We've got new signs!

Both Priesthill and Shawlands URC have invested in new signs for their buildings in a step to make their presence known and felt in the local areas. “We didn’t realise it was a Church” commented some in Priesthill. Locals in Shawlands have commented on the smart, newly painted building. At a recent joint Priesthill Church and hall meeting the following question was posed to those present:

“Are we a community centre where church happens on a Sunday or are we a Church where community happens?”

The resounding and unanimous answer was the latter, that we are definitely a Church where community happens.

I have been in Church Related Community Work ministry since 1990 and this is the first time I have had direct responsibility for activities in a specific building and, in many ways for the maintenance of that building. But in the last 28 years I have encountered numerous congregations who have decided to use their buildings for the community. If I am honest, I suspect that this has often been triggered by the realisation that the congregation is ageing and declining. But also supported by a sincere belief that by renting out the building to local groups and organisations, more people will start attending worship services. It’s what I sometimes (cynically) refer to as “becoming a born-again community centre”.

Unfortunately, it’s a plan that in my experience rarely seems to work. Yes, we can then say that X number of the people walk through the doors of the church each week. And if we are really honest the income earned from the use of the building sometimes help subsidise the church and our building’s existence. But is it enough that they are crossing our threshold to attend a slimming club, an exercise class and a playgroup rather than develop some form of deeper relationship with the Christian community? It’s a question I ask myself on an almost daily basis.

We are trying in Priesthill and Shawlands to be more, as we say, ‘intentional’, to build relationships with those who come into the buildings and help them build relationships with each other. Many of the activities, particularly in one area, provide spaces for the creation of community rather than providing services to and for the community. This appears to be working, as relationships are being formed and small informal groups decide to organise things together - fun days, community meals, drama workshops etc.

……and, of course, during all this, we share our stories of God and our faith - usually over cups of tea or whilst eating a roll and bacon or scones. Or sometimes during an afternoon of gardening. ‘I don’t know why, but I have always known there is a God’ was a sudden and surprising opener to a conversation with those present at a community gardening session. After an animated and sometimes heated discussion about everyone’s thoughts on God another volunteer declared, as he continued to nail chicken wire onto the wooden walkway ‘I suppose this is what you would call doing practical theology?’