

*Estates Evangelism, one of ten Renewal and Reform workstreams, is 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.*

‘Anarchy, drug abuse and financial problems.’ These are the challenges facing the Lion Farm Estate in Birmingham according to Jill MacDonald,



St James was part of this, with broken windows and doors, graffiti daubed on its walls. Its grilled windows and closed door gave the impression that the place was shut. And it nearly was. By 2011, the congregation had dwindled to just 23 people. The church struggled to keep a minister.

Then, Jill MacDonald was asked to be minister-in-charge. She'd been attending the church for 37 years and knew the people and the area well.

The glamorous 70-year-old with purple hair and a flair for interior design decided to take the church on. With less than £1,000 in the church coffers, she applied for grants and loans, and has seen the church redecorated. But she denies that the purple wall in the sanctuary was done to match her hair.

‘People thought that the place was shut for years,’ she says. ‘The grass wasn’t mowed. The glass in the doors had been broken so many times that they were boarded up. The windows were opaque glass with wire over them. However much we cleaned, it looked grotty. It was vile.’

That’s all changed. With redecoration and a welcome sign outside, the atmosphere has changed inside.

‘Painting the church has made such a difference,’ says Jill. ‘The whole feel of the place lifted people’s spirits. I’ve even put pink chandeliers in the toilets, and you don’t see that often. They’re a real talking point.’



‘Now, we have a friendly face and there are people coming in. The hall is booked every night. We will never be a massive, humungous church, but we have grown.’

One of those who’s found a warm welcome at the cheerfully decorated church is 55-year-old Barbara Hunt. After a difficult childhood, she found comfort in alcohol and gambling as an adult. When she walked through the doors of St James she was, Jill recalls, ‘frightening’ dressed from head-to-toe in black, with long black hair and long, black nails.



sely cropped, and she is smiling.



‘My family are worse than you can dream,’ she says. ‘People at St James opened up their arms to me, and it was “wow!” This is my family. This is where I’m happy. I’m not scared any more.

‘I don’t need the booze now. I thought I was nothing, but I’m as important to God as the next person.’

Barbara is not the only one to be impacted by the friendly welcome at St James. There are now four regular events each week at the church, including a prayer group on a Friday and tea and coffee on a Tuesday. The church hall, painted in bright colours, is booked every night of the



Canon Andy Delmege, Urban Estates Missioner for the Birmingham Diocese, says, ‘It’s really turned around from being on its last legs to flourishing.

‘The estates are one of the more socially and economically challenged part of the country and if we are not present in vital ways in the estates, then we have lost the gospel of Jesus’ heart for people in situations in poverty, which was so much at the heart of his life and message.’

It is vital, he says, that people on estates such as Lion Farm, realise their worth in Christ. ‘Everybody is our sister and brother,’ he says, ‘especially those who are in more challenging situations. So it is important that the church is there, helping people.’



How does he feel about what’s happened at Lion Farm? ‘It’s absolutely wonderful,’ he says, smiling broadly. ‘Jill is amazing.’

Back at St James, Jill is planning for the future, redecorating the vestry, hoping to see weddings take place in the once-forlorn church. And she’s got a message for other churches on Britain’s estates: ‘Step out in faith,’ she says.



*Learn more about estates evangelism as part of Renewal and Reform, aimed at creating a growing Church for all people and in all places.*

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