

St John's Northgate Methodist Church, Gloucester

This is based on a handout and presentation given by Ann Dunning at the MCCN Meeting in Gloucester on 14th November 2007



Gloucester is a relatively small city but with many of the issues and problems which face larger cities. It has a population of 113,200

- 92% white European
- 5% Black and Asian
- 2% Mixed race
- 1% Chinese and other ethnic origins

The city has some of the most deprived wards in country with 23% of adults on some form of benefit.

St John's Northgate is a historic building, built in 1732, though it is

possible that a Saxon church was the first of several on site. The church has long-standing association in the life of the city. Evidence of links to the city and beyond are found in memorials to participants in the Civil War, to tradespeople and artisans, and with pioneers of the Sunday School Movement.

In 1972, following sale of nearby Methodist building, St John's became the home of the Methodist congregation, initially in a Sharing Agreement with Anglican congregation but eventually the Church of England found that it no longer needed the building and the Methodist congregation has had sole use and sole responsibility since 1994.

By early 1990s it became necessary to review Church's role and ask whether what was the future for the church in the city centre? Wide-ranging discussion and consultation resulted in a Mission Statement and a commitment to remain and to witness and to work in the city centre and with some optimism the church set about improving and adapting buildings for mission.

The Mission Statement was later summed up in the single statement:

The purpose of our Church is to proclaim our Christian faith through worship, fellowship, service and witness in the City Centre.

The 21st century has present increasing challenges to the gathered (and ageing) congregation. St John's has no ordained or lay staff who have the church as their sole responsibility. The reduction in church membership has limited resources both financial and human. At present the membership at St John's is 777 out of a circuit total of 558.

The church is a listed building whose history and relics attract tourists and other visitors. This can lead to tensions between the expectations of such visitors and the church's work in meeting the needs of people such as the homeless. Also the letting of



THE MISSION FOR ST JOHN'S

1. To promote an ecumenical approach to city centre work and, in partnership with other city centre Churches, provide chaplaincy to the colleges, offices, stores.
2. To respond to the needs of the many people who gravitate to the city centre particularly the elderly, the lonely, the homeless and the hungry.
3. To maintain in the centre of Gloucester a place for Methodist worship in a comfortable and attractive building.
4. To recognise the history of the church building as one of its attractions and to exploit the interest which its history creates.
5. To be open and welcoming to visitors and tourists who look for a place of Methodist worship in the city centre.
6. To provide worship, nurture and pastoral care for the present membership.
7. To train and encourage members in house group evangelism and so build up the congregation.
8. Provide space in the city centre where visitors, shoppers and workers can drop in and rest, find refreshment and the opportunity for contact with the worship, witness, work and ministry of the church.
9. To offer a more suitable space for exhibitions, concerts, conferences, festivals, dramatic performances, meetings and Christian mission events.
10. To provide a facility for the promotion of Christian music, literature, gifts and goods.

rooms brings in income but can also conflict with exploiting opportunities to be innovative.

Working ecumenically presents difficulties. There is a diminishing and fragmented scene in the traditional church, and an ever-changing scene in the 'wider' church (house churches). Being a cathedral city often means that other city centre churches are overshadowed

There are barriers which impede outreach work – the general fear of crime leads to city centre residents being isolated and less accessible living in apartments and flats behind security systems. The establishment of civic links is frustrated as the civic priorities and policies changing in response to changes in local politics. The fact that many retail and commercial organisations are managed corporately means that local staff cannot make decision about local initiatives. Charity collections at Tesco are organised from headquarters and Asda in Gloucester has its own chaplain appointed centrally and who apparently has no remit to build local contacts or to work ecumenically.

This does not mean that there is nothing that can be done. The church is **open** for visitors, shoppers, people seeking contact with 'the church' and for those in need. Church building open during the week for a limited number of hours. Hospitality is offered through coffee mornings in Northgate Hall and the church the Church is available to help people mark the milestones of life – birth, marriage and death.

The **premises are available** for community use: WI Country Market; concerts by young performers; meetings and debates; Music Festival recitals; art exhibitions; slimming groups.

It is our calling to **be the Church** in the city centre. St John's works with charities – collecting on the street for Christian Aid, collecting food for the Food Bank where those in desperate need can get enough food for three days – campaigns alongside others – the Peace Vigil and the Climate Change March – and is a visible presence at community events such as Medieval Fair and the Fair Trade stall in the Farmers' Market.

The future continues to present issues:

- a **Gloucestershire** county-wide circuit for 2008?
- Major **redevelopments** planned for Gloucester City – retail, business, residential, ...
- The need to work in **partnership** with others – What about the Methodist-Anglican covenant?



Sword stands once mounted on the end of pews

