

News from the Urban Ministry and Theology project (January 2006)

On a windy day just before Christmas the first phase of the rebuilding of St Martin's church and community building was handed over. This phase was the completion of the nursery part of the Children's Centre developed through a partnership with the Government initiative SureStart and the local community. The second phase which continues apace is to be a community facility with integral worship space. During this work the worshipping community have been meeting for Sunday services at Welbeck



Primary School. The many other groups, some of whom had already begun using the old St Martin's building, have been keeping in touch with the building project through regular partnership meetings and are eagerly anticipating the move into the new facilities in 2006. This has been a real collaboration by the Church and a diversity of partners all of whom have a passion and commitment both

in terms of time, money and skills for the community around St Martin's. The hard work of community consultation and meetings prior to any works being undertaken should provide a real sense of ownership and enthusiasm for the facilities by local residents and community groups.

There is simply no substitute for a period of serious reflection and enquiry which engages the parish in terms of local residents and key partner organisations when considering the future of our buildings. Each context will develop a different strategy as each of the UMTF parishes' solutions shows.



On the same windy day before Christmas the basic repair works to St Michael's church building were also handed over! The building is now watertight and fungus free! It is indeed heartening to see what had appeared an insurmountable task of simply salvaging the fabric completed. The Aspire partnership and the parish can now see its task ahead as being much more achievable. The building, with fresh plaster and no buckets of water, lifts the spirits and will inspire "Aspire" to continue its effort in refining the vision for the wonderful space and place that is St Michael's.



It should be clearer to potential funders and partners that there are real possibilities here for haven and tranquillity or whatever the community and church envisage. Once again it has been through the commitment of local residents, committed community activities and the members of St Michael's church that things have got so far (not to mention the seemingly limitless energy of John Sadler!). As far as the worship which has continued in the parish, the centre amongst the shops on Raby Cross has

enabled the congregation to grow significantly in their time there and indeed the work with young people has taken root so well some of it can be shared with St Silas! The courageous move to an unconventional setting has certainly demonstrated the church's commitment to be where its people are.



Once again there is no getting away from the need to engage with the people, all around us, to take them seriously no matter how challenging that is and to offer ourselves (our buildings, resources etc.) in their service. It seems the more we are prepared to let go the more we receive (sounds somewhat scriptural!)



At St Silas' this Christmas marked the end of the first full year in the remodelled building. This has been a great achievement and indeed a flourishing partnership between all the diverse organisations involved. The church and hall have moved from being only used a few hours during the week by hardy groups such as Woodcraft Folk and Caporeia and worship for a few hours on a Sunday and Wednesday to on some days before Christmas being in use almost 24hrs a day (no really there is an African

church group who held an overnight vigil!). There is only a Friday evening every other week which is still unused and in months such as October and November when Byker Bridge Housing Association, the key partner, held training sessions throughout the day there were hardly any day times left available also.

This has all meant not only that there is a real buzz of activity about the place but also that new connections for ministry are being made. For example the 65 Club which runs Tea Dances and social activities for the Parson's Retirement group had members who attend Christmas services and contributed the flowers for Church this Christmas. The Age Concern Lunch and leisure group who meet twice a week were also provided with Easter and Christmas services, and the Joseph Cowen centre which is part of Byker Bridge Housing Association and which provides health services for rough sleepers laid on a buffet for a Carol Service there just before Christmas. The congregation itself has grown in numbers and feels less drained as so many more people share in the responsibility for the upkeep and running costs of the building. For so many more people it is once again "their church" and as such they contribute in so many ways to its life not just on a Sunday but through the week as well.

Each of these parishes has developed a vision which is very individual for the very different settings they find themselves in. Each building has been treated differently. There is no specific universally applicable plan and no short cut to the answers. Each parish has had to take painful decisions, to let go of some dearly held things but each has been blessed in return for their faith with growth and a much more hopeful future. There has needed to be a substantial investment on the part of the congregations and other partner organisation. There has been the trick question, if you like, of "who is my neighbour?" Who is it that we form partnerships with? How do we speak to the people in our neighbourhoods and discern their views? Then what are we prepared to sacrifice?

By Sue Faulkner