

A story of faith and fundraising – raising funds for a capital appeal

Many of our churches are looking at capital appeals, to raise the funds to either reorder or reimagine church spaces, to make us fit for purpose for the 21st century. I remember the first time I walked into St James's Church in Devizes, and being blown away. You would never guess from the outside that the inside had been so transformed. I asked them how they did it – imagining that there must have been a significant element of grant fundraising.



It turns out, they raised it all through faith. So inspiring!

Here is the story, told by Mike Wilmott, the churchwarden back then, and now reprising the role again in 2023!

Reordering St James's Church, Devizes – a look back to 2007

Contrary to what you might think, grants were a very small element in our fundraising. Things might be different now, but certainly back in 2007/08 it was very difficult to get grants for works to the interior of church buildings used for religious purposes. We did secure some grant aid from Garfield Weston Foundation and what was then Ecclesiastical, with a small bit from Wiltshire Historic Churches, but we are talking no more than 10k in total from grants. Contrast this with when we bought and refurbished the former diocesan school building and repurposed as the St James Centre a few years ago – we were certainly able to tap into a wider range of grants for that because it wasn't a 'religious' building and we could emphasise the community use, debt centre etc.

Back in 2007, the far more significant element was the overall Vision. We called the project 'Vision for Mission' and ran it with three legs. One part of the Vision was for a flexible worship space that we could use for multiple purposes as well as different forms of worship – so this was getting the pews out; toilets and a kitchen in and some smaller meeting places – all internal to the church building.

The second part was that we promised to tithe the money we received to fund the construction of a community building out in our linked diocese of South Sudan. (This was built and apparently still stands despite the subsequent civil war a few years later).

The third part was to employ a children and families worker, as we could see the need to build up children's work, not just in the church, but also in the local primary schools. On this element, we did receive grant funding from the Aldhelm Mission Fund, but this was budgeted separately and spread over the first three years of the post.

The point is that we took several years (we first started talking about this in 2001 at an away day) and used the time to get the congregation united behind a wide-ranging project. Having different 'legs' meant that we appealed to different strands of the congregation – some would support us because of their insight into the need to refurbish and re-order the building; others could see the need for a children and families worker; and others appreciated the overseas support that we were giving. So, it wasn't just a 'building project'.

It also helped that our church architect at the time was a member of the congregation, so he knew what was needed (and the fees were lower!) and as a local government planning officer at the time I could find my way around the faculty legislation and paperwork (no small undertaking then).

In the end, we stuck our faith to the sticking post and decided on a Gift Day/weekend. We ended up raising gifts and pledges, mostly from the congregation. Some came from the wider community (there were no objections to our faculty application). In all, we raised over £230k if I recall on that one weekend and never looked back (that made the local press!).

Once the work was done, we paid off the outstanding bills within a year or 18 months, so we never had any long term loans from any external organisations or anything. I think the overall sum we raised in the end was ca 350-400k. Allowing for inflation, it would be over half a million now, and some, as building inflation has outstripped general inflation.

We didn't get everything right – the DAC were pretty insistent back then in ensuring that any upholstered chairs were wooden – they looked nice and were comfortable – but they were not easily movable (heavy and not stackable) – so we replaced them during covid with much lighter steel framed upholstered chairs that we can now move around at the drop of a hat- and fulfil the original mandate of flexibility with use for toddlers and sustainable sales/exchanges.

One interesting consequence. The building was Grade II listed when we started. When Historic England came back and re-surveyed the building after the works were completed, they upgraded it to Grade II*, as we had not only (in their view) kept the character of the building with the work we did, but also enhanced it by revealing the medieval stonework in the 14th century tower room.

Looking back, I think the VFM project gave people a greater sense of our identity – what we are about, what we should be doing – and brought us closer together - it wasn't a be-all and end all, and the length of time it took to get everything and everyone on board shouldn't be underestimated - but it did give us the confidence to go for the St James Centre (SJC) as we could see that such projects can be transformational both in our own church community and in the wider area. For many people, it was a faith-builder, as some doubted that we'd be able to achieve the ask. It's certainly been a blessing and enjoyed by many. No-one has ever asked for the pews back!

Hope that helps. I think there is a folder somewhere on the church premises/SJC that covers that time – news cuttings, PR leaflets etc. I've certainly still got several lever arch fulls of paperwork from it all!



Coming together for worship...



...and community (the view from the mezzanine floor)