

Poole Methodists – Good Practice Story

Background

The structure and mission of the Methodist churches in central Poole was reviewed over 10 years ago. There were five churches within 2-3 miles of each other, some with congregations of 40-60; others smaller. Congregations generally had an elderly age range. While churches were undertaking local activities, the profile of the Methodist Church in Poole was relatively low.



Discussion across the circuit over several years resulted in a decision to go for radical change. Congregations were to come together in one of the churches, located on the central shopping street in Poole, which had a small congregation (c. 25) and required substantial refurbishment. The other four churches were to close, with resources from the sale used to support (with other funds raised) a substantial rebuild of the central church, costing over £4m. (The project might have been self-financing through church sales, but the financial crash of 2008 reduced land prices in the area).

Redevelopment of the central church was favoured for various reasons, including:

- its potential for **mission**, given the substantial numbers of people passing the church each day, and its central position in the town;
- the potential to become a community hub serving the needs of the local area, which included the most deprived areas of Poole, in partnership with the voluntary sector;
- the greater likelihood that a site with high footfall would create a self-financing hub; and
- the opportunity to enhance the profile and impact of the Methodist Church in the life of Poole.

The plans were initially developed by a large redevelopment group, which was then tightened up and split into three streams, each with a project leader – building (the physical development); finance (fund raising); and people (including building partnerships with the third sector). The voluntary sector were involved from the start of the project; working with the Council for Voluntary Services in Poole, the particularly pressing needs of the local area were identified and formal partnerships established with community groups who might use the building;

Timescale and phasing

Remodelling of High Street Methodist Church and its rear halls into The Spire community hub took almost 7 years, although building work did not happen continuously throughout this period. There were 5 main periods of work:

Summer 2012 – Exploratory works to determine if the old church building was sound enough to be redeveloped. By this time the 5 congregations had joined together into “Poole Methodists” and were worshipping at the other larger churches which were yet to be sold.

Summer 2013 – Re-roofing & high level stone works – This was brought forward into phase 1 to prevent internal water damage (highlighted by the exploratory works) becoming too great. Poole Methodists retained a presence on site, using the old rear hall to trial a volunteer run Saturday cafe.

2014 – Phase 1 – During phase 1 the old building was completely stripped out, new ground and first floors were created and the lower section of the frontage completely rebuilt to allow in much more light with new arched glass doors and windows. Inside, the cafe space, chapel and offices were created and fitted out. The Saturday cafe and other groups continued in the old hall at the rear during the build. The church continued to worship at the other remaining site.



2015 – Phase 2 – Poole Methodists secured “bridging loans” from 2 neighbouring Circuits which allowed the value of the remaining site to be used for phase 2 whilst still using it for worship. During phase 2 the original rear halls were demolished and the new annex and linking foyer constructed. The ground floor of the annex was fitted out but the upstairs of both the annex and church buildings were left as weather proof shells due to lack of funds. All through the phase 2 build, the cafe and 3 rooms were used by various community groups.

Once phase 2 was complete Poole Methodists moved all its activities to The Spire and operated from the ground floor only. The remaining other site was sold and the loans repaid. About half of the twenty community partners commenced activities in the building.

2018 – Phase 3 – The upstairs shell was insulated, lined, decorated and fitted out, including installation of several staircases and a lift. Activities on the ground floor continued with only minimal disruption during the phase 3 build. Following the completion of the building works, the upstairs opened to the public in March 2019.

Budget & Savings

In June 2013 Quantity Surveyors estimated the total project cost as £4.376 million. In August 2013 we received contractor quotes for the works which would have given a total project cost of £5.85 million.

The actual project costs were:

Exploratory works	£27,000
Re-roofing works	£136,000
Professional fees	£596,000
Phase 1	£1,414,000
Phase 2	£1,145,000
Phase 3	£967,000
TOTAL	£4,285,000

Costs were held to just under the original budget, despite the project taking roughly 5 years longer than anticipated! This was done by reviewing every single item prior to the start of each phase and working with the architects (The Intelligent Design Centre) and contractors to find more cost effective solutions. At one end of the scale this involved extensive external alterations to the new annex, requiring changes to the planning permission and a modified design. At the other end of the scale, it involved things like changing from stainless steel to aluminium door handles.

Although the phasing inevitably meant that contractors were on site for longer, this was more than compensated for that by having the time to design-in savings learnt from the earlier phases into the later phases.

Fundraising

The money for the project was raised from a variety of sources:

Poole Methodist property sales	£2,150,000
Existing bequests	£193,000
Internal fundraising (sales, events, etc)	£261,000
Sale of other Circuit properties (a closed village church and a manse)	£645,000
Connexional grants	£200,000
District grants	£143,000
Circuit grants	£200,000
Methodist related grant awarding trusts	£62,000
National grant awarding trusts	£308,000
Local grant awarding trusts	£123,000
TOTAL	£4,285,000

60% of the money came from Poole Methodists' original assets plus its own traditional fundraising activities. The Project Team supported even the smallest of congregational fundraising schemes, cementing, the belief that everyone could help. The rest was secured by applying for Methodist grants at all levels, persuading the Circuit to divert

sale monies of some other property sales to the project, and writing numerous grant applications to trusts. Another advantage with phasing the project was that when applying for grants for later phases it was possible to say, 'come and see what we're already doing and how your money will improve it.' Every single trust who visited once part of the building was in operation donated to the project.

The Spire in operation

In a typical week six months after opening phase 3 (phase 1 having been open 4 years and phase 2, 3 years) the building was used by over 30 separate community and church groups with over 60 booked sessions. Church led activities included an ecumenical daily 'shoppers' service', various weekly children's activities and an adults' art group. Community activities included an eye screening clinic, exercise classes, slimming, and musical theatre. Including cafe customers, the estimated weekly footfall was roughly 1750 person-visits and expected to increase to over 2000 in time.

Room bookings and maintenance are overseen by a Centre Administrator whilst the Cafe is run by a mixture of paid staff and volunteers. A not-for-profit management company was set up to operate the centre on behalf of the Poole Methodists church council.



Learning from this process

There are several key learning points which could be of interest to church communities considering their future mission, including (but not limited to) building projects:

- Churches/circuits considering new futures and missions might draw encouragement and learning from Poole's approach to engagement – including difficulties faced in getting initial involvement from congregations. The development of a clear sense of mission and values, including their presence and impact in the Poole community, appears to have been crucial in achieving and maintaining commitment. Imagination and leadership from the original Circuit superintendent also appears to have been important.
- Project planning and delivery, using focused streams led by key individuals. This restriction of the size of the core team, and delegation of decisions to them, seems to be a common theme in successful building and renewal projects and well worth emphasising. Also important was frequent communication with the congregation by the Project Team – monthly updates in the church magazine, presentations to Church Council, and open meetings with Q&A sessions seemed to help church members to own the project and support it.
- The importance of professional skills in the project team and of maintaining good relations with constructors, architect and quantity surveyor. Having someone in the project team who could be a 'cost savings champion' and was capable of challenging and reducing the cost of expensive plans at a macro-level (e.g. a glass roof which did

not contribute to mission) or more detailed aspects (e.g. light or door fittings) proved especially important in helping to bring budgets down.

- As seen here, phasing of projects does not necessarily increase costs and can create several other benefits:
 - Allowing a continuous presence on the site.
 - Learning to manage a larger / different property in small steps.
 - Realising goals of the project sooner which in turn leads to...
 - Easier fundraising due to demonstrable successes in completed phases.
- The partnership with the voluntary sector to produce a 'community hub' appears to have been an innovative and successful approach, going well beyond simply providing a community space which can be rented. While the precise format of the partnership might not be appropriate for all projects, it could be replicated elsewhere, and the approach of engaging from the start with the local voluntary sector to establish needs and potential cooperation could be adopted widely.
- Creating links between groups enables the whole to become greater than the sum of its parts. Examples at The Spire are:
 - a council funded brain injury group grows vegetables, makes soup in a food skills course which is then sold in the cafe.
 - Job skills groups use the cafe for work placements.
 - A trust which funds local charities uses a room as their office enabling close contact with those they fund.
- The church's own work as a resource/drop-in for young parents and school children, including the Story Café, could be replicated by other churches located near to schools.
- Development of the town centre mission, including partnerships with other churches (e.g. in the daily service). Sharing experiences with other churches or chaplaincies located in city/town centres could be helpful (there are parallels with the work at the New Room in Bristol).
- Engagement with local government, the NHS, etc, not only widens the possibilities of building usage but can also make planning applications easier when councillors are aware of the community benefits of a project.
- Whilst not suitable in every case, the setting up of a not-for-profit management company to operate the property on behalf of the church can give the following advantages:
 - Enables people from the wider community with professional skills and similar values to sit on the voluntary management board in a way which would not be possible with a church 'property committee'.
 - Avoids the church council being constantly bogged down with property issues.
 - Protects church trustees from financial effects if, say, a cafe were to fail.