

Something wonderful happened in the main hall of the Parish Centre last Friday night – and I had nothing to do with it. There's a lesson there isn't there?

Linda along with a team of ladies organised what we hope will be the launch of a Women's Fellowship Group. It was wonderful on a number of levels that give me great heart as I look to the future.

First, just watching the team on Friday afternoon as they worked with and around the facility we have in the Parish Centre. Lighting not great in the Hall – no problem. Standard lamps, table lamps were brought in from various homes – I have visions of husbands and families sitting in the dark. Moving images of a flaming fire were (courtesy of Linda) projected onto a makeshift screen. The Hall was transformed.

Then there was the worry - Who will come, will anyone come? I disappeared as the crowd started to assemble, range of ages, established Parish members, newcomers to the Parish. It was a 'Bake Off' so there was a common theme of baking – no doubt ideas were shared, samples tasted. But there was more to it than that – there was an enjoyment of each other's company and in that enjoyment there was real communication. I often think that the conversations on the edges of these events are often as valuable as the main theme.

But there was still more to it than that. Friday night is the night the Scouts meet in the Hall – they organised other activities that night, some came in to look at what was going on, admiring the new look to the Hall – there was no sense that the women's group were intruding on their territory, their time.

Now as we are reminded at this time of year, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are members of the world wide Christian Church. Within that we

are members of the Church of Ireland drawing together people with a range of political and spiritual convictions. But of course this is where we experience Church - in this community, in this Parish Church. We may be involved in other things outside but for most of us this is our primary place of worship, our primary Christian community. This is where I want you to keep in mind the image of that wonderful event organised by the women's group last Friday night.

Before Christmas, the Vestry began a process of reflection on how we see our Parish over the next ten years, in terms of worship, in terms of community. Looked at from one perspective you could argue that we are an aging community with declining attendances at worship. But the event in the Parish Centre on Friday night tells me that that is not the whole story.

As part of our process of reflection, a Parish Review Group has been set up with members drawn from right across the parish in terms of age, of gender, of worship preferences. We held our first meeting ten days ago and Richard McMurtry has written about it in the current edition of the News Letter. As part of their work members of the group will be going out to visit other Churches in our Diocese to see how they are tackling the same challenges that we are facing, their worship styles, their age profiles, their community life. As we were reflecting the other night and in subsequent email exchanges, whatever we do has to work here in St Mary's and be built upon and around the community that is this Parish, drawing on the strengths of this community, responding to the needs of this community.

What was brought home to me last Friday night is how rich and varied this community is – our worshipping life and our community life has to reflect that and empower that as we build each other up. I will just briefly recap what I was saying earlier. There was the range of people who came along on Friday.

There were older members who had enjoyed the fellowship of the Mothers Union and there were younger women, most of them caught up in that fraught balance between maintaining a career and caring for their family. There were those well established in the Parish and those who are new to this Parish. And out of that wonderful mix I sensed real community. Then the willingness of the scouts to defer – in one sense they had to - but they did not have to do it with such a spirit of generosity.

Now as someone observed the other night, community and worship are two different things. They are but they are not unrelated. Over the last few days I came across this prayer that draws together these areas of community and worship in the life of a Parish Church:

Dear Lord we built this church as a house for you,  
not because you need it, you don't,  
not because its big enough to hold you, it isn't,  
not because we can't find you anywhere else, we can.

We built it as a meeting place  
where together we can worship and wonder,  
sing and study,  
pray and ponder.  
Be with us while we are here  
and when we leave be with us still.

Let this place be lovely in our memories and miraculous in our lives. Amen

We are only at the beginning of this process of review and it will be very much a work in progress. I suppose that prayer in many ways encapsulates something of my hopes for this place as we move towards our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2016.

May this Parish Church, which has seen so many changes in the life of the Church of Ireland as in the process of Disestablishment in 1871, just 5 years after this place was built, we lost many of our privileges; changes also in the political and social life of Ireland; may this place be

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where together we can worship and wonder,  
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Let this place be lovely in our memories and miraculous in our lives.