

The views do not necessarily represent the views of the Archbishops' or the



This is Wesley Court, a stunning building in breath-taking surroundings. Located in the town of Ambleside in the Lake District, it's a block of social housing like few others. Up until twenty years ago, the building was known as Ambleside Methodist Chapel.

Not only is Wesley Court picturesque, it's also badly needed. Ambleside is beautiful. So beautiful, in fact, that there is a real shortage of housing for local people – holiday homes abound, and new development is restricted to conserve the area. The price of existing housing is driven up by the holiday market, meaning that local people can't afford to stay in the area. Wesley Court contains fourteen households who would otherwise be forced to leave. In a small community like this, every departure makes a difference.

But this isn't the story of a closed church: Ambleside Methodist Church is still very much alive. This is the story of a small, determined congregation who decided to help address the issues affecting their town.

Two decades ago, the issue of housing in the Lake District was already systemic, and the congregation of Ambleside Methodist Church knew it. There was another problem faced by Ambleside, though. There was a lack of community space in the area. The Church of England church, St Mary's, had been thinking about this issue, but they didn't have the £1 million required to build a new community centre.

'We knew the needs of the area', says John Biggs, a member of the Methodist church. With a small congregation, they didn't need their large chapel, and they realised that they could make do with one of the rooms in the new community centre. They decided to kill two birds with one stone: by selling their building to a housing association, they were able to donate £470,000 to plug the gap in funding for the new community centre, while providing affordable housing for those in need. As John put it, 'this was the most useful way to use it.'

The inhabitants of Wesley Court – including an active member of the Methodist church – are able to remain part of the town's life. The housing association were sensitive to the heritage of the building, incorporating its beautiful stained glass into the accommodation. Meanwhile, the new community centre is fulfilling a need for a community hub in the area. The community 'has come to "own" it', says John, and its use 'has extended well beyond our original imagining'. They are now hosting youth clubs, work with older people and weekly free lunches. The Methodists regularly worship in the community centre and find it a good space. The centre is also currently central in the response to coronavirus – distributing eighty free meals a day, running an enlarged food bank, and distributing a weekly newsletter to the self-isolated to give details of what facilities are open in the local area.



The new community centre – known as Ambleside Parish Centre

In these strange times, the way churches use our buildings is changing. We're realising that a church is so much more than bricks and mortar. Selling off buildings isn't the answer in many situations, but this is a time to think about what's key to our mission – what do we have, and how can we best use it? This is exactly the sort of reflection on our church property that the Archbishop of Canterbury's Housing Commission is encouraging. It might be scary, but looking back on the success in Ambleside shows that it can work in the long run. As the congregation said at the time 'We praise Him for all that is past and trust Him for all that's to come.'

It also demonstrates the benefits of working together. None of this could have been achieved by one denomination alone. But, this couldn't have happened without first building trust between the two churches. Why not reach out to other churches in your area to ask how you can work together? Building close ties is key to helping our community right now, and you never know what it could lead to.

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