



Llanfair Uniting Church Penrhys

'Mission in Partnership'

Ordained Ministry

A. Mission Context in Brief¹

The village of Penrhys is situated above Tylorstown on the mountain between Rhondda Fach and Rhondda Fawr and is 1100ft above sea level. The estate was originally built to replace housing in the valleys below and was officially opened in 1968, providing the largest public sector housing in Wales with 951 dwellings. Over the years, the outward migration from the Rhondda Valleys has seen the Village shrink in size. The 1970's and 80's saw many negative aspects to the community, with people experiencing third generation unemployment, a high turn over of tenancies, the effects of negative media, the increase of criminality and alcohol/drug problem, debt, health problems, teenage pregnancies and low educational achievements. Over the years properties were demolished as they became vacant, increasing the sense of hopelessness and abandonment as the estate was drastically reduced in size.

Through the work of Llanfair and the Penrhys Partnership, founded in 1993, (Penrhys.com) that sense of despair has begun to be replaced by a spirit of pride in the community, although some outside the estate still stigmatise it.

Positive aspects of Penrhys life are the development and existence of the extended family, an accepting, open and forgiving nature, the capacity for enjoyment on limited means, community solidarity and remarkable human resources of resilience and compassion. The estate is now known as the Penrhys Village and the Partnership made significant steps forward in community development, with many of their practices being adopted elsewhere.

The process of community regeneration began with the work of Revd John and Mrs Norah Morgans and the development of Llanfair in February 1992. A series of community projects were developed and there was the encouragement of a team of local volunteers, education workers and students that support the projects.

Alongside this, the Penrhys Partnership was established and 1993 saw the creation of the Penrhys Village Centre. This provided a range of basic services and a wide range of opportunities for individuals and groups within the community. The Directors of the Penrhys Partnership are presently considering its future. On their agenda are Cartref, (which has provided high quality, secure supported accommodation for six families who enjoy their independence within the community) and Canolfan Rhys Arts and Education Centre (which has provided a wide variety of arts activities).

For many years there was an expectation that further demolition would take place and the future of Penrhys Village was in question. A recent review of Llanfair sought to assess if Penrhys had any future at all. It became clear in talking to RCT and RCT Homes that there was no intention to demolish any more property or for that matter build any additional stock, leaving the community at around 800 people, with around 25% being children. However, that has all changed. On the 9th December 2010 a public consultation began between RCT Homes² and Mr Ian Robinson of 4H Consultancy, and the community of

¹ For a more comprehensive account and description please see the February 2015 Consultation Documents. These can be made available in PDF format.

² RCT Homes is now known as 'Trevallis'

Penrhys. Mr Robinson has been involved in a number of community regeneration schemes and the current proposal has a number of elements to it. There has been a commitment on the part of RCT Homes to modernise the present housing stock, improving the exteriors; replacing heating, kitchens and bathrooms and generally getting the housing stock to meet the proper standards.

Llanfair

Llanfair is the only Christian presence within the Penrhys Village community. It is unique in that it is the only Church mission partnership in Wales supported by 8 denominations :

- the Baptist Union of Great Britain
- the Baptist Union of Wales,
- the Church in Wales,
- the Congregational Federation,
- the Methodist Church,
- the Presbyterian Church of Wales,
- the Union of Welsh Independents,
- the United Reformed Church.

The Uniting Church began on Penrhys in 1971 when the Churches of Rhondda and Wales agreed to form One Uniting Church on Penrhys. They began with a Sunday School and with worship in the Community Centre. In 1992 Llanfair was created out of a redundant and derelict maisonette block. It is located at the centre of the village providing a base for many of its community activities as well as accommodation for the staff and volunteers who both live and serve within the community.

The church seeks to serve not only the spiritual needs of the community, but also the physical, educational and social needs. The church has a very strong emphasis on being an incarnational presence.

The spiritual life of the church revolves around a regular pattern of prayer and liturgical worship echoing the monastic community who once lived on the same site. The shrine of the Virgin Mary at Penrhys was one of the most important in South Wales. It was the focus of intense piety and prayer prior to its destruction at the command of Henry VIII in 1538. It is still a site of annual pilgrimage. Those living in Llanfair are joined by others from the community in this regular pattern of prayer and worship. This spiritual dimension has been recognised by others working in the village as a key part of the community development.

Trying to convey the uniqueness, opportunities and mission challenges of Llanfair in words is really quite difficult. Llanfair grows on you over time as you engage with the church and community. At its heart it's really a very small 'church', made up of a number of very loyal and committed individuals, but it is so much more than that. It is a church at the centre of the community, it is the community's church.

Llanfair is a church that is part of a '*community under strain*', disadvantaged by geography and the lack of facilities.

In all this is a small core 'team' of staff and 3 or 4 overseas volunteers. The presence of Sharon, Rebecca and Miara, overseas and local volunteers is essential for the life of the church and its work with the community, as is the dedication of the core of the church. The overseas volunteers have been enabled to come to Llanfair and Penrhys from links with Madagascar, through CWM, as well as Time For God.

The volunteers live in the flats which form part of the complex. Following the recent replacement of Llanfair's roof, the now refurbished flats are again available for volunteers. The Sponsoring Body is actively investigating with the Council for World Mission the possibilities of having regular overseas volunteers as part of the team.

Sharon Rees has been working at Llanfair as an education worker for 25 years. Her role involves work in the local school as well as in all that Llanfair itself offers. Sharon's post has been funded at various times by 'Laura Ashley', 'Post Office Counters' and 'On-Track.' Her post is currently funded by a one year grant from 'The Rhondda Trust'. We would like to obtain more sustainable funding for her post.

Rebecca is a Partner in Mission supported by Council For World Mission through the partnership of 4 of the 8 supporting denominations. Rebecca comes from the Presbyterian Church of India – Mizoram Synod in the north eastern part of India. She met Miara, a skilled lawyer, in Madagascar. Miara serves as a full time volunteer in Penrhys. They have two children Hannah aged 8, and born in Madagascar, and Seren aged 3, born in the Royal Glamorgan Hospital.

Through this small team of people, and in the midst of the difficulties and disappointments life brings to the residents of Penrhys Village, Llanfair offers genuine, deep love and compassion. It is a place and 'community' of hope and encouragement. It is a place of welcome and acceptance. It is a place and community of prayer and spiritual refreshment in which the ministry of Llanfair is rooted. For some it is a place of pilgrimage where people from all over the world come to serve.

In a Bible Study workshop in Durban South Africa in November 2014 the General Secretary of Council for World Mission described his experience of the life and ministry of Llanfair:

Two colleagues and I had the privilege of visiting the Penrhys' project in Wales recently; and we came away from there with an example of a life affirming community ... it is the spirit of community in which the needs, interest and wellbeing of everyone is considered; the joy of seeing children playing in the streets and literally behaving with an awareness that the community belongs to them; and the strategic role of the church in the very centre of life in the community that encouraged and inspired us. In the words of several members of the community, 'without the Church there would be no Penrhys'. We heard stories of the 'outstanding and valuable' work of our partners in mission, who are fully immersed into the life and culture of the community, presenting themselves as true ambassadors of the church. We left there with very positive feeling about the work of a partnership of eight churches, including four CWM member churches, in seeking to bring hope and a sense of future to the people of that community.

The threats to the ministry and mission work of Llanfair are linked to the reliance of the church on funding from the 8 Mission Partner denominations, CWM, and for some staff and overseas volunteers, external grant funding. A further vulnerability arises from the difficulties at times in getting overseas workers into the country due to the UK Government Border Agency.

B. Priorities for Llanfair Uniting Church

The priorities for the ministry and life of Llanfair were explored and subsequently outlined in the documents to and from a major consultation process we held in February 2015. Those documents continue to be on the agenda of the Sponsoring Body and to shape much of its developing work.

The nature of Llanfair as a Mission Partnership of the 8 partner denominations has led to the development of a unique relationship. The current Constitution, written and adopted by the Sponsoring Denominations in 2000, describes the creative relationship between the wider church and Llanfair. It also describes the nature of the local meeting of the church.

The Sponsoring Body is at present considering whether and how that Constitution might be re-drafted in order to reflect:

a) the developing maturity and needs of Llanfair and Penrhys,

- b) the support available from the mission partners,
- c) the way in which the experiences learned from the mission partnership might be communicated to the 8 denominational partners who together sponsor and contribute to sustain the mission of Llanfair in 'the Spirit of the Covenant for Unity in Wales.'

C. Role of an ordained Minister

For over 25 years the United Reformed Church provided ministry for Llanfair from their Special Category Ministry (SCM). The URC held a number of ministerial stipends centrally in order to provide ministers in areas of special mission. That enabled the provision of a URC minister. However, following Revd Sian Collins' move this could simply not continue. With the formation of the Pastorate with Porth URC, the Revd Gethin Rhys was inducted to ministry with both Churches. Since Gethin's move Llanfair has not had a minister. It has of course benefitted from the range of ministries offered occasionally from the partner denominations - usually for Wednesday morning Communion.

At the same time the number of volunteers working in the Llanfair Team has been reduced. This was partly due to water ingress into the flats making them uninhabitable. Llanfair's roof has been replaced with costs borne by the Llanfair reserve fund, which is now greatly reduced.

However, the development of the 'Nurture Group' and the accreditation by the University of Wales, Trinity St David of a course designed by Revd Dr John Morgans as a way of encouraging and enabling leadership, has flourished. Taken together there is now a sense that there is a need for ordained ministry within Llanfair in order to continue to develop the worship life of the church, but much more to encourage and support the ongoing mission of Llanfair and the team. We are hopeful that Llanfair will soon be able to welcome volunteers from the world church. This has proved to be of very real benefit to the volunteers, Llanfair and Penrhys over the years.

The priorities of an ordained minister are considered to be :

1. To be a visible presence in and around Llanfair and Penrhys Village, available to and developing trust within the community;
2. To provide continuing mentoring, support and guidance and encouragement for the 'Nurture Group' alongside that of University of Wales Trinity St David;
3. With ecumenical partners through the Sponsoring Body, Llanfair staff, the Nurture Group and CWM, to engage actively in exploring ways in which this ministry can develop in the future;
4. To consult closely with the Sponsoring Body, the Nurture Group and denominational representatives to ensure regular worship is offered.
5. With the Nurture Group to plan worship, and preside at communion and baptisms, funerals and weddings;
6. To provide pastoral care and support for the Penrhys Village community, volunteers and the Llanfair 'team';
7. Through weekly team meetings, with the Sponsoring Body and the Llanfair 'team' to consult, plan and oversee the ministry and life of Llanfair;
8. To work with other community groups and to encourage consultation between all the groups in the Penrhys village who have a role in its well-being;
9. To ensure the churches of the partner denominations have opportunity to gain from Llanfair's experience and valuable expertise in community work and regeneration, and also to work with those outside the reach of traditional churches.

The Sponsoring Body see this as a piece of work say over about a three year period. During this time the ministry leadership offered by those who are studying on the Nurture Programme will be much more confident and equipped.