

Draft for GT annual report - Helensburgh

‘Seven whole days, not one in seven’ – these words from George Herbert’s great hymn were the guiding principle behind the extensive project at Helensburgh Parish Church, recently completed at a cost of £2.2m. The congregation’s new halls and other ancillary accommodation have been designed to provide the opportunity for a strong and active everyday witness in the Argyll & Bute town’s central square, itself the subject of an extensive makeover.

The development is the culmination of a vision of many years standing for the various Kirk congregations in this town (population of about 15,000) to come together in a single presence through combining resources. The General Trustees played an important role in nurturing and enabling the vision to become reality.

Helensburgh, a seaside town which largely grew up in the Victorian era, bears all the classic marks of the fractures of 19th century Presbyterianism. The various denominations built five large and imposing buildings, all within fifteen years of each other and all on prime corner sites in the central streets. A series of unions took place (two of them within the past four years) resulting in one town-centre charge, with the redundant buildings (churches and manses) being disposed of. The charge of Helensburgh Parish Church is also now linked with Rhu & Shandon, the neighbouring community to the west of the town.

Former minister the Rev David Clark, now retired, said, ‘When it came to the hard choice of which church building to retain and develop, the General Trustees were very helpful in providing funds and advice for feasibility studies. This exercise included consideration of building condition surveys, future maintenance and development costs and likely disposal values for the neighbouring suites of buildings being considered. It cost quite a few thousand pounds but it meant that we were able to get as objective an assessment as possible so that the congregations (and Presbytery) were in a position to make decisions and have a clear sense of direction before the union of the congregations took place.

The major project was funded from a combination of

- well-stewarded existing resources
- local congregational and community fundraising
- grants from a small number of trusts and funders (including General Trustees)
- sale of redundant church and manse

This meant that no borrowing was required – thus the congregation enters its new building ‘debt-free’. The General Trustees also assisted greatly in establishing that the development would be zero-rated for VAT (a highly complex and technical matter) – and then when the VAT regulations changed and VAT did become chargeable that it would be recoverable. The General Trustees gave the congregation the assurance of loan facilities to assist with cash flow should it be necessary until VAT was reimbursed. This has not proved necessary but it was good to know that it was available. The ability to reclaim VAT (from the Listed Places of Worship Scheme) has meant a reduction in the overall cost of the development of several hundred thousand pounds (from about £2.2mm to about £1.9m).

Mr Clark said, ‘I believe that working closely with the General Trustees has been an essential factor in making this dream a reality. Their advice, encouragement expertise and, where

necessary, prudent caution has made the path so much smoother. It has helped greatly to enable this community, at least, to solve the problem of how to handle a surfeit of buildings.

The project involved the creation of two new halls, meeting rooms, vestry, church office, kitchen, toilets, lots of storage – and an impressive large ‘gathering space’ where the new build joins the existing (and very fine) church through its transept wall, thus providing a completely integrated and level complex, where previously there were disjointed and inadequate halls.

The development is now complete and the congregation, with its newly-inducted minister, Rev David T Young, have the exciting and challenging task of fulfilling the original vision and making it a reality in and from the new facilities.

Mr Young commented :

The development project at Helensburgh Parish Church, coupled with the vision of being a parish church open to all within the community 7 days per week with activities and busyness and noise, is exactly just what attracted me to the Charge. Having come from a University Chaplaincy I felt very much that the new build effectively created a Chaplaincy Centre with excellent state of the art facilities to allow the congregation to engage in mission and outreach to the local community. This is an exciting time for the Church of Scotland in Helensburgh: we’ve created a ‘super-parish’ ministered to by a Team Ministry which will include an Associate Minister and a Parish Assistant, and all this a reality due to the vision and commitment of former ministers and church members.