

## A transformed space for a growing city

### Now is the time!

Nehemiah, the King's food taster, in exile in Babylon, heard on the grapevine that the walls of Jerusalem had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The City lay undefended. Nehemiah, distressed, hit the ground kneeling, he prayed his socks off. And here's the thing.... he did that for four months. Miraculously, his King, Artaxerxes, gave him food, guards and safe passage back to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem. It's been a long journey – but Nehemiah is a man of action and so he hits the ground kneeling again – this time for three days – and then and only then – alone on his horse – he surveys the damage. He calls the leaders and priests in Jerusalem together and declares the walls unfit for purpose. But he tells them that God's gracious hand is upon the task of putting things right. Trusting in God, everyone in Jerusalem unites for the work – the whole community. There is an inevitability about their success.

So what's all this got to do with us at St Mary's? After all, our mission doesn't talk of bricks and mortar – it's all about people. We are called to **engage** with our community; to **grow** new disciples of Jesus Christ, and **deepen** our relationship with God.

The mission of St Mary's is all about people, but our building plays a vital part in our mission – and in my view if Nehemiah were here today – he would be taking the wardens aside and declaring our building is not fit for purpose.

The present building was dedicated by Bishop Eustace in the 13th Century in order to offer the good news of Jesus to the people of Ely and its surrounds.

But then came the Victorians. Now I have been delighted to live in beautiful Victorian houses for much of my life, and my wonderful grandparents were models of that society, but when the Victorians refurnished this glorious space in 1876 – probably unintentionally – they locked it down for a “Sunday use only” pattern. So for much of the past 141 years, St Mary's has been in use for less than 8 hours a week, and therefore, unusable for 104 hours per week. That's in use for a total of 59,000 hours and redundant for 763,000 hours. Compare that with a space like the Cathedral up the road which is open and usable every morning, afternoon and evening.

And what's more the Victoria County History, even then, described the new furniture, the pews, as "modern and mediocre".

I believe that now is the time to transform the building internally for a growing city – to fashion an open, beautiful and functional St Mary's.

We could just do nothing of course, with the danger that, along with many Victorian furnished churches up and down the country, we become a white elephant – practically redundant, vulnerable to decline, irrelevant to the very community we are supposed to serve. I believe it would be grossly negligent of me to let us continue to sleep walk towards that.

But the alternative is a transformed building, a hospitable space, from which we can accomplish Jesus' mission for our lives – to make disciples!

A long time before I got here others had felt this call; just like Nehemiah there have been prophets before us; maybe the time hasn't been right. But **now is the time!**

- By 2025, the parish we serve will grow by 10,000 to 30,000. **Now is the time!**
- Our 50 Sunday children are housed in the Church Rooms, the Vicarage office, Nero's, a cluttered vestry and the crèche in a damp tower room. **Now is the time!**
- Let's offer the 1,500 people who gather each year for Sunday afternoon Christenings better hospitality, visibility and possibilities to participate – for confirmations too. **Now is the time!**
- Let's rise to Bishop Stephen's challenge that St Mary's becomes a resource hub for our team villages, for the market towns of the Ely Diocese, and the region, providing learning and training facilities. **Now is the time!**
- Let's seize the opportunities to host events and conferences – partnering with faith organisations like New Wine, Soul Survivor, Spring Harvest, Willow Creek UK and secular partners like local businesses, and organisations, and so on. **Now is the time!**
- Let's rise to the challenge of providing admin space for the Ely Team. With seven ministers, three administrators, ten congregations and 26,000 parishioners currently served by a dingy office designed to accommodate two people. **Now is the time!**
- Let's offer decent counselling and office space as the host church for CAP – Christians Against Poverty – and for Cruse Counselling and other partners. **Now is the time!**

- Let's acknowledge that the church rooms are at capacity during the week, with new requests from community groups all the time – let's make the nave available for them. **Now is the time!**
- Let's step up to become a centre of musical and performing arts in Ely. We have great acoustics – but groups continually struggle to adapt to the restrictions of our fixed furniture – some are going elsewhere. **Now is the time** to make this the venue for our City!
- Let's host our life skills courses: parenting, marriage, relationships, workplace, CAP money. and Alpha Courses in a purpose-built environment. The demand is growing from heads of our local schools and wedding couples for example. **Now is the time!**
- Let's create a transformed chancel for everyday worship – a beautiful, holy, functional space – that supports a rule of life. **Now is the time!**
- Let's improve access to allow our less mobile members and visitors to take part more fully. **Now is the time!**
- And whilst we are at it – our toilet facilities – where do I start? **Now is the time!**

There is a cost, of course. We will need to spend £1,500,000 (£1,200,000 still to raise!). We do need to be committed as a body of people – on our knees – with our wallets – with our time. We will be asking congregational members and others in the community who love St Mary's to pledge support, and we will be applying for grants.

Let's be generous and visible in the community. Let's fling the doors open. Let's create a building fit for a confident Church of England in the 21st Century, glorifying God, inclusive and welcoming.

Let's stand shoulder to shoulder "along the walls", as we transform this building for our generation, our children's generation and, our grandchildren's generation.

**Chris Hill**

For a fuller picture – visit [www.stmarysely.org](http://www.stmarysely.org) and listen to Chris' sermon from 9<sup>th</sup> July 2017

## **St Mary's Church Transformation Project**

### **Now is the Time!**

#### **How you can help**

- ❖ Please pray for the Parochial Church Council and all involved with making decisions about this project, that we follow God's guidance and direction.
- ❖ Please pray for a successful outcome of a meeting being held on July 14 with our Architects, the Diocesan Advisory Council and representatives of Historic England, The Victorian Society and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.
- ❖ We will be launching the first phase of an appeal for pledges of money during August. This will be to everyone who considers themselves to be a member of St Mary's Church and with the aim of raising £300,000. Please pray about whether and how you can respond.
- ❖ We need a few people with the following skills to join the project team:
  - Fundraising** – If you have experience and skills in this area – submitting successful grant applications for Lottery funding and to other grant making bodies, or successful appeals to the business community and the wider community, we would love to hear from you.
  - ❖ **Communication** – We need to enhance our methods of keeping everyone informed regularly on what is happening, progress of appeal and our needs by using the full range of opportunities available to us. If you have skills and experience with creating and maintaining websites or social media or general publicity or maintaining contact with press, TV and radio or writing newsletters, we would love to hear from you.
  - ❖ **Heritage** – St Mary's is a Grade 1 listed building dating back to around 1200. We would like to find out more about the building, what has happened in this place over the last 800 years and make that available to the wider community. If you have experience or knowledge of Heritage Management, or been involved in research of this type, we would love to hear from you.

**Please contact the Building Transformation Project Team leader,  
Derek Tye Tel: 01353 666883, email: derekftye@hotmail.com or the  
Church Office Tel: 01353 659550, if you can help.**