

*Estates Evangelism is one of nine **Renewal and Reform** workstreams. Our estates projects are working toward a thriving, growing, loving church on every significant social housing estate in the country – through new patterns of ministry, sharing good practice and encouraging leaders.*

Built in the 1930s for the Whitehawk Estate, St Cuthman's Church is an unassuming building on the main road. It is at the heart of an estate where 67% of properties are socially rented.

When St Cuthman's vicar retired in 2010, closure was a real possibility. The church hadn't paid a diocesan contribution for some time, and the congregation was a declining population.



But Jan Nowak, the churchwarden at the time, had other ideas. She contacted St Peter's Brighton, itself a church plant, to see if they were willing to partner with St Cuthman's.

'I can only say it was a God call,' she says, sitting steadily on a low wall outside the church. 'I made an appointment with Archie [the vicar at St Peter's].

'Archie stopped in his tracks when we told him what we wanted. He said, "This is an answer to our prayers." He wanted to be involved at Whitehawk with the estate.'

'Around twenty people from St Peter's committed to a year of worshipping here,' says Richard Merrick, who led the original team. 'St Cuthman's didn't fit the usual criteria for a plant from St Peter's, but we came anyway. We had a strong sense of need to have a long-term presence.

'My wife and I initially headed the team up, basically because we were willing. Quite quickly we realised that it was too much. I said to Archie that it wasn't sustainable, that we would need someone full time. That's when Steve came on board.'



Steve Tennant, the curate and current incumbent at St Cuthman's, is open and friendly. Like the church, he is unassuming: dressed in a polo shirt, denim shorts and sandals, he could easily be on holiday. His relaxed approach has yielded excellent results, with 50 local children attending the Kidz Klub and a further 135 adults and children in attendance on a Sunday.

'St Peter's has a number of plants,' he says. "It has 2 in the city – us and St Matthias Fireways. As a staff team we meet monthly with their senior staff team to talk about where our ministries can complement each other. They help financially. They're very supportive.'

But it hasn't always been smooth sailing.

'When I arrived at St Cuthman's, my first job was to clear the church," says Jan. "It looked like a jumble sale. There were broken chairs, torn books and old toys everywhere. I said to the congregation, "If there's anything you want, take it in 2 weeks or it'll be gone." I took everything to the tip. The church got a bit clearer, and I got new equipment for the church by scrounging.

'When the team from St Peter's came, everything was removed without a word. I went upstairs and saw that everything had been cleared from the cupboards. I raised my voice. I banged my fist on the countertop. I think Richard tried to calm me down. Richard is one of my best friends now.



‘Richard and I went around the church talking about what to get rid of. Some things were easy, like plants. But he wanted to get rid of the stations of the cross. I put my foot down. I use these in life situations for teaching.

‘It was very much, “We’re here now. We’re going to do it our way.” That’s how it seemed. But it didn’t take long for me to realise that they’d only done what I’d done five years earlier. I hadn’t asked anyone. I’d cleared everything out. So it has been a learning experience. Even so, it felt like everything we’d built up over five years was discarded. I’m not saying that’s how it was, but that’s how it felt.’

But Jan adds, ‘Personally I think it’s absolutely right for Whitehawk. I’m closer to 80 than to 70 now. I’m stepping back. I love what’s going on, but now I don’t have to be involved with it all.’

And as Ian steps back, others have stepped in. Melanie Stewart, who lived on the estate until recently, runs the wellbeing group, has led eight



'I started coming to St Cuthman's over three years ago. My neighbour was doing the jumble sale and asked if I wanted to come. At first I was involved with the set up. I became more involved until I was running it, but I still wasn't going to the church.

'One day someone suggested that I come to a service. I plucked up the courage and went. I had a funny feeling during the service and said so to the lady next to me. She said, "That's the Holy Spirit!"

'I lost a baby and I've lost two husbands. I've suffered abuse. When I felt the Holy Spirit in church that day, I thought, "I know this feeling." I could see all of the times I'd felt the Holy Spirit like a video in my mind. I could feel God was with me all those times when things were bad. Now I've got that Holy Spirit feeling and I know that God is with me.

'I feel peace at last in my life. I feel at home, at peace. If I can just share that with people to turn their lives around, to help them, then I hope I've done a little bit of good.'

*Find out more about **Estates Evangelism** as part of the Church of England's **Renewal and Reform programme**, aimed at creating a growing Church for all people and for all places.*



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