

Project Detail

“A Massive Leap of Faith”

Over the past four years prayers, arguments and planning have been the spiritual nourishment at Sandyford Church, writes Andrew MacKay

Four years ago the Sandyford Henderson Memorial Church in the Kelvingrove area of Glasgow underwent a restoration process. The building was cleaned, stonework repaired, rot halted and stained glass made to sparkle. The work took around seven months to complete and the effect to the external appearance of the building was outstanding.

But the job was only part done because the Rev C Peter White and the church's office bearers had greater plans to change Sandyford into a role model for 21st century worship. Although the Rev White will impress that he is not a man of “visions” he will admit that when he was taking the service around seven years ago he realised that something was not quite right. “On my first or second Sunday at Sandyford, I looked out at the congregation. They were seated in narrow, uncomfortable pews, in a fairly dark building and they seemed a long way away. The pulpit was located at the side which did not quite centralise God's word. A mental picture came to me where I could see this congregation, not distant or off-side in a darkish dim light, but gathered as a church family around the preached word and being led in music and worship.”

The church's office bearers and the Rev White were united in spirit to make a difference to the church and inwardly they all knew what had to be done. Sandyford must become a powerful witness to Christ, it must be welcoming, it must shout out good news and it must show that the gospel is a gift not a request. More important, it must use its space better so that it declares God's church as a family and that God's church gathers around the word.

The plans were bold, even revolutionary and the congregation accepted them wholeheartedly. They realised that even though some aspects were far from traditional, even unchurchlike, the only way forward was to see an end to the dark, Victorian environment with its fixed pews and pulpit and in their place a church that really was the people. Rows of rigid pews were taken out and an arrangement of seating was installed that allowed flexibility and better use of the space when necessary.

Today, the contractor has finished his job and the congregation's patience has been rewarded. This time the difference is quite spectacular. Sandyford has been restructured to fit with modern patterns of worship. Within its kingdom are areas for fellowship and meetings, a new kitchen, toilets and access for disabled persons to the sanctuary and other parts of the church.

To get to this point did not happen overnight and many, many, meetings were held. Prior to any work starting there was extensive consultation with CRGP Limited who had been involved in the first phase and were now being retained to provide architectural, quantity surveying and planning supervision for phase 2. Beneficial to the meetings' fluid progress was the presence of John Nicolson and Roger Fleming of CRGP who are enormously experienced in ecclesiastical work. As elders of their churches they also brought a special and unique strength and understanding to the meetings. Those involved in the discussion included members of the church board, the committee on artistic matters from the Church of Scotland and the local planning department.

When the final scheme was completed it was presented to members of the congregation through specially prepared brochures and computer generated three-dimensional imagery that effectively illustrated exactly how the church would look after the refurbishment.

The pulpit is still in the church but it is merely a symbol of days past, C. Peter White conducts the service from the same level as the congregation.

“Preaching establishes a meeting of minds between God, preacher and people and the closer and more direct and less impeded that is the more true to the gospel it is,” he says. “Our parish is almost entirely made up of young professional people and students. We want them to realise that we have changed our traditional setting and that a modern young woman or man will feel at home in this place. Those were the dynamics that were driving all of the prayer and discussion.” Having seats that can be moved certainly offers the flexibility to create space so that children and praise groups can be seen, heard and made to feel part of the church. For churchgoers the atmosphere is quite different, there's more space, it is more comfortable and there is a new fellowship area where worshippers can have a chat before the service and a cup of tea or coffee after it.

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One feature that has been given a new lease of life is the church's “wedding doors”. They are typical large, wooden church doors; when they are closed they are as solid as a rock, however, when open the cold draughts made life miserable for worshippers. Consequently they were never used and it may have appeared that this church did not open, however, the installation of a glass lobby immediately through the door has had the effect of keeping the church “open” while preventing cold draughts penetrating the sanctuary. One dividend is that the church's magnificent stained glass windows reveal their glory when they reflect on the glass. It is quite an uplifting experience for anyone coming into the church.

The church is, to say the least, exceptionally active in raising the profile of Christ the Saviour to those in its parish. On a Monday it has an international students' café and a primary three to seven club with a Bible story on a Thursday. Its new facilities have stimulated fresh ideas and on Wednesday morning the church is open for breakfast or for people to go for a chat with those on duty or to simply have a quiet period for reflection in the new sanctuary area. At the start of the new university term, 150 students were given lunch as well as various friendship teas.

Sandyford works hard in the parish to bring people to Christ and it regularly does a leaflet drop that informs about church activities as well as offering a free video about the life of Christ to every house in the area. The church has also instituted public lectures with subjects that are intended to appeal to the large numbers of young professionals on its doorstep. Recent topics were Has Science Buried God?, Spirituality and The World is Not Enough which was an exploration of the difference between cash capital and social capital (the assets of good relationships, family friendships and doing some good).

The cost of the refurbishment at Sandyford was in the region of £1m and the money for the project is being financed through various channels. Direct grants amounted to £20K, one-off legacies accounted for a further £150K, which left the congregation to fund the remainder, around £800K. Over two years the congregation has given a remarkable £550K and the trustees of the Church of Scotland have given a loan at a “kind” percentage.

The decision to go ahead with the plans was a brave one for the congregation. They appeared to have put a tremendous debt burden around their neck, however, in two years they have given gladly and willingly. Sandyford's congregation offers no excuses for giving to Jesus because their transformed building has served as yet another reminder of God's immense faithfulness to them as well as reflecting His gift of salvation available to all.

