



Case study: May Street Presbyterian Church, Belfast



“Transform the building”

“The support we have received for the roof, coupled with the funding we received earlier for the regeneration of our basement and entrance lobby, means that May Street has been the recipient of third party grants amounting to around £500,000 over the past four years. This finance has enabled us to transform the building and make good the damage caused by the elements over many years ... We believe there was a higher purpose in our being so blessed by the funders.”

“May Street congregation may not be there for ever, but we fervently believe that our premises will continue to be used for Christian worship and community outreach for many years to come. The threat that our church, despite its pivotal position in the heart of the city, might be left derelict, be demolished or even used for some commercial purpose has been seen off, and we give thanks for that.”

Arthur Acheson, Clerk of Session, May Street Presbyterian Church, 2018

About the building

Built in 1829 for the historically influential public figure Rev Henry Cooke, May Street Presbyterian Church is a Grade A listed classical Georgian building with a gallery and basement. The church is situated in the Linen Conservation Area of Belfast, which was designated in 1992 and which has always been an important economic centre for the City.

A fine Binns organ was installed in 1914 and is still in regular use. Binns was highly regarded - his most famous instrument is at the Royal Albert Hall in London.

The building is used by more than 10 different community groups serving people of all ages. It takes part in European Heritage Open Days, welcoming 120 visitors last year.

About the roof project

May Street Presbyterian Church is a historically and architecturally significant city centre church, and a local landmark with an annual footfall of c25,000. However, this was not enough to ensure its future.

The congregation had been growing smaller and the regular congregation of 25 people had serious concerns about meeting the needs of the building in the future. An urgent major roof and rainwater goods project meant potential closure.

The congregation planned a well organised project that addressed the immediate issues and looked to the future of the building. After clearly defining the need, the church team used their own skills and networks, worked with consultants and carefully selected qualified professionals to successfully execute the project.

The church received a major public grant of £100,000 from the Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund in July 2016. In December 2016, it sought and received match funding from the National Churches Trust through a Repair Grant of £10,000 and a £2,000 grant to help to start up a Cinnamon Network project in the future.

Making successful grant applications

- Ensure you have your story prepared. This means :
 - Being able to explain why your building is important.
 - Being able to explain what needs to be done and what difference it will make.
- Ensure you check eligibility criteria, usually available online. If you still have questions, most funders are happy to hear from people who are thinking about applying. They can help you prepare and this can save rejections and a lot of additional work later on.
- Ensure that you demonstrate need. Explain any financial reserves, and show urgency if the funder requires it. May Street demonstrated good practice in financial management, and showed that without the work the future of the building was at risk.
- Ensure that you demonstrate that funders' investment in your building will be well spent by explaining how the building will be maintained into the future. May Street worked on their maintenance plan whilst planning for the roof project.
- Ensure you can talk about significance. Being able to write or talk about the importance of your building in a precise and accurate way will help you. When you've written a good description, you can re-use it in press releases and grant applications.

Roof project at May Street Presbyterian Church, completed January 2018

Total cost: £132,066 (including VAT)

Money received in grants: £110,000 (plus £2,000 additional micro-grant for use later)

The issues: Felt parapet wall gutters and valleys were installed in the 1960s and had reached the end of their life. This caused multiple failures around the perimeter walls. Professional reports showed that the flat roof top was in good order, but the slated perimeter had many slipped, broken or damaged slates. Ingress of water was evident in several places together with damage to plasterwork and decoration. The fine Binns organ which was installed in 1914 was also threatened and there was a danger of dry rot affecting timbers and masonry. If water ingress continued the church would have had to close within a few months.

Project description: The project was to put up scaffolding, remove the slated perimeter together with the felt valleys and parapet gutters, and replace them with natural slate pitched roofing, lead valleys and lead parapet gutters. Natural slate and lead would have been the original materials. This will keep the church watertight, safe and open for use.

"The renewal of our roof, with 10,000 new Bangor Blue slates, means we can at last pack away the buckets and basins which have been catching the drips and leaks for years. Making the building watertight has been a long cherished ambition."

Arthur Acheson



Overcoming issues

- **Dealing with an increase to the estimates**

The costs went up because of initial insufficient allowance for scaffolding and safety measures.

The church had to re-tender in September, and in October appointed JPM Contracts Ltd of Dungiven. They worked with JCP Consulting for project management.

- **Thinking about the impact of the work and our surroundings and current users**

Groups currently using the building were consulted to minimise disruption and ensure safe access and continued use during the works. Statutory authorities gave permission for street closure for erection of scaffolding in late October 2017. The owner of the adjoining car park gave permission for access for high-level loading of slates onto the roof.

- **Losses and gains**

A couple of longstanding members of the congregation left, and a couple of activities were discontinued during the works. These are temporary setbacks that can happen during projects.

Benefits seen during and since the project

- Increasing ongoing support and engagement from local organisations and contacts.
- May Street has received £500,000 of funding from grant applications for various projects over the last four years.
- The building is wind and watertight. Other areas of the building that needed attention have been sorted out. The choir room is now a useful space that can be hired to organisations for meetings of up to 12 people.
- The church is increasingly chosen as a venue, including being a participant in this Department for Communities funded project facilitated by the National Churches Trust with other organisations working in Northern Ireland.
- A maintenance plan was developed during the project. This will help the building to stay in good repair, saving money over time and minimising the likelihood and need for future repair projects.

Successful promotion

- Identify interesting stories, such as when your church has received a grant or finished the work. Produce well written, short, to the point press releases so that local newspapers or magazines can publish them without much further work.
- Include some information about your church and contact details after the article.
- You can create stories. For example, the May Street team are planning a plaque unveiling ceremony during spring 2018 to celebrate the successful conclusion of the project and acknowledge the support of the funders.
- Timing is important. Christmas and Easter are particularly good times to send church stories to the media.
- Ensure that contact details are clear on websites and any releases you make.
- Ensure you can respond quickly if radio or television broadcasters get in touch.

The key elements to success were:

- Good teamwork and communication kept the Presbytery and congregation up-to-date.
- Making connections and consulting people and organisations in the surrounding area.
- Working with supportive qualified advisers and finding good contractors.
- Thorough planning and being able to respond to unexpected challenges
- Ensuring all required permissions were understood and met
- Following funders' guidance and meeting their eligibility requirements
- Promotion and contacting local media.
- Thanking everyone (ongoing!)



A typical week at May Street Church

There is a traditional Sunday service each week at 11am, and a lunchtime service on Thursdays at 1.05am.

The building is used by a range of community groups during the week.

On Mondays and Fridays the Urban Soul Venue opened in the basement in 2017. It plays host to Teen Challenge, which runs a lunch and coffee bar for those dealing with the challenges of addiction.

At weekends, May Street's Urban Soul Venue is the base for Street Pastors, who go out to bars and clubs to help keep young people safe.

Re:Hope, a growing youth focussed ministry, has made its home at May Street since January 2017. A two day collaborative "Fabric City Conference" which aims to reflect the diversity of traditions in Belfast encouraging dialogue and engagement between Christianity and aspects of city life, was launched at May Street in May 2018.

ⁱ The Cinnamon Network aims to make it as easy as possible for local churches to transform their communities by reaching out and building life-giving relationships with those in greatest need. They offer a series of tried and tested social action projects and everything a church needs to set them up including training and ongoing support. The National Churches Trust worked with them to offer micro grants of £2,000 to ten church projects in 2017.

The May Street Presbyterian Church is at 13-29 May Street, Belfast, BT1 4NA. To find out more visit <http://maystreetchurch.com/>

The National Churches Trust provides resources on many of the tips presented in this case study. Take a look at ExploreChurches and sign your church up. Visit our website to find out more about our grant programmes and see the Building Advice section which offers information on a range of topics. www.nationalchurchestrust.org.

This case study has been prepared as part of a Department for Communities funded project carried out in March 2018. The project was facilitated by the National Churches Trust with local faith heritage and faith organisations including the [Ulster Historic Churches Trust](#).