



The newly refurbished Cavandoragh Methodist Church at Ardstraw which was saved from closure after the local community embarked on a spirited battle to save the building which was founded in 1776.

# Community saves historic church

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"UNLESS God builds the house the labourers labour in vain." **Psalm 127**

This is a verse that was used on numerous occasions as the small yet spirited congregation of Cavandoragh Methodist Church set about the monumental task of raising £160,000 for a full refurbishment and extension of their quaint rural church near Ardstraw.

With attendance at the turn of the century at times only in single figures on winter mornings, the church, which has been in existence in the area since August 1776, was at risk of closure due to its dilapidated state and the Methodist Church's rejection of their quaint rural church near Ardstraw.

However, despite the cold and damp conditions, which was seen as the reason for diminishing numbers, the congregation began to grow with new families to the area attending more regularly.

And such was the local community's passion to maintain the church, plans were put in place and they secured a £180,000 loan for a full renovation and extension.

An ambitious five-year fund-raising plan was then implemented to have the loan repaid, and they recently achieved this feat with six months to spare.

A special 'thanksgiving service' was held last Sunday evening, led by Rev John Beacom and the members of their newly formed choir, to mark the culmination of this momentous journey.

The work on the old stone church has not only transformed the aesthetic appearance of the building, but has also instilled a renewed community spirit and togetherness with congregation numbers doubling to 16 families who are at the heart of life in Cavandoragh.

As well as the extension to create a kitchen, toilets and car park, one of the biggest transformations was the removal of the old inbuilt pews and replacing them with transportable chairs.

This has opened enough space to allow the church to also double up as

## Cavandoragh locals fight spirited battle to prevent closure of centuries-old building

a community building for evening classes, meetings and the establishment of a weekly youth club.

As the parameters of the ground was in such close proximity to the church, the members were overwhelmed when a neighbouring farmer told them, "take as much land as you need" for the extension and the car park.

"This was just one of a long list of charitable and generous acts experienced by Cavandoragh along our journey," said Society Steward, Keith Wysner.

"It's totally changed our church from a Sunday morning church where people sat in discomfort, families didn't attend because it was so cold... to one that is warm and welcoming in both temperature and spirit," said Mr Wysner. Now as a multi-functioning room we have more flexibility to use it for other functions such as a youth night each Friday.

"New families have been attracted to the church and the work has made it more engaging for other families to return. There is a pride in the church now."

Mr Wysner explained that before a loan was secured, locals feared they might lose the church and be forced to amalgamate elsewhere.

In 1999 a Methodist District evaluation of the Cavandoragh Society was as follows: "The commission views with concern the state of the church property at Cavandoragh and recommends that before any major decision is made regarding expenditure on this property there should be full frank discussion at both society and circuit level. Throughout Ireland at present Methodists are finding and using more effectively the gifts of time, talent, possessions and wealth God has given them. I would urge the congregation of Cavandoragh to do likewise."

"This response dealt a serious blow to the Cavandoragh people who have maintained regular worship in this community for over 230 years," said Mr Wysner.

"Although they admitted that the building was in serious disrepair, they felt that this should not be a reason for closure."

Praying for help and guidance, Mr Wysner said the tide turned after new

families joined the church, while others started attending more regularly despite the dreadful state of the building which was very cold with rotting floor.

In 2004 with the spiritual climate of the church changing, the Cavandoragh Society leaders felt they needed to know the exact condition of the property, so they got the church surveyed by a structural engineer.

His findings were positive with a recommendation to spend £100,000 to bring the building up to standard.

This figure did not daunt the community, said Mr Wysner, and it was agreed to not only set plans in motion to address the issues raised in the engineer's report, but to also investigate the viability of the extension which would bring the total cost to £180,000.

Recognising that a project of this size would stretch their financial capabilities, a fund-raising committee was established to help offset the financial burden. This committee was made up of one representative from each family.

In the first six months fund-raising events, which included a general auc-

tion, concert and fun day, raised £13,768 with pledges made by the congregation of £7,400, leaving them with £20,000 in the bank before work even commenced.

Grants amounting to £30,000 were received from the Joseph Bank Trust and the Methodist Church in Ireland and the rest of the £150,000 total arrived as a result of fund-raising and donations.

Mr Wysner said, "As the local community know only too well, everything was attempted, tried and tested: Auctions, craft fairs, fun days, concerts, BBQ's..."

"Jan de Vries held a guest lecture on alternative medicine and there were sponsored walks and even a canoe run held. No stone was left unturned and Her Majesties Revenue and Customs also contributed through valuable gift aid on donations received.

"Members of our local community and suppliers not connected with the church gave generously of land, time and materials. Without all of these valuable contributions, the efforts of man would have been in vein.

"Now with 16 families we have doubled our average church attendance, and we continue to have a strong Sunday school and youth club who meet weekly thanks to the dedication of teachers and leaders," Mr Wysner explained.

"There was an unwillingness to close because of historic tradition and ties, but perhaps more importantly because of a security of knowledge that God had a purpose in the 1700s when he first planted a church in this community and an understanding and belief that there is still God's work to do in this area."

Overall, the project has provided a renewed optimism for the future existence of Cavandoragh Methodist Church.

It now plays a more vibrant role in the local community, and through the committed fund-raising process has become a 'more cohesive group' with a sense of belonging.

For more details about this amazing journey and to view few pictures of the refurbishment process visit [www.cavandoragh.org](http://www.cavandoragh.org)



Local ministers pictured at the reopening of Cavandoragh Methodist Church are (from left): Rev Harold Agnew, Rev Mervyn Ewing, Rev Des Baine, the former President of the Methodist Church of Ireland, Rev Ian Henderson and George Bowes, parishioner.