



St. Giles is a Grade II* building, unique for its medieval western apse.

The church was ‘restored’ in 1882 when a north aisle with crypt beneath was added, as was a vestry and bell tower.

The parish is very small – only some 290 people – and is scattered over quite a wide area.

Introduction

The local school closed in 1924 and the village shop closed in 1986, leaving the village without any facilities. The little village hall (previously a Victorian cowshed!) is now thriving and hosts a nursery school during the day.

Most of the villagers work outside the village or are now retired. The vision behind the project was to make the church more accessible to people, to provide a service for the village, and to enable parishioners to get to know other people in the community.

One of the churchwardens Mrs Allen entered a competition in the ‘Essex Matters’ magazine which asked “What would you do for your community if you had £10,000?” Her entry suggested extending the use of the church to incorporate a small village shop. This entry was one of the winners.

She has kindly answered the following questions about the project to help other parishes considering a similar approach to extending the use of their church building.

Who were your main partners in developing and implementing this project?

Essex County Council, The Diocesan Advisory Committee, The Rural Community Council of Essex and our Parish Council.

What was the total cost of the project?

£10,000





What was the funding strategy?

The money was given to set up the project – building the shelving, improving lighting, providing signage etc. Once all the capital bills were paid, the remainder of the money was handed over for the running of the project.

How long did it take from start to finish - from initial proposal to the building being completed and opened?

18 (very long!) months. Although it was only requesting the change of use of the vestry from one facility to another, and no actual building work was necessary.

What lessons were learnt? What would you have done differently?

I probably wouldn't have entered in the first place! No, seriously, I would have thought through the staffing problems more carefully as the onus of keeping the venture going falls very heavily onto one person – me. I would also have applied for all the permissions at the same time – Church and Local Council – as each one took a some time to approve the venture.

However, in reality that probably wouldn't have done any good because the Council wouldn't entertain the idea without the permission of the Church being given first.



Inside the Heavenly supplies shop

Successes:

The project, even if it were to fold now, has been a great success in that it has achieved its aim - i.e. getting people in the village to know each other, and to work together for a common cause. As one of the volunteers has young children, they come with her when she does her stint in the shop, and she





has said that being in the church has been wonderful for her as she can give her children 'quality time' that she could not do at home as she would be distracted by household duties. The children also are encouraged to 'help' with working out how much change should be given – invaluable for maths!

Has there been an increase in footfall?

Yes, there has. We also now have a new member of the congregation, who has also joined the choir, and others have shown great interest in coming to services so that has been a very positive outcome. We now have 'regulars' who stop by on a given day, have a cup of tea and a chat with us, buy a few bits and pieces and go on their way again.

It has also meant that people who would not normally come into a church, for whatever reason, feel able to do so because they are coming to look at the shop. Once they are there, most people take a good look round and ask questions. It is a slow process, but it enables people to feel comfortable about coming into the building without fear of being 'preached at' as one visitor said! One of the 'draws' of the shop is its name – 'Heavenly Supplies' – as this intrigues people enough to get them to come in and see what its all about!

To what degree has this project contributed to the sustainability of the building itself?

Some who have come into the building have now become 'Friends' of St. Giles', which is wonderful. Having seen inside the building (which sadly under the terms of our insurance has to be kept locked when not in use) many people are keen that it should be kept for future generations.

Has there been an increase in income?

Not really, as the shop itself is a non-profit making venture, purely as a service to the village, but we have seen an increase in the number of people attending events in the church, so in a roundabout way, yes there has been.

What management structures are in place for the running of the building?

The Churchwardens are responsible for the maintenance of the building itself, and the incumbent, in consultation with the Parochial Church Council, decides on what services will be held. As the shop venture was approved by the PCC they are kept informed of progress at all times.

To what degree has this project contributed to the life of the church as church?

As mentioned earlier, we now have a new member of the congregation, who has also joined the choir. It has also meant that those who do not normally come to church now feel that they have 'ownership' of the building as part of their community.

We hope that they will feel able at some future date to come into the worshipping community as well, but we certainly won't be pushing for that.





Sustainability of the Project: how are you looking to sustain what you have achieved in the long term?

The project has an initial 'licence' of 18 months from when it was officially opened (March 2009) so after a year we will be looking at whether it is sustainable and how/if it can be improved. Currently the shop is only open two mornings during the week (Monday and Wednesday) and after the service on Sundays.

We have also been open on Thursday evenings, but this has not been so well supported, and we may well discontinue this in the New Year. We will be looking to see if we can open every morning so that people know it is always open, but that will depend on whether we can get more people to become volunteers, and obviously approval from the PCC.

Any future plans for the building?

One of the drawbacks of the church being so old is that it has no 'facilities'. Running the shop has highlighted the very great need for toilet and kitchen facilities. Currently the shop is housed in the vestry, and some in the church feel we should build a church hall, and move it into that.

Personally I feel that the whole charm of the project is that it is in the church itself, and moving it outside the main building will mean that fewer people might go into the church and realise what a wonderful building it is. We have applied for a Feasibility Study to see what could be achieved in the way of getting these very necessary facilities, but it will certainly not happen for at least two years.

