

Sunday 12 March 2006: Lent 6.30pm Sermon Series: Building Community

Building a Live-in Community

Readings: Genesis 6. 9-end; Matthew 25. 31-46

Early on a cold winters morning about four weeks ago a number of people gathered outside this church on the Portico and then moved to what is now the first part of the building site in the process of redeveloping this and our associated buildings. Gathered together we praised God in hymn, psalm and prayer as we held a ground-breaking ceremony. We were joined by a Rabbi, the Lord Mayor of Westminster and other dignitaries and there was a sense of great excitement, there were even party poppers, that finally after years of planning, work to make this space fit for purpose in the 21st century had begun.

It was not quite like that when I closed down Earls Court YMCA, a hostel for young homeless people, to start building work on that place. One autumnal Friday the day I handed over the keys to the building firm, myself and others were frantically finding an alternative home for our last remaining residents to move to and putting them in taxis, to other projects as we said goodbye to them. Staff members were saying goodbye to one another as they ended their employment with YMCA and went their separate ways and in all the chaos we were selling curtains, and furniture or giving it away to other projects as once the builders moved in anything left would be trashed and thrown out. And in my chaos at 5.30pm I remembered to transfer the phone number so that on Monday I would be able to receive calls and work from a new office, I handed over the keys to the site manager and with sadness, gratitude and expectation all in one I left what had been a home, a place of work and a living community and the process to rebuild a new Live-in (g) Community began.

Two months later to the day I visited the site and was struck how cold it was, it was December, but it could have been July and it would still have been cold. The walls had disappeared, floors had gone and it took a few moments to re-orientate myself to as to where offices, bedrooms and kitchen had existed. The life of the place had gone and all that was left was rubble, dust and space and a hole in the roof letting a shaft of light pierce the darkness as well as the rain, all the way down to the basement. I could not wait to get out of there, as a place that had buzzed with life was now void and just an empty shell, but I held onto the promise that we would re-open and that we would live again and that kept me going.

In the account of Noah we hear God giving him strict instructions as to how he is to build his Ark. The dimensions are there and the purpose is clear as God decides that he will wipe the earth clean and start again. At times I wish we had had clear instructions as endless meetings and time was taken up ensuring that Architect, Local Authority and YMCA England, the landlord, were happy with how Earls Court YMCA was to be rebuilt. There are all sorts of rules in homes of multiple occupation, for example about how many doors a resident is allowed to go through to reach a kitchen. So we relied on the brains of people who through drawings and plans could work out how to utilise every inch of space and meet all the legal requirements as well as the aesthetics and other practicalities that we required. I am indebted to the way in which the Architect, Mechanical and Electrical Engineers and others thought around problems and incorporated my suggestions and those of ex- residents as to what might make a first class home for our new

residents and encourage community living. Our hostel is a home of second chance for many. We set about creating a place where young homeless people could live together in community and prepare for independent living. For many there needs to be a new start. For those who come from prison or who are subject to a tagging order, for those who are tested each week to see if they have been using drugs under a Drug Treatment and Testing Order and for those whose family have rejected them and asked them to leave. The key was to create a space where people from a variety of backgrounds could live together sharing some facilities and with support move to a new stage of their life journey. We were fortunate that the Housing Corporation funded the project and gave a £1.3 million pound grant to enable us to build 24 bedrooms, put in four kitchens where residents can learn to cook and eat together and allow some communal space for recreation and training. All this fits in well with the ethos of YMCA which wishes to build healthy people and communities in body mind and spirit.

The building work and process to prepare a new hostel took longer than it ought, made people redundant and made others like the Board of Management feel redundant. It was at times painful and I think that I have learnt a great deal about how attached we are to places and buildings that feature heavily in our lives, whether it be our home, work place or church. Everyone had a view on how the new building should be and wanted to express it and feel heard, and when the building was emptied and under redevelopment it felt at times, for those of us associated with it, that we were empty and being redeveloped too. It was a time of great opportunity but it did require a leap of faith to seize that opportunity when the hurdles appeared too high to jump over.

However after 18 months of work the keys to Earls Court YMCA were finally handed back to me on a glorious summer's day. What excitement there was as lorries arrived with beds, wardrobes and other furniture, as a new staff team took up their posts and all the key stake holders visited and admired the new home that we had created. We celebrated with a couple of bottles of champagne and that felt right as all those who had been involved in the process gathered to see what we had created. The community that had worked on this project needed to express its delight and have an ending before they moved onto other projects. But after a couple of weeks of endless visits and showing off, and when I had finally stopped grinning from ear to ear the real work began as the first residents moved in and the building once again began to live.

Some eight months on we have had the privilege of meeting a number of young people in need. We have housed them of course but much more than that we have begun the process to help them to change their lives, to address their needs and prepare for the time when they can move out and live more independently in their own place. We have been privileged to watch and prompt people to live together in community and we have developed programmes and opportunities to facilitate this.

Matthews's gospel reminds us why we are doing what we are doing. That we seek to see the face of Christ in all who come to us and serve them because in so doing we are serving Christ and playing our part in building the kingdom of God on earth.

When Jim Wallis, author of the book "God's Politics Why the American Right gets it Wrong and the Left doesn't Get It," came to St Martin's a few weeks ago he told us a story of his visit to Sing Sing Prison. He met an inmate there who said to him "We are all from only about five neighbourhoods in New York City. It's like a train that begins in my neighbourhood. You get on that train when you are nine or ten years old and the train ends up here at Sing Sing. Then he said when I get out I want to go back and stop that train." That really struck me because the

government here changed the way projects like mine are funded devolving the money from central government to local government, through its Supporting People Programme. That has meant that my project can no longer give ten bed spaces to the Connection at St Martins as we used to but have to take all referrals from our local authority. The consequence of this, is people have less choice to move around, that in turn has led us to notice that 95% of our referrals come from one small area of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The borough that has the wealthiest parts of Britain also contains small areas that are the poorest parts of Britain and they have a train which leads to Earls Court YMCA, I think my next challenge will be to work out, with others, how we stop the train that leads directly to Earls Court YMCA from Ladbroke Grove without stopping at Notting Hill Gate and High Street Kensington. But that is the next phase of looking at how we can build community

Winston Churchill once said “First we shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.” It was a quote I thought about a lot as I watched our hostel taking shape and have pondered on even more since we re-opened, as we seek to help shape the lives of the people who live there. If we get it right those people will also help to shape the lives of those who work with them and we will be working towards the vision of Earls Court YMCA that all young people deserve to experience life in all its fullness.