercy! God of all healing counsel! He comes alongside us when we go through hard times, and before you know it, he brings us alongside someone else who is going through hard times so that we can be there for that person just as God is there for us

As I commented earlier we were very timid about advertising the service as we were aware that our resources for counselling were very limited. But gradually people heard about us and a steady trickle of clients came. For most of the ten years we have been open there has only rarely been a waiting list and clients are allocated to a counsellor usually within two weeks. Also we have never told counsellors that they must limit the number of sessions for which they work with a client. This means that some clients are really long term and have been counselled for over a year whereas others need only two or three sessions. Counselling is very much tailored to the needs of the client.

Another characteristic of the service is that our counsellors come from a wide variety of background and training. The Manna House Christian counselling course in Northampton has trained a number of those who work here. Several others have done the Diploma course at South Leicestershire College in Person Centred Counselling. Still others have been trained in the Psychodynamic and Integrative models. We are fortunate to have an extraordinary mix of skills available to clients. Right at the beginning we were helped and guided by a General Practitioner who specialised in Mental Health issues. She is still available to us for advice. We have had counsellors who have worked in Social Services, Health Services, Accountancy and Police. We have teachers with expertise with learning disabilities, secondary school children and teaching adults. An Anglican clergyperson worked with us for a while and there are those who practice as psychologist, psychiatrist and psychotherapist. But also counsellors have trained who come from all aspects of society and many different backgrounds so clients can be matched with a suitable counsellor with whom they will be comfortable working. There is such a richness in the people who work here – such a depth of knowledge and expertise which is gladly shared so the mutual support and fellowship among the volunteers deepens everyone’s ability to help our clients.

After the first few years the organisation felt strong enough to offer student placements. Those undertaking counselling training are required to do a set number of hours with clients – usually one hundred hours actually counselling. The opportunity for students to work at the Bower House - providing they fulfil the requirement to be Christians - has enriched the place with the diversity and the enthusiasm of students. Many of these on completing their training have stayed on as counsellors and continued to develop their skills and grow into more mature practitioners. At the time of writing this there are thirty counsellors, either trained or students, working at the centre. They can choose the number of hours they are prepared to give and most limit their sessions to two or three a week. However this still means that in the last twelve months over 1600 hours of counselling took place.

**CHAPTER 5 Gods ongoing provision**

The house which was first rented was then purchased by the Bower House using a low interest loan from a dear friend, Jenny Sparks wife of the Chair of our Governing Body. Over several years we paid back as we could but still owed over £60,000 when tragedy struck. In 2001 Jenny was taken ill and it became clear that she was dying. In her will she cancelled the debt on her death so that her legacy is the freehold we have of the premises we use. A small courtyard garden has been created as a memorial to her and it is with great sadness but huge gratitude that we remember her.

And now we look back with thankfulness at the way we have been led and how the service has grown to its present size. But with this come new challenges. To create more space we were given a grant by Market Harborough and Bowden Charity to develop the outbuildings at the back of the house. This has enabled us to provide facilities for disabled visitors, an extra ground floor counselling room and a downstairs office.

Six years ago a substantial chunk of money – a gift from a town church - was given with the express purpose that it be spent on people not equipment or the building. It was decided to pay an honorarium to two people to job- share the task of service co-ordinator. When this money ran out the Bowden Charity gave us £10,000 for three years to continue the work. As this generous help is coming to an end in March 2011 there is a sense that we need to plan for the future. The options seem to be that we allow the service to grow as it is and continue to try to meet the ever increasing need brought through our doors, or we decide to hold it to the size it is and maintain the sense of warmth and friendliness which people encounter when they come here. Either way there is a need to rethink the way we staff the house – do we need a full time paid Manager and Administrator or can the gift of time and love from volunteers continue to provide a professional and safe counselling service?

For guidance as to how to move forward those with management or trustee responsibilities are seeking Gods wisdom and discernment in these matters so that The Bower House can continue to serve Market Harborough in the way He wishes and continue to show the love of God to a needy community.

Through what is done here lives are changed, distress is shared and relieved, emotions are healed and for some there is spiritual renewal. Below is the mission statement to which we work and I believe we have worked hard to fulfil all of these to some extent. God give us the wisdom to continue in what we do and to do it well.

***Mission Statement of the Bower House***

*The Bower House aims to provide a Christian response to the needs of local people in Market Harborough and District to offer help, support and encouragement at times of crises in their lives. In this we seek to empower and help people make their own decisions in appropriate ways to enable them to satisfactorily come through their crises.*

*We also see our role as training and equipping Christians to be involved in Christian counselling and enable Christians to utilise the gifts that God has given them, together with their past training and experience.*

*We wish to work alongside Churches in their caring ministries and with secular organisations that care for people.*