

Downderry Methodist Church – The Downderry Coastal Zone

Downderry Methodist Church in 2008 was sadly in a state of decline and had a core membership of about eight people, and half a dozen regular attenders. Leadership was provided by two people who led regular events such as Harvest Festival, but there continued to be low support.

Location

Downderry is 18 miles from Plymouth and between 10-12 miles from Torpoint, Saltash and Liskeard. The area is rural and hard to reach and has a population of about 1300 which includes 200 children under the age of 18. The population is growing. In housing and services it is within 8% of the UK's most deprived areas. Recent findings show 40% of workers in south-east Cornwall have less than the living wage. There are many second homes. There are few public buildings available and are fully booked. Public transport is poor and does not run in the evenings. There is no library, sports centre or cinema.

The Project

Subsequently in October 2010 five members of the Church voted to close the church which was supported by the Circuit Leadership Team, and the Church was closed. However the closure led to some dismay by groups who had for many years used the premises for social events and had celebrated worship at Christmas and on other occasions. They encouraged representations to be made to the Circuit for the building to be kept for the local community.

The building and grounds showed signs of age. The shrubs were overgrown, there was a hazardous pit outside where the old coal boiler had been removed and it was a struggle for those with mobility problems get up the steep gravel path. Inside the chapel, the rooms were extremely cluttered with various broken chairs and other bulky refuse hazards.



The Circuit agreed that the building could be used by the community, and that a group of four key experienced people in relevant fields such as bid writing, legal and bursary knowledge, together with the Minister, could form a Change-Making steering group. The Circuit would not ask for rent, but the Group must take on the running of the Methodist Chapel and pay all the day to day expenses. The co-ordinator for overseeing the project, now named the Downderry Coastal Zone, was Heather Blacker who was key in being instrumental in the success of the project.

The finances were kept in a healthy state by the Bursar, working with the grant seeker. £15,000 had been raised mostly from grants for capital works that have improved the fabric of the building, including a new heating system. The pews were taken out, old windows replaced, ceilings replaced and there were now three good sized rooms available to hire. With Transformation Cornwall's support funders were met and training was accessed through workshops. Consequently the project received a total of £23,570.40 from funders:

Viridor Credits, Cornwall Community Foundation (C100 Club, Benefiting Older People, Community Fund), Deviock Town and Parish Council, Cornwall Councillors Community Chest, Methodist Insurance, CRCC, and their own community fundraising efforts.

Some groups that previously used the Chapel continued to meet. There were new groups, some on an occasional and regular basis, came on board such as the Memory Cafe. The hiring income steadily increased which is main source of income to cover the basic running costs of the building.

Currently a new paved path and hand rail, replacing the gravel path, has been installed from funding obtained from Viridor and a recent survey showed that 135 people used the path during the week, with groups varying in size from 3-35 and age groups were represented from five months to 90. Another area of work in which Transformation Cornwall provided support was to the intergenerational sensory garden project which is a partnership between groups using the space; the Bread and Babes group (a parent



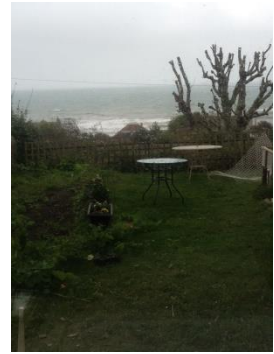
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and toddler group), the Memory Café and volunteers and the Methodist Chapel.

Current challenges

These include:

- Managing the growing level of demand for use of the building including an effective booking system, physically opening and closing the venue and ensuring the rooms are set up correctly for users. This equates to several hours each day which is currently done voluntarily. A paid caretaker/administrator is required, together with a website with online booking capabilities.
- Owing to the high usage of the building there is an urgent need for redecoration, changes to the kitchen, the addition of an extra toilet and increased storage. Funding for this capital work is required.



A proposed way forward

The Change-Making Group requests for formal rental agreement with the Methodist Circuit, on a peppercorn rent, guaranteeing use of the building for at least 5 years. Having this in place the group's research shows several grants that can be applied to pay for a part time worker and to do the necessary capital works.

The future

With the above resources in place, the Downderry Coastal Zone will take the next step of providing more and better social support to local people eg debt and employment advice and to support the most vulnerable, alongside the many and varied activities already underway. The Coastal Zone are always open to new ideas and try to accommodate all who wish to use their space, making Downderry Methodist Church a real heart of the community with many groups using their facilities throughout the week. They are an excellent example of a community driven church using local assets to ensure they are there to respond to their community and its needs.