BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF PROMISING FUTURE

Promising Future is our initiative to develop the life, outreach and mission of St Helen’s Church. Key to its success is providing facilities expected in the 21st century which are appropriate to the historic Parish Church of Northwich.

St Helen’s a beautiful grade 1 listed building, placing it in the top 2% of historic buildings in England. The building was originally constructed c.1350 (there is evidence of an even earlier church on the site). It was enlarged between 1480 – 1520 and galleries were inserted in the 18th century. These galleries were removed in the early 19th century. The church was improved and enlarged and the one-acre churchyard enlarged to 3 acres during the 19th century. Two toilets were installed in the 1980’s, otherwise no major development works have been carried out since the 1880’s. Therefore, about every 150 years the church has been altered to meet the needs of the time. It remains the oldest and most beautiful building in Northwich.

St Helen’s plays an essential role in the life of the community, and whilst there has been a decline in church attendance over the last 50 years numbers are once again increasing. There are services and activities in the church on most days of the week.

The church and churchyard are run and fully funded by the congregation. We do not receive any funding from the Church of England or the government.

About 5 years ago we began a review of how the church was used and how it was perceived by the local community. We delivered a mail-drop questionnaire to every residential address in the parish asking what people wanted to see happen. Common responses included improving the churchyard, providing good facilities such as better toilets, catering facilities, meeting facilities, better access and car parking, opening the church more often, having better advertising of what’s on and using the church for performances and community events in addition to church services.

A team was set up in the church to visit other churches which had successfully done these things. The team then produced a statement of mission, which was to better engage with and support the local community and provide the facilities and events expected in the 21st century. This is what previous generations had done throughout the life of the church.

Developments in the life and mission of St Helen’s are already taking place. We have established a group called Friends of St Helen’s for those people who want to support St Helen’s as a community asset but do not necessarily wish to attend church services. We now open the church every Saturday for visitors, and provide events for mums and toddlers and also older people. We provide basic refreshment facilities, hold concerts and performances and regularly host local charities.

A brief for the sort of permanent improvements we need was produced, taking full recognition of the importance and sensitivity of the church and churchyard. The improvements fall into four categories – improvements to the churchyard, improvements to facilities within the church building, the provision of new facilities and the repair of the medieval church fabric.

We interviewed and appointed an architect, landscape architect and quantity surveyor. They have produced a variety of ideas which have been discussed and shared with statutory authorities and consultees and developed accordingly. We are now moving forward in a series of stand-alone phases.

The first is to provide improvements to the church building including a more attractive and welcoming entrance, a permanent servery for refreshments, and new audio-visual equipment. The second is to improve the churchyard to make it the most beautiful space in Northwich. The third is to repair the ancient stonework and clean the stained glass. The fourth is to build a sensitively designed extension on the north side of the church to provide new toilets, a proper kitchen, a meeting room/classroom and a church office.

We think this is a very exciting project which will significantly improve the quality of life for many different groups within the local community. That is why we have called our project Promising Future.