

How Regeneration of our Church buildings can contribute to their community context

A presentation at the Barking Episcopal Area Regeneration Group July 2014

How many times have you looked at a church notice board that is tired and sad, or worse still out of date? Or failed to find details of the service times and who to contact, or spotted weeds growing through the tarmac, and thought what a sad place?

Now that may be a little bit of a caricature, but don't underestimate the impact our buildings have on the local community and how they view us.

Our buildings say a lot about us, even before anyone comes through the doors, and if they say the wrong things – tired, out of date, not interested – then those same people won't bother to cross the threshold.

Our local council has recently initiated a programme of spending relatively small amounts of money to improve some of our shopping areas; with the idea that this will lead to regeneration of the businesses, and the areas around, and it has certainly raised the bar in terms of community pride.

We cannot claim the credit for this idea, although as a church we did make such a suggestion to the Leader of the Council, after we had done something similar with our buildings.

Our Mission & Evangelism is all about working in and with our local community, and we started with ourselves, by taking a look at how our buildings were used, and just as importantly how they presented.



The 2 halls are very well used by the community, and over the years we have encouraged a wide range of uses, don't have all your income with one user, charging rents that reflect ability to pay, whilst at the same time generating an income to keep the buildings in good repair with up to date facilities. Each year we take on a major project – this year it was up grading and providing additional female toilets, and next year the kitchen needs attention.

Unfortunately our halls are the face that the public sees first. Our jewel of a church is hidden by the halls, through an accident of history; so we have looked at how we can make the church more visible. We cut back foliage, erected new simple notice boards and direction boards. We decorated the exterior of the halls and we resurfaced our car parks.

The notice boards are now up to date with contact details, posters advertising what the church is doing, and when there is no specific function to advertise, a large colourful picture of the inside of the church (with people in it!) is displayed.

All simple things to do, but they do have an impact. More than one person has commented that the buildings were looking tired, but now they look alive.

This visible presence of both our buildings and our work in the community – campaigning against the loss of amenities; speaking to the local council; supporting other churches with the local night shelter and food bank have all raised our profile and contributed to improvements in the area as a whole.

This is not an affluent area – one of our local wards is one of the most deprived in the country, and so anything we as the Church can do in raising aspirations and showing God's love we see as a mission opportunity.

We have been able to commission some works of art specifically for our building and are part of the Barking Art Trail, and like many we are looking at ways we can engage with other tourist attractions near by. Our next endeavour is to engage the local community more in the upkeep of the fabric of the building through the Friends group, as we continue to encourage its use for activities outside our regular worship.



For some churches the possibility of total redevelopment of the site might be the long term goal, but in the meantime don't underestimate the regeneration possibilities – both physical and spiritual – of improving the seemingly small things.

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