

Something Beautiful for God

A Faith Journey for the Catholic Community in Latchford, Grappenhall & Thelwall

Foreword - *Fr Peter Montgomery*

To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.

These words of Cardinal Newman invite us to regard change in a positive light. Yet we know from experience how change rarely comes without a cost.

Stories carry memories into the future. Stories help us to ponder the things that really matter, heal the wounds inflicted by hurt and misunderstanding, teach us how to do things better and raise our hopes towards new possibilities.

Philomena McCarthy, Patricia Peters and the members of our publicity and communication team have done us a great service by articulating our experience of change in the context of a story. They were invited to tell the story in a way that gave expression to the downs as well as the ups. To honour the views and feelings of those who have not always been persuaded of the merits of building a new church. They have been faithful to this expectation.

This account also records the many good things we have created and experienced together. These have all contributed to a tangible atmosphere of hope we embark on this new stage in our story.

This work is dedicated to the memory of David Forrest (1931 - 2009)
who recorded so faithfully and meticulously the stories
of Our Lady's and Saint Augustine's.

Parish Prayer

Lord God

Your house is a place of welcome
a place of nourishment

A place of forgiveness, healing and peace.

Give us voices uplifted in praise
and hearts ready to welcome all you call.

Instil in us the desire to serve.

Unite in bonds of faith, hope and love
all members of our community.

Grant us grace upon grace
to build the temple of your spirit
creating its beauty from the holiness of our lives.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen. PCM

Introduction

This is not just an account of re-scheduling buildings, although they feature largely in the story.

It is a snapshot of the living church at the beginning of the 21st century.
It is about the people of God's journey of faith in the church of the world today.
And about the work of the Holy Spirit whose blessings sustained us on the way.

The changes which instigated the Pastoral and Property Review are commonplace to us all now:

- namely diminishing numbers of congregations,
- lack of vocations to the priesthood, and corresponding shortage of priests,
- limited finances, and a vastly changing social order
- and not least of all, Vatican documents, especially *Gaudium et Spes* a Pastoral Constitution on 'The Church in the Modern World'.

Churches throughout the land were in a dilemma and, as was said at the time 'to do nothing was not an option'.

At the request of Bishop Brian a period of consultation took place within the whole of the Shrewsbury Diocese. Initially our Deanery consultation comprised of parishes in the Runcorn area, and parishes of St Monica, Appleton, St. Winefride Lymm and the two Latchford parishes of St Augustine and Our Lady, the final decision focused mainly on the two Latchford parishes.

Extensive consultation took place within the Deaneries, with Diocesan Trustees and parishes. The final recommendations of the Pastoral and Property Review in June 2000 contained a devastating blow for members of the communities of both Our Lady's and Saint Augustine's churches in Latchford.

Both had buildings that were in need of replacement or major repairs. Taking into account the needs of the church in the world today, the decision was made to demolish the two existing buildings and to build a new church, with facilities for use by the combined catholic communities, with suitable facilities to enable the opportunity to extend a welcome to other members of the wider community.

When the two communities heard the recommendations, the shock and disbelief was tangible.

- *"How am I going to get to another church, I can only just about get here?" I can only just manage to get here?"*
- *"It will be great to have a new church, it's about time!"*
- *"My family have been coming here for generations"*
- *"Where are they going to build a new church?"*
- *"It's criminal to close a beautiful church like this, it could easily be fixed."*
- *"Where's the money coming from to build a new church?"*

Both had proud histories and strong communities. For them to change would not be easy. Perhaps in some ways, the vision of the proposed new church was obscured by the security and comfort of the familiar, the sense of belonging they felt for their existing community, and lack of trust in the unknown.

Since the 1930s St Augustine's was a force for good in the lives of many thousands of people both inside and beyond the parish. At the turn of the century it supported a strong spiritual community. The pristine condition of the interior of the church reflected the loving care with which they lavished on their place of worship. The fabric of the church building however, gave cause for concern.

Implicit in the history of St Augustine's Church, built in the 1930s, was the general expectations of the congregation that in the future a replacement building would facilitate their strong community worship. St Augustine's was at this time a close-knit community with a lively social community spirit.

Our Lady's Church celebrated its centenary in 2002, although the parish has existed since 1869. The magnificent church suffered for many years from lack of maintenance. Parishioners genuinely cherished the hope that possible plans for refurbishment and renovation, following the Review, would assist the pastoral renewal of the whole community. Throughout the history of the parish there have been thousands of parishioners who have given their time and energy for the good of others who have followed them. Although it has suffered the usual fall in attendance, generations have worshipped here. Families hoped this tradition would continue into the future.

So we look to the future....and the Lord is calling us to strange times ahead. It would be very nice if we could see clearly what we can do, but we can't. But we know it's going to be very different from the past, and our path is difficult to meet the new demands made upon us.... So for the pilgrim, there's no room for despondency... And I would beg you not to be despondent.... There is a future—God's future—and again I want to say that I am grateful to you for the spirit in which you are prepared to go into that different future, and to work for God in the many ways he is calling us to do. EXTRACTS FROM BISHOP BRIAN NOBLE'S HOMILY at the centenary Mass at Our Lady's Church 23 October 2002

Moving from Rumour to Reality - What does the future Hold?

Local interest in the changing circumstances of the Catholic population led to the following headlines.

LATCHFORD: Bid to ensure parishioners have a place of worship Search is on to Find Site for New Church

Warrington Guardian 4 April 2002

There is no doubt that for many of the parishioners, in both parishes, the loss of the church they had worshipped in for many years and for some, a lifetime, came as a cruel blow.

At the time of the announcement not everyone agreed with the outcome of the recommendations. Reluctantly at first, people gradually began to become used to the idea rather than wholeheartedly accepting it, realising that this would be the best way forward, given the circumstances. But at this stage, few immediately had the generosity of spirit to adapt to changing circumstances.

Something Beautiful for God

“To be a People of Hope we need a Vision”

In 2003 the two parishes came under the pastoral care of Father Peter Montgomery. He was charged with the difficult duty of merging the two parishes and building a new church to serve the Latchford community.

The project placed before him he entitled “*Something Beautiful For God*” a phrase used by Mother Teresa, and one that reflected for the future, a vision, of the church and the community. Who could not be moved by the quotation?

It was the projects put before us, in the summer of 2004, which gradually brought people in both communities to the realisation that, change, whether we were happy about it or not, was inevitable.

In June a consultation paper ‘A new building for a new community’ outlined the way ahead for the two communities.

At about the same time, nominations from the two congregations were requested to form a Parish Support Group which held its first meeting in July. A combination of people from both existing parishes, working in groups, provided a springboard from which individuals found they could work together on specific tasks. Not surprisingly, working together, they forged links for a common cause.

We heard the news that a possible site for the church at Brook Place, Knutsford Road was being considered. Negotiations began between Diocesan Trustees, and with Estates, Planning and Education departments at Warrington Borough Council, with proposals to

exchange land and finance. Our Lady's Church site was to be sold to provide some of the capital funding for the new building.

At a Parish Meeting which included Diocesan Trustees, architect David Ireland and a good representation of parishioners from both parishes, many people were anxious to voice their concerns, both positive and negative about the project in hand.

Questions were raised about the design, the structure and building materials to be used, both of the interior and exterior. Car parking, road access and safety were also of concern.

A great deal of discussion centred around the inclusion of treasured items presently in use in both of the churches. "Will we able to take them to the new church?"

A disparate number of views were expressed:

- people wanting to remain in the present building,
- those who saw the need for change but were unsure of the way forward.
- parishioners who did not want change in any shape or form
- those who genuinely looked forward to a new church with all the pastoral advantages it promised.

The meeting was lively and even where different points of view were aired this was done in a respectful manner. Most people found it a valuable opportunity to gain information and have their concerns heard. In the two communities people wanted reassurance for the numerous concerns that they had. With such a reorganisation planned, how was it possible for this to be achieved?

It was the unexpected news that the church had been designated as a listed building that placed the people in turmoil. The listing automatically protected the building from sale. This complicated funding for the new project, especially as proposals were already in place regarding land exchanges, with Planning Applications submitted. For those who wished for Our Lady's Church to remain it seemed like a miracle. For many longing for a new church their hopes appeared to have been dashed. For the Diocesan Trustees and Fr. Montgomery - this caused a great deal of stress and frustration as the problems continued. At this point, it is not difficult to understand the story of the Israelites 40 years in the desert!

Negotiations over land deals dragged on, although on the face of it nothing seemed to be happening. Sometimes we are too close to things to appreciate what is happening at the time, and mostly we forget, that things happen not in our time, but God's.

When looking back it was really a time of great blessing — for it gave us time.

- Time for two disconsolate communities to come together.
- Time for the making of new friends
- Time for sharing our skills and learning new ones.
- Time for social gatherings that forged new friendships.
- Time for healing and peace.

In the past seven years we have been blessed with the presence of Father Peter who has guided parishioners with wisdom empathy and tenacity. Hopefully there have been treasured moments along the way too. We are also blessed to have Deacon John Clowes, whose constant dedication to service and support for all parishioners is exemplary. The Parish Support Group enthusiastically and meticulously set about the various tasks they had undertaken with one goal in mind; *the building of a new community*.

At the same time parishioners were also informed of the proposed date for the final Mass and closure of St Augustine's Church. (17 July 05) The arrangements for after this date were, that parishioners would combine with Our Lady's to become one parish renamed "Our Lady of the Assumption and St. Augustine of Canterbury" a name decided after much consultation with parishioners but confirmed by Bishop Brian. Changes in Mass times were inevitable and for an interim period the Saturday Vigil Mass took place in Our Lady's School. Not all were happy about the arrangements but they accepted, that all decisions were made in good faith, and had to make the best of the situation.

Future plans held that St Augustine's Church and presbytery were due for demolition at a later date, with the site included in the negotiations towards the purchase of a site for the new church. The situation for the close-knit community at St Augustine's was traumatic. For the strong, worshipful and socially-aware community, the church building so dedicatedly cared for, was no longer part of their daily life. For some people, the alternative provision was less than palatable. On the final day it was with mixed emotions that the pilgrim church of St. Augustine's were moving on. At this stage the future was not yet secure, but there was hope.

On 5 June 2005 A meeting with Mr Jim Keaton (on behalf of the Trustees) enabled parishioners to ask many of the questions which concerned them, although there was little information available to allay their fears. Many of the queries were centred on the listing and could not be answered immediately. Problems of finance needed to be resolved regarding the outlay already incurred by the Diocese on the project so far. It was noted at the meeting that the Curial Offices and Bishop Brian knew of the hurt felt by so many. Fr Peter's correspondence with Helen Southworth M.P. and Warrington Council officials was also noted.

2005 was a turbulent year. Mercifully at the end of the year, news reached us that Warrington Borough Council had agreed a valuation for both St Augustine's and Brook Place sites. It now looked increasingly likely that the proposed building would go ahead.

2006 In the new year, on the feast of the Epiphany — like the Magi - we were given new hope as we continued on another stage of the journey. With so many setbacks in the plans the phrase found in one of the reports;

"We are not starting, we are moving on" summed up the situation precisely, and while there was no major news to record, neither, thankfully, were there any problems.

It was in June 2008 that the preliminary design for the new church building, along with samples of stonework were displayed for all to see and comment upon. It stirred everyone's imagination. The architect was David Horne of Hulme Upright.

The plans attracted great interest and discussion. Parishioners immediately focused on the differences in the interior, there were questions regarding furniture and further queries highlighted which items would be included within the church. Comments were asked for.

People were delighted to see the additional facilities, with all the modern specifications and safety regulations; making life much easier for those who will use the building for worship, for hospitality and inclusive use within the community.

The area for worship, our main purpose as people of the Eucharist attracted the most attention. To see the vision of the new church actually taking shape created either elation or dismay, and for some, both emotions at the same time.

In the planning of our new church, earliest designs have aimed to reflect the sacredness of our worship in the Liturgy. Careful planning and decision making and a great deal of time has been spent, in choosing awe-inspiring, crafted materials, for the baptismal font, altar, and ambo. All this is dedicated to the glory of God in celebrating the Eucharist and sacraments. It appears that all efforts have been made, to create a sacred space, conducive to worship, welcome and service.

Blessing of the Site – 14 August 2009

The blessings took place at the future sacramental areas of the church, gathering first at where the baptismal font will be situated. As a sign of our intention to contribute to a Gospel centred community we blessed ourselves with Baptismal water.

We gathered where the scriptures will be proclaimed for the first reading here to be proclaimed.

We then move to where the altar will stand and noted where the foundation stone would be laid. The ground was ceremoniously cut, north, east, south, and west. Then intercessions, prayers and blessings followed before the hymn: “All are Welcome” was sung.

Blessing the Foundation Stone

On 17 November 2009 work was halted for a short while when, amidst the scaffolding and the building material, our celebration took place. We welcomed Mgr. McManus to bless the foundation stone for the new church. We were also pleased to welcome Mayor and Mayoress Drs. Brian and Irina Axcell for this occasion along with interested parishioners from other parishes. Clergy and guests from all sections of the community in Warrington also took part in the ceremony. Bishop Brian Noble sent his blessings in a letter read to all present. Children from the two primary schools in the parish sang our opening song: “Let us build a house where love can dwell” One of the students from Cardinal Newman High School, read the scripture.

Stones bearing the following inscriptions were blessed on the north-west corner of the building:

X AD 2009 X
God's household built upon the foundation
of the apostles and prophets,
Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.
Ephesians 2: 20

This stone was laid by the Right Rev Mgr John McManus VG
Diocese of Shrewsbury

It is right to acknowledge that Monsignor McManus and Shrewsbury Diocesan Trustees worked tirelessly on the Bishop's behalf to implement the proposals for the community of this part of the Diocese.

Celebrating and Remembering.

The final year in the church of Our Lady's and St Augustine's, was a year of special celebration and memory. It was as though the church was coming to life for the last farewell. A variety of fundraising events had the more pleasing effect of welcoming people into the church who hitherto would not have visited. Could this be a foretaste of our future ahead? We had the good fortune to enjoy a number of successful Musical Evenings. In the summer, a concert by the Chester St Cecilia Choir, was a huge success.

It was the Festival of Flowers however, which will remain a lasting memory for many people, as a testament to the blessings of what can be achieved by working together.

Joy to the World - A Festival of Flowers and Carols.

All sections of the community contributed to produce a spectacular and inspirational event of floral displays, inspired by Christmas carols. The opening Mass was celebrated by Bishop Brian. We were happy to share this joy with many of our friends in the neighbouring community. For the week of the festival, we were visited by people from all parts of Warrington and further afield in the diocese. As the church was transformed by such an inspiring collection of talents, people were overwhelmed by the splendour of it all. Many of the visitors returned to be enchanted by a concert with the Lydian Singers at the end of the festival. Other fundraising events included bowling evenings, social evenings, various coffee mornings /afternoons the usual ways of adding to the funds but of equal importance in the community.

We continued to mark in varying degrees, the joys, sadness and hope which events in the Liturgical calendar evoked.

As the risen Christ gave us hope with the resurrection, the symbols on the Paschal candle of Alpha and Omega - the beginning and end - reminded us that our future is in God's hands. Who knows what lies ahead? In the past few years, as a community we have travelled far. But our mission as a community continues.

God has created me to do him some definite service.....
I am a link in a chain..... wrote Cardinal Newman.

We each have our part to play in the work ahead of us. It will be sad when we close the doors for the last time, but joyful as another door opens. We always trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding us. And a welcome awaits all.

LOCAL PASTORAL AREAS

The changes we experienced at this time were echoed within the wider diocesan community. You may remember the reorganisation initiated by Bishop Brian in 2007 to create more pastorally friendly regions, more fitted to serve the needs of the church in the world of today. Formerly we were part of the Deanery which included all the parishes in the Runcorn area, in addition to St Monica's and St Winefride's. In the diocesan reorganisation our newly formed now comprised of St Monica's, St. Winefride's and our newly formed parish of Our Lady's & St Augustine's facilitating a more accessible co-operation between the local churches. The aim of this reorganisation is to have manageable groups with which we share spiritual and social events and interest in each others wellbeing. For the people within our LPA this has been successful in that we share some spiritual and social events, recognising the need to look to the wider community more constructively.

OUR BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE - the LPA Mission Statement

To unite the people of the parishes.
Respect and cherish the past.
Joyfully nourish the present.
Positively prepare for and welcome the future
developing the means of spiritual growth for all.
To the glory of the Father
Centred on Christ
In the power of the Holy Spirit.