

The Therapeutic Community of Penrhys

Located on the mountain ridge between the Rhondda Fawr and Rhondda Fach - two valleys dotted with nonconformist chapels that have long closed - the Penrhys housing estate, built in this inconvenient, windy and inaccessible place, is no longer in the news as it used to be.

But in the seventies and eighties, this housing estate was often in the news - and this was because of the failure of the policy that led to the demolition of houses in the Rhondda and the relocation of three thousand people to this estate built on top of the mountain. The levels of deprivation among the estate's population were staggering; at its highest, the unemployment rate was 90 percent and the problems typical of post-industrial areas were evident. There was little social provision, and attempts to establish a church there had been failing for years.

With roots in Tylorstown, over the mountain from Penrhys, Revd Dr John Morgans felt that he was called to live a life of worship and service on the Penrhys estate. Contrary to the advice of many, but obedient to God's call, in 1986 John moved with his wife, Nora, and his family there. Anyone who has had experience of Penrhys Uniting Church since then would hardly doubt that John and his family moved to Penrhys in obedience to God. A block of flats was renovated to house *Llanfair*, and a chapel was built next to it. Step by step, *Llanfair* Penrhys came into existence, an ecclesiastical centre for a viable church community dedicated to a life of worship and service that has been the catalyst for the transformation of this estate that had suffered decades of neglect. At the heart of the *Llanfair* centre in Penrhys and at the centre of the Penrhys faith community is the beautifully simple small chapel and the constant worship that takes place there. By now, the wider Penrhys community considers *Llanfair* Penrhys as the 'heart' of the estate with the chapel, cafeteria, library and shop in *Llanfair* being invaluable resources in the life of the estate.

Dr Morgans had already fulfilled a commendable and prominent ministry not only in his own denomination, the United Reformed Church, where he was pastor of churches and president of his own denomination for years. He had also networked widely in the ecumenical field, particularly when he was

chairman of the Council of Churches in Wales. He nurtured ecumenical links in his ministry at Penrhys, enabling young people from different countries to visit Penrhys and some to come to work on the estate as a valuable and formative part of their theological training. The traditional Roman Catholic compline service became a regular part of the Penrhys worship system. From time to time, vespers, the service of the Orthodox Church, were held in the chapel at *Llanfair Penrhys*, and once outdoors at *Llanfair*, with a choir of theological students from Baia Mare in Romania singing, and a host of Penrhys people in attendance. The occasion was particularly poignant as Baia Mare itself was a post-industrial city and the students were preparing to be ordained as a new generation of priests in a post-industrial context after the fall of communism in Romania.

If the words of the Book of Proverbs are true, '*Where there is no vision, the people perish....*' (Proverbs 29:18a), we can be confident that people will not 'perish' if there is *vision*.

Here are some of the core elements of the vision that was developed at Penrhys:

- ❖ The leaders of the Penrhys vision have convinced the community through their words and their lives that healing a community from its wounds is possible and one of the duties of the Christian Faith.

- ❖ The belief that underlies the existence of *Llanfair Penrhys* is that the relationship between the lives of individuals is transformed and the transformation of the 'body' of the Penrhys community - in other words, that there is an integral relationship between acceptance and healing, and the parallel and integral connection between community worship and healing.

When planning *Llanfair Penrhys* - the chapel and centre and its resources, what were the guidelines?

I quote some of Rev. John Morgans' words from his account of the history of *Llanfair Penrhys* (nearing publication) and from his diary:

'The new building needed to reflect an integration of work and worship, of liturgy and social justice. There were central practical ingredients.'

(a) The call for communal ministry. ... At the top of the Maisonette Block would be four flats...the live-in community would provide mutual support, protect the building, and at the same time be accessible to the wider community of Penrhys.

(b) The call to be a serving church. The church needed to offer something of practical service to the wider community. The area created immediately underneath the residential flats would be the home of projects which the people of Penrhys felt would be beneficial to the whole estate. After many discussions with the community, it was agreed that spaces should be provided for a Cafe, Creche, Launderette, Nearly-New Shop, Music Room and a Homework Club.

(c) The call to reflect worship and justice.

Could the Church meet the needs of both the residential community and the wider community of Penrhys? The building should form a whole, reflecting that to be "church" is to integrate holiness into the wholeness of life. ...[into the many]Projects which are as much the expression of being the church as is the service of worship.

Through the worship and ministry of the Penrhys faith community, Penrhys has become a spiritual beacon. *Llanfair* Penrhys radiates faith, hope and love, and gives many of us hope as we in turn seek to navigate through the spiritual darkness of contemporary Wales.