

St Mary's Church: a Sanctuary in the heart of Guildford

This paper is both an invitation and a request from the people of St Mary's Church to the Guildford Methodist Church to respond to the developing use of St Mary's Church, Quarry Street. This is an ancient building that has been used for Christian worship for nearly 1000 years. It lies close to the centre of the town, yet significantly it is found just off the High Street, thereby offering an easily accessible place of peace within the busy-ness of Guildford.

Preamble

Recently, the church council responsible for St Mary's decided to remove the Victorian pews, thus opening up a wonderful flexible space inside the church. We have also spent large sums repairing the west wall of the church, and are about to embark on renewing the roof at the east end. Deciding to do this was an expression of faith in new aspects of ministry that have already begun at St Mary's: the Russian Orthodox Church worships here each month, as does one of the congregations from St Saviour's; the church is occasionally used by the Matrix Trust, the Town Centre Chaplain and Street Angels; this venue is seen somewhat as "common ground" by some of the Christian communities within Guildford.

So far, those using St Mary's have recognised that it has a special character based on the many years of faithful prayer and service that have been offered here. St Mary's is a place of peace, quiet, spiritual openness, study, reflection, rest and safety. On Market Day, occasional visitors drop in and immediately appreciate this too. Any changes will build on this character. And now, an increasing number of people have a bigger vision for what St Mary's can contribute to God's mission in our town. This can be a place of confident action, dedicated prayer and profound inspiration.

What will we see at St Mary's?

Let's fast forward 5 years, and suppose that we have renewed the inside of the church: what will we see? There will of course be better access, a smooth well-signed path from the High Street, a small step back from, but connected to, the hustle of the town. Inside, you will be able to loiter, to spend comfortable time meeting friends, eating a light meal provided from the café at the west end. There will be exhibition panels around the wall, where each month there will be changing displays explaining the faith, or showing our Christian heritage, or new paintings from local art societies, or promotional material from some of the charities working in our neighbourhood. Behind the glass sound-proof screens, one of the chapels is exclusively reserved for prayer: there will sometimes be midweek services held there, or visitors can simply withdraw to be still in the presence of God. On the upper floor above the servery of the café, there are a couple of office spaces, for church use or personal counselling.

Once the café closes at 5.00 pm, St Mary's may rest for the night, or it may be one of those days when there is a concert (ideal for small chamber music and audiences of up to 100), or the youth department from the Yvonne Arnaud theatre may be rehearsing for the play they are going to present next week, or, perhaps this is the season for a Christian adult education course (sometimes being offered with a simple meal). On Saturday evenings, the space is properly cleared so that Sunday worship happens, and the Church is what it should be: a house of God, hospitable to all who are drawn to it, a place of love, security and truth, and a site where lives are enriched and community is strengthened.

Whose church is it anyway?

Clearly, when it was first built just before the Norman Conquest, St Mary's owed allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. For nearly 500 years it has been part of the Church of England, and now it is seeking to be 'common ground'. In the light of the new vision described above, we will be keen to establish a suitable structure so that everyone's contribution and participation is honoured and safe-guarded. This can happen so that skills can be shared, decisions can be made together, and volunteers be released to help directly in the mission based on this site. Finding a new name for this venture that expresses the vision and hopes of all involved will be important.

Whose mission is it?

A fresh St Mary's can play a part in God's mission to Guildford. We all know that regular church-going is declining, and the average age of congregations is increasing. But that does not prevent God being at work here. Even in this modern "secular" age, the Christian faith is valued, and many un-churched people find it easier to connect with the faith through what is traditional and recognisable – hence the need to combine what is old at St Mary's with modern comforts, providing easy access points for today's explorers and pilgrims. Christian mission today must show itself to be engaged with the Community, rooted in secure values yet of service to those who are unsettled, and faithful in prayer. That is the platform for mission that St Mary's can contribute for the next 100 years.

If Guildford Methodist Church chose to be actively involved

1. Some of this bigger vision becomes possible; the people and place of St Mary's needs your faithfulness, traditions, and people: we are too lightly resourced to achieve this on our own.
2. We need to establish "common ground", with no sense of take-over or loss, so that all can feel comfortable entering into partnership.
3. We will be future and mission-focussed, not replicating what is already happening at other churches in Guildford; this is a chance to create a new sort of Christian venue, a pattern that exists and has been tried in other English towns, but not one that currently exists here.
4. In 1966 a new type of church was built in Guildford on the Woodbridge Road, intentionally created in an "ecumenical style", not imitating classic Anglicanism, suited to the age, the culture and the site. We need this same attitude that created and sustained at the Methodist Church a distinctive contribution to Guildford church life for 50 years, to be brought to bear at St Mary's.

Our fundamental beliefs

- God is present and active amongst us now. Also, God has been present. What is useful from the past for today's mission (whether buildings or traditions) must be preserved.
- Something new is already happening at St Mary's, in a basic way. Much more is possible; at the moment, the larger vision is beyond the resources of the Church of England.
- Lives can be changed by people praying, when people meet in a safe and nourishing environment, when we are inspired by heritage, beauty and learning, and when the church is confident and gives confidence to other groups which serve the community.

And now? This is both an invitation and a request from the people of St Mary's Church to the Guildford Methodist Church. As followers of the same Lord, we will value your response.

Rev Robert Cotton

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