

Looking Ahead Bulletin No: 3

In previous Looking Ahead sessions we considered

1. How we should approach our discussions on the future development of Union Chapel. What kind of a church are we? What type of church would we like to be? *(see Bulletin No: 1)*
2. What kind of community do we live in? Who uses our premises? How do we involve everyone in our discussions? *(see Bulletin No: 2)*

In this third session we tried to see how some other churches had pursued their vision of the church in their own community. What they did and the problems they faced. We started to look at some of the financial implications. We started to look at our visions for the future.

As before the morning started with worship. We reflected in the singing of the first hymn that although it might be difficult to see clearly the way ahead that does not mean we should lose heart.

*In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

Other People's Visions

Roby URC Longsight.

The church set up the Roby Outreach Project in the late seventies to provide support for people with mental health problems and their families when changes in the mental health Acts meant that many hospital and residential places were lost. At the time there were several people in the church very committed to mental health and with the support and involvement of the congregation a number of groups were started, providing activities, social gatherings and counselling. They were used and enjoyed by people from a variety of backgrounds, languages and ethnic groups.

In the 1990's they received a grant of £150,000 from Manchester City Council and a Project Leader. Over time the nature of the Project changed because the church was no longer the sole organiser and gradually the number of volunteers from the church declined. Some people felt that the original intentions of the Project had been lost – and of course some thirty years had passed and those who had been the leaders could not be as active and involved. Currently there are no activity groups, but the one-to-one counselling service is still in operation.

Reflecting on the situation, the minister Revd. Bob Day suggests that a church should consider whether allowing people the use of its buildings is a sufficient way of serving the community.

Chorlton Central Church

The church is a Baptist/URC community meeting in what was the Hall of the original very large URC church. That building and most of the site were sold to a Housing Association. In 2006 Chorlton Central began talks with three other non-conformist churches in the area about sharing mission and buildings. These continued until 2008 when, for various reasons the other churches withdrew.

The church then considered other ways forward; working with the Housing Association, renting a shop in Chorlton, or renting a school for worship and using people's homes for other activities. None of these proved acceptable and would also have meant losing the groups who meet in the building. So they decided to re-develop on their part of the original site and arranged for groups to be able to continue to meet, either there or in agreed alternative places. The renewed building, paid for by selling a manse and fundraising by the congregation, was opened in 2014. The project had taken eight years from their initial discussions.

Finance

We looked first at our current situation. When we compared our income from all sources (Offerings, Rents and Land Rental) with our expenses (Salaries, Maintenance etc.) we found we ran a small surplus. For the future we would lose the Land Rental from our current income and interest payments on our reserves would not fully compensate for this loss. It would result in the removal of the present small surplus causing us to just about break even. There would be an increase in the value of our assets both in cash and property value.

Our Visions - Group Discussions

In order to look at our visions we considered two questions: What do we want to be together? and Where are we going as a church? Points arising in discussion were:

- People were involved in the church for different reasons, and that the connection that members feel with the other users of the building varies a good deal. Some people have a lot invested in the “other” activities at Union Chapel; others don’t, or don’t even have any interest.
- Some group members weren’t sure if they would want to be nothing more than a community which regularly worshipped together, and/or one which paid others to run its building/s.
- The deal with the university on Linton House had been lucrative and had removed what had become a burden, but it had also divorced the church from what had once been a tangible example of its mission
- Some people stressed the little knowledge the church had of the work involved in the other activities of the building, There isn't a shared investment in, and appreciation of, the work entailed in both building usage broadly and food bank in particular
- Fewer people in the church are now connected to the other groups using the building - this has affected our shared identity and a sense of fragmentation in our purpose
- Reflecting on other churches’ visions, as glimpsed in the presentations on Chorlton Central, Roby, and Swindon, there was a discussion of the changing needs of each generation, and how a particular church vision may only last, or even be required to last, for the needs of today, not the next 100 years.
- The issue initially arose from the Linton House situation but should not be seen in the negative light which coloured the ‘dry rot’ discussions in the early 90’s.
- We could sell L.H. and just keep going as a church, or we could use the opportunity to explore the whole picture.
- Could L.H. be used temporarily for refugees/ homeless ? – but others’ experiences suggested a lot of attached problems, especially security.
- Developing the whole site would be exciting, but what would we do for money ?
- Should we sell the whole site for social housing in exchange for a worship / meeting area ? This would mean losing most if not all of the user groups.
- How far should the groups’ needs be a factor in our consideration ?

We ended with a hymn and blessing.

*From the past will come the future,
what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*