

Official Opening of the New St John's, Hamilton East

Saturday, 20th May was an unseasonably cold and blustery day in Hamilton, but the weather did nothing to daunt the spirits of the 4 congregations of the Hamilton East Methodist Parish as they gathered to dedicate themselves and their new church building to God's work. The 2pm service of thanksgiving and dedication was led by the Parish's Presbyter, the Rev Anne Preston, and attended by the President of Conference, the Rev Prince Devanandan, the District Superintendent, Rev Dr Susan Thompson, and many invited guests. Parishioners representing the St John's, Wesley, Fijian and Tongan congregations all played active roles in the service – from children leading the opening procession, to the scripture readers, and the communion celebrants. A combined choir sang, and the parish-wide youth group sang and danced. The President preached, reminding us that the true church exists independently of any building, and urging us to become 'living stones' to bring God's love to others.

The service provided an opportunity to recall the past, and to explain to the gathering how this new building had come about.

The old St John's Methodist church had stood (albeit with some alterations and additions) on the current site, at the intersections of Grey and Wellington Streets in Hamilton East, since 1910. Sadly, in 2011, just 1 year after its centenary, it had to be closed because, in the context of the second Christchurch earthquake, it was found that it constituted such a risk that the Connexion and District could not countenance its continued use.

In July 2013 a meeting of members of the Parish made the very challenging decision to build a new church, rather than to endeavour to strengthen the old one. That decision was particularly challenging because it was with much reluctance (and a good deal of community angst) that they were to break with the past and demolish a tired old, but dearly loved, building; and because the task of raising sufficient money to rebuild was indeed daunting.

A design brief was issued and a bold plan by MOAA Architects was selected because, having made the break with the past, parish leaders considered that they wanted something that was contemporary, that was community-facing, and that reflected the multi-cultural nature of the Parish. The Property Convenor, Neville Jack, having led the process of seeking architectural proposals, now took on the onerous task of day-to-

day management of the Building Project; and the entire parish, having made the commitment to rebuild, set to, with a will, to raise sufficient funds. The desire was to open a debt-free building.

The Parish began ‘Sunday Trading’, we might jocularly say. Every week there was something new: plants, flowers, cakes, biscuits, jams, parsonage grapefruit converted into marmalade, beanies in Waikato colours, sewing, sweets, popcorn – all offered on the expectation of a donation to the Building Fund. Subtle means were employed for extracting other donations: please contribute for the privilege of wearing slippers, or an outrageous hat, or spectacular sunglasses, or a frivolous wig to a combined Sunday service; otherwise, pay a forfeit for not participating in this unlikely parade. It is highly improbable that any parishioner could not recall Chad Chibnall’s gherkin jar, pressed into service for receiving what had been extracted. Progress was charted on a huge, green thermometer pinned to the back of the Hall where, in the absence of a useable church, weekly services were held for 6 years.

A very active and hardworking Fundraising Committee was formed and organised a multitude of events: a Parish dinner, quiz nights, concerts, curry evenings, and an all-encompassing church fair. Those parishioners who were able made substantial thanksgiving donations. All congregations and all parish members did their utmost to support the Building Project.

It is acknowledged that Hamilton East parishioners did not do it all on their own: they were mightily blessed to be the recipients of extremely generous grants from the Hamilton Methodist Trust and Tidd Foundation. No doubt it helped that several of the trustees of both organisations are members of St John’s. No, it wasn’t done alone, and it wasn’t all hard work. The Parish had a great deal of fun on the journey – and what a great way to build not just a church building, but also a church community! And so on 20 May 2017 Hamilton East was able to officially open a new building that was not only beautiful and award-winning, but also completely debt-free. Praise be to God.

Following the service, guests were invited to partake of a feast offered in true Pasifika fashion. They were seated in the beautifully bedecked church hall; royally fed and entertained. A formal cake was cut by the oldest parishioner, 98 year-old Doris Ratcliffe; and honoured guests were garlanded. The celebratory meal concluded a very special day in the life of the Hamilton East Parish.