

Seeking the Vision

How to describe a church? We all know the metaphors, don't we? The church is a body, a flock, a family, the bride of Christ. In a local sense it is a group of believers seeking to live out the gospel through words and actions, one which is at its best when it seeks to connect with and serve others. But here's where things get a little harder to pin down. Who are those others and what does that service look like?

These are the very real questions we're currently grappling with at LFEC as we seek to work out what exactly we are meant to do with the building we purchased last year. Faced with increasing attendances and a building struggling with the demands placed upon it, we were miraculously (and I don't use that word lightly) led to the purchase of a police station. And not just any old police station. No, what we bought was the old Divisional HQ of Dyfed Powys Police. Sixteen thousand square feet of three-story office block, cell block, exercise yard and dog kennels, complete with parking for upwards of 35 cars and a row of garage units. All in a highly visible site in the middle of Llanelli.

To put this into context, the whole footprint of our current church building would fit, fairly comfortably, on just one of the three floors of the office building – and that's without needing to remove the staircase at each end! And when you stand at one end of the plot and realise the office block is only a small part of the overall space – well, it's no wonder that our pastor described the whole enterprise as 'bonkers'! As the husband of one of our congregation muttered to me as we looked around the building together, 'Matthew, what have you done...?'

Yet, as everyone at LFEC would agree, we haven't actually 'done' anything. God has. After a search for a new building that had lasted around ten years and exhausted our best efforts, it was He that caused our pastor to check online one Sunday morning and discover the building was up for sale. It was He that swelled our coffers to the extent that our rather static building fund went from £30,000 to £350,000 in just three short weeks – and it was He that ensured the amount we submitted to an extremely competitive 'sealed bid' process was enough to secure the site for His use. Lesson number one – God's not short of money.

So, God gave us a building, albeit one that needs development. But no time to stand still because, lesson number two, God's not hung up on bricks and mortar, God wants people. Next, we hear that elsewhere in Wales plans have fallen through for a mission, so there's now a team of trainee missionaries heading our way along with Slavko Hadzic and Andy Mayo. What an opportunity to reach out to a local community already intrigued by our recent purchase – but what a timescale! Something like six weeks to put together a programme AND let people hear about it. Heroically, our members got to work and, following an intensive leafleting campaign and some online planning sessions, we very quickly found ourselves in the middle of an extremely well-attended series of events that connected us with many new people. Meanwhile, at roughly the same time, our hastily formed building group found themselves in touch with not one

but three architects, all keen to offer guidance and advice to a church still coming to terms with the building it had been given.

Things were clearly moving on the 'people' front. Connections were being made and new people were joining us, each with their own skills to offer and experiences to share. We had a fabulous Saturday morning get-together at the end of April at which everyone associated with the church was invited to come and explore the police station before sharing thoughts on what to do with it, and it was great to have all generations of the church there, from young to old, all pitching in and making suggestions. We also had a wonderful opportunity at the start of the summer to work with talented artist Lois Adams on creating a mural for the front of the building in which she engaged the help of local schoolchildren to design and then paint panels. With the message of our church, the community and the gospel being proclaimed on its outer walls, the building finally began to feel like ours.

Yet while everything seemed to be moving at breakneck speed, there was still one very important piece of the puzzle that needed to be put in place before things could really get going. I've already mentioned that LFEC had been looking for a new building for years without success. However, right back at the start, a group had been formed to search for suitable properties, and I remember at one of the very first meetings a member flagged up the police station as somewhere that was going to be being sold off in the foreseeable future. So there's a sense in which God had already earmarked that building for us, we just didn't know it yet. But why did we have to wait so long and search so fruitlessly? Well, to put it simply, we just weren't ready. Crucially, we also needed to complete a process of reflection and reorganisation that had itself begun some four years earlier when we set out to become a CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organisation). This was a process that appeared, over the years, to be never-ending but now seems, with impeccable, perfect timing, to be heading towards a conclusion as we close in on a plan for our new building. A 'new' church moving into a new building - I don't really need to say it, do I? Lesson three – in God's time, not ours.

In a legal sense it is extremely important that we become a CIO if we are going to take on a project of this size. For anyone who hasn't been through it, becoming a CIO might be an arduous process but it does allow an organisation to become a legal entity in its own right and so affords a certain degree of protection for its trustees against claims that might be made against it. It also allows a church to enter into contracts, own property and employ staff in its own name. So God once again knew what He was doing when He started LFEC on the path to becoming a CIO some four years earlier. But equally as important as the practical considerations, He also knew that the process would require us to take a long, hard look at our constitution and rulebook, making sure we were fit for purpose to be His church undertaking His plans for His new building in Llanelli.

Because what has become very clear as the weeks and months have ticked by is the sheer scale of this project in terms of the needs it could address. Our April brainstorming event led to the realisation that what we very much wanted was to be a community church, but that the word 'community' included not just ourselves as a church, but also our neighbours, our town, our county, and the wider Christian

community of which we are part. Our architect, Dan Benham, is currently working on a feasibility study with our building group, part of which involves encouraging as many people as possible to tell us what they would like to see on the site – and if you're reading this before Feb 2025 then please visit our website and join in. In what is a wonderful opportunity to connect, we're about to spend a Saturday hosting a public event at the site where we will ask as many people as possible, from young to old, from the powerful to those with the smallest voice, 'what is church?' - and we'll be bracing ourselves for the answer.

So, a year on from our miraculous purchase where do we find ourselves? In one sense, we're galloping forward with the practicalities of site development. Dan and his team are extremely proactive in engaging with the local community so, with over 1000 people invited to come to the site and share their thoughts with us, we're not going to be short on opinion. And pretty soon those opinions will be translated into plans, and we'll have more of an idea of what the finished building will look like – which, of course, will come with its own significant challenges. We'll have to submit planning applications, engage with builders, engineers, designers and, above everything else, find the money to pay for it all. But that, of course, brings us back to lesson one, 'God's not short of money,' and the realisation that, in spite of all our worries, fears or anxieties, from what we've seen so far, we know it's all in His hands, not ours. Keep that in mind and this becomes one of the most exciting, exhilarating adventures anyone can ever hope to go on.

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