

Welcome to Openshaw Connection, the first in what we hope will be a regular newsletter from, surprisingly enough, Openshaw.

Openshaw lies to the east of Manchester, at the heart of one of the most deprived communities in the country. As the community has suffered, and people have left the area, so churches have declined and been forced to close. The poor and elderly who remain in communities like Openshaw have seen little in their lives to thank God for, and traditional Christian faith has become, for many, little more than an historical relic.

Through all this, the tiny Baptist chapel in Openshaw, the United Baptist Tabernacle, has remained faithful to its vision of God active and loving, even (or perhaps especially!) in this most desperate of communities.

Openshaw and East Manchester are now undertaking a massive regeneration programme, and Mersey Street is regenerating itself alongside the community. Within the church, two families, the McBeaths and the Presswoods, have committed to exploring this new vision of community and ministry together.

Openshaw Connection has been set up by the North Western Baptist Association to work with Mersey Street to find new ways in which this story can be nurtured and shared.

At the end of January Openshaw Connection will be launched on the internet at www.openshawconnection.org.uk where you will be able to find more up to date information, together with reflections and worship materials which we have written.

We hope you will enjoy reading this twice yearly newsletter and being part of the Openshaw Connection.



Regeneration

It won't be long, on a visit to East Manchester, before you hear the word 'partnership.' Mersey Street is very much one of the regeneration partners in East Manchester.

As a church, we host numerous residents' meetings, consultations and planning sessions. We have recently begun to welcome the Feelgood Factor, a mental health users' group, who run a monthly Sunday Lunch, as well as weekly complementary therapy sessions in the church.

It is also an important part of our mission that we support individuals as they engage with the regeneration. Tim Presswood, one of our ministers, 'wears more hats than he has hair.' Tim currently chairs the Beacons for a Brighter Future Regeneration Partnership - the body with all the money to spend! He is also a community director of New East Manchester Limited, a strategic urban regeneration company (no we don't know what that means either, but Tim says it's pretty important). Clare McBeath, our other minister, is soon to co-chair the Beacons Well-Being Network, the health and social issues task group. Clare also serves on the management groups of the local community farm and of East Manchester Community Forum. Meanwhile, Andy McBeath is Director of Eastserve, a community IT project providing computers and broadband internet access for over 4,000 local homes and businesses. Andy is also a director of East Manchester Credit Union, of which Tim is currently Treasurer. Deborah's work as a teacher finds its way into our children's work and the youth groups she chairs.

And, of course, all of this finds its way, more often than not, into our worship together.



The Open Space?

This rather unprepossessing wreck has been purchased through the Regeneration and North Manchester Primary Care Trust (of which Tim is a Non-Executive Director) to convert into a Healthy Living Centre.

While the rear is beyond renovation, and will be re-built from new, the front of this landmark building will be restored to provide a 'shop front' for a variety of community facilities including a children's library, a Sure-Start crèche and a variety of information points and meeting rooms. On the first floor the local GP practice

will have their new surgery, while on the second floor Social Services Older People's Team will have their base. All these partners will share resources and, hopefully, provide a seamless service for local people.

The church has been part of planning this centre from the very beginning. In the middle of all the bustle and activity, a small 'open space' will be provided for reflection and prayer. Both users and staff will be invited to make use of a variety of art and craft materials, or simply to take time out in peace and security. On Sundays, this room will be where the church will meet for worship.

This will leave the existing building on Mersey Street vacant, just as the whole Toxteth Street estate undergoes a major redevelopment. The final plans for this redevelopment will be published in January, but it is already clear that the land on which Mersey Street stands forms part of the plans for new housing. Co-incidentally, Tim also serves on the steering group which is overseeing the neighbourhood planning process.

Faith and Healthcare

We have been asked to facilitate a one-day workshop, looking at the issues for faith communities engaging with mainstream healthcare services.

If all that sounds a bit too much like jargon, then please don't switch off. All it means is that we will be looking at the ways in which Christians and healthcare professionals can work together.

Further details will be available nearer the time, but for now, please put the date in your diaries:

Wednesday 12 May, 2004

Contact Details

The Openshaw Connection is a two-way process. Please get in touch with us to share your stories and reactions to our stories.

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A Vision Thing

This has been a hard year for Mersey Street. Illness and old age have taken their toll. In particular, we miss two long-standing members, Marjorie Golpin and Margaret McHale, both of whom have died this year. It is all the more important as the traditional congregation dwindles, that we have a clear vision for the ongoing Christian presence here in Openshaw.

Much to our surprise and delight our vision for the future of the church has been recognised this year by the Baptist Union Home Mission Fund who have awarded us a substantial and innovative grant to support our ministry into the future.

This has already enabled us to attend a number of gatherings, both Baptist and ecumenical, and to begin work on a number of pieces of writing. Publishers, please beat down our door!