



The **Methodist** Church

Bishops Stortford Methodist Church

Affirming the inclusivity of a church with disabled access



Bishops Stortford Methodist Church is a town centre church that completed a building project from 2021-22 to make the building fully accessible. The previously multi-level site is now all on one level and has accessible toilets, including a Changing Places toilet facility. The church is now open during the week for community use and is continuing their journey to enable worship to be fully inclusive for all, including those who are disabled.

The foyer, lounge and church have been put onto the same level. There is a big change in level from the street to the church so this required a long ramp. Wheelchair users were consulted on the best way to do this. A semi-circular ramp was put in, avoiding corners and hairpins for wheelchair users, with a handrail. The church is now step-free from the street. This makes it accessible for all who have factors that affect their mobility, including those with pushchairs, electric scooters or difficulties walking, as well as wheelchair users.

Summary

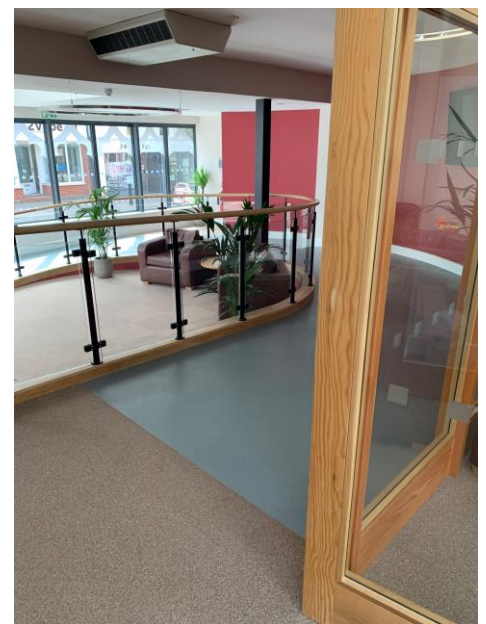


The building is open during the week, with a volunteers' rota and donation-only refreshments (which breaks even).



Windows were unblocked, meaning that the stained glass windows could be seen from the lounge and the lounge and sanctuary were linked.

Extra wall, ceiling and floor insulation was installed to keep the building warm in winter.



There were conversations with the congregation so that there was inclusive decision-making throughout the process, for example regarding the unisex toilets. Decisions were not left to the Steering Group. However, this did not mean that nothing was done unless everyone was pleased. In fact, following a decade of 'thinking groups' and sub-committees, the new minister insisted that either a project was commissioned or the discussions come to a close. This provided the impetus needed to start the project.

Process

The congregation were kept up-to-date through regular newsletters. There were regular updates at church meetings. Costings were split to show which spending was leading to which outcome, rather than just the items being paid for.

The total cost was around £860,000. No debt was taken on. A Methodist Chapel Aid loan was put in place but not used.

- £400,000 from the circuit
- £100,000 from reserves
- £80,000 from external grants
- £20,000 from District grants
- £260,000 from fundraising and members' giving (some of which has come from church finances, spent against commitments of future giving)

On the Level

The Redevelopment Project Newsletter



Issue 5,

Welcome to our fifth edition of **On the Level**

An Introduction from Revd Gill Hulme

Last time I wrote an introduction I started it with: Things are happening, albeit not quite as quickly as we had hoped!

Mission

A few Sundays ago, I walked into Church and see the new door leading into the hall from that everything we have been planning w

The initial budget was reduced by £100,000 by the loss of a Connexional grant. The choice was made not to refurbish the back hall, but to maintain everything that created accessibility. There was a clearly defined core vision.

Around 15 volunteers were needed to oversee the project. There was a building group, finance group, mission group, fundraising committee and an over-arching steering group. There was clear accountability and the minister was released from the day-to-day decisions of the process. The mission group considered the balance between continuing current work and beginning new projects, including communicating to the congregation any changes that would affect current groups.

The volunteers had management experience, especially in change management. Though none had expertise in building, this could be bought in via architects and contractors. The church had expertise in accountability, change management and attention to detail, ensuring contractors were held to account. The church did not always take the cheapest quote but considered the quality and reliability of contractors. They also managed delays and subsequent change to the opening date.

The church have recognised that the hard work is not 'done' now that the building project has been completed. Rather, the hard work is just beginning.

The building being open is a statement of the church as a place of discipleship. There is a banner with the church's vision statement: "We are open. Open to God. Open to You. Open to Each Other."

The church are clear that 'success' is anything that enables the building of relationships, the offering or prayer and bringing people to know Jesus. It is not necessarily about whether numbers increase at Sunday morning worship.



A place for discipleship

Journeying together regarding issues of inclusivity has become part of the congregation's shared journey of discipleship. These conversations have led to the acceptance that opening up the building to the community will bring more diversity and change the church community. There has been an acceptance of that and no attempt to protect the current congregation from change.

This shared journey has enhanced conversations around other issues, such as God in Love Unites Us.



The church are taking steps to ensure worship is inclusive for all, including those who are disabled:

- ❖ Worshippers with learning disabilities are louder than other worshippers and this is accepted. Worshippers with learning disabilities have invited others to worship as it is inclusive of their needs.
- ❖ There is a Sunday afternoon 'Songs of Praise' dementia-friendly worship service and the church is seeking accreditation as dementia-friendly.
- ❖ A room is used as a retreat during worship, so people can withdraw somewhere quiet. Sound from the service is relayed there so the service can still be listened to. There is also a direct sound feed from the service to the lounge, with the option to add a video feed to the screen, meaning a service could be livestreamed into the lounge.

Outside the church, in the town's high street, there is a bric-a-brac stall, which is donation only. Those who stop are invited inside for refreshments. Whenever the building is open, there is always someone on 'Welcome' sitting in the foyer. It gives members of the church a chance to show love to their community.

Anecdotal feedback from people in the community shows that the church is known as one that "cares".

At the heart of the community

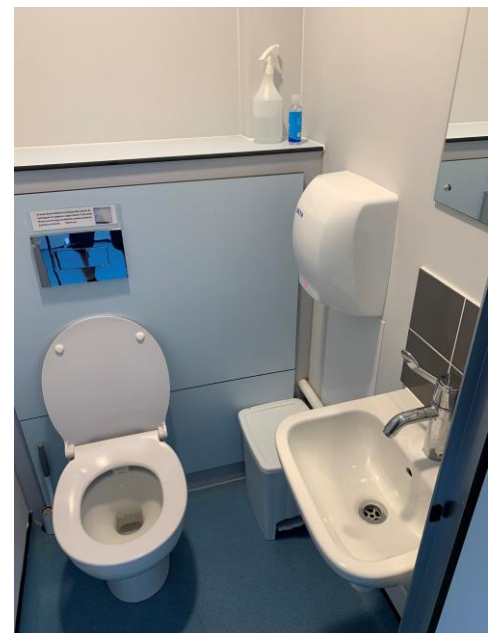
The church obtained a grant from the Town Council for the community-use facilities, such as the Changing Places toilet facility. Networking with council and community leaders meant the church knew the community needs. Local councillors hold informal surgeries in the lounge. PCSOs pop in to speak with members of the community. The food bank has hosted MP's surgeries.

The church uses social media to communicate with people, communicating with them in the way they use to communicate.



The toilets are unisex, with sinks in each cubicle, so all can use the facilities in safety.

Inclusive



The building has the same main entrance for everyone, even though separate entrances for those with and without disabilities would have been cheaper.

The building project has been just part of the church's journey to become more inclusive:

- ❖ The minister was asked by a member of the congregation to learn sign language. This enabled 'signing' using Makaton during COVID-restrictions.
- ❖ Gluten-free bread is used during communion so that everyone is able to share 'one bread'.
- ❖ Church notices are provided electronically and are available in printed form.
- ❖ There has been improved awareness of ensuring the format of PowerPoint slides are more inclusive by avoiding backgrounds and colours that can be difficult to read.



The building is open to community groups to use to meet, with free wi-fi, eg the Alzheimer's society runs a memory café and training for the church and local businesses.

There are different styles of seats so people can sit somewhere comfortable for them. Seats are easily wiped down, avoiding any indignity or tension for those without access to homes and cleaning facilities who use the space.



Cares for the whole person and community, not just people's spiritual needs



The foyer welcome area includes information and contacts for those who have needs and require help.

The church provides meals for refugees and pays for taxis to allow refugees in hotels near Stansted airport to attend.

There is a hearing loop in the lounge, as well as in the church, for use in community events as well as worship.

There is a Changing Places toilet facility to avoid the indignity of people having to lie on the floor to change continence pads.



The redevelopment allowed the food bank to continue to use the rooms at the rear of the church.



The Methodist Church affirms the building re-development at Bishops Stortford Methodist Church because it is:

❖ Safe

- Provides sinks in every toilet and a Changing Places toilet facility

❖ Inclusive

- Inclusive decision-making process
- Worship that is inclusive for all, including those with learning disabilities

❖ Serves people, meeting their needs

- Provides a free space for accessible toilet and changing facilities and community groups to meet

❖ At the heart of its community

- Not that it is a town centre location, but the church is at the heart of conversations in the town and with political representatives

❖ Provides space for discipleship

- Enables space for conversations, relationships and growing the Kingdom, outside of worship, and worship that is inclusive

❖ Has a building that is fully accessible for those who are disabled

- Single level site with accessible toilets
- Step-free from the street
- Semi-circular ramp with no corners or hairpins and a handrail

❖ A commitment to further becoming more inclusive

- The Open Church Oversight group continually reviewing their worship and day-to-day offering to be accessible to, and meet the needs of, everyone, including reviewing collaborative work with charities who use the premises
- Examples of this include:
 - Registering as a Warm Welcome space and providing soup and rolls, which has provided a comfortable and safe space during the day for guests of the local night shelter
 - A monthly dementia café run by the Alzheimer's Society
 - A slow cooker course on a budget, alongside the foodbank
 - Using the church kitchen facilities to help the local Thirst Youth Café provide hot meals for teenagers