



# The Gym to a Cathedral - and back again every week

By Neil Halligan

It's six o'clock on a Friday evening; the weather is beginning to turn cold and the students and teachers at St. Mel's College are long gone home for the weekend. However, in one section of the educational campus, it's a hive of activity for six men who are busy at work.

Twelve months ago, none of the team of people led by David Shannon expected to be inside the school's sports hall, transforming it into St. Mel's Cathedral Centre.

But after the events of December 25 unfolded, the lives of all Longfordians changed forever. Among those at the centre of the hectic days and months that followed was parish administrator, Fr Tom Healy.

"By 8 o'clock, our initial thought was that Christmas was cancelled and people were going to have to go to Newtownforbes or Edgeworthstown or Killoe to go to Mass," said Fr Healy.

"You must remember we lost everything, so we didn't have a chalice or a book, or vestments, or altar wine, or anything. Everything that we had was gone.

"However, by half nine it struck me that there was a real need for people to somehow gather, that this was a shared grief - the community had lost something very dear and that there was a great need to assemble and to be together," he added, and the first Mass after the fire took place in the shadow of the Cathedral, in the Temperance Hall.

"I remember the choir's music that morning just lifting our hearts. I have no idea to this day where the vestments or chalices came out of."

"That half eleven Mass and the one o'clock Mass were highly memorable for the emotion of the loss and the common bond," he recalled.

Sundays, however, were far too busy to consider the Temperance Hall as a long term replacement, and just days after the fire, plans were already being drawn up for a new location to celebrate weekend Mass.

"There's something sacred about a venue where people can gather. It did occur to me on those days that some hundreds of people would have come every day to the Cathedral, whether it was for two minutes or for an hour. It was a place that was very welcoming and that an awful lot of people dropped into," said Fr. Healy.

Other venues like the army barracks or an industrial unit might have been briefly considered, but in St. Mel's College, the parish had facilities that would provide the perfect fit for its needs.

The school's principal, Damian Cunningham, contacted the bishop, and among the first places to be visited on that Monday - three days after the fire - was the college's chapel.

For years it was the venue where boarders attended Mass, but since boarding has been discontinued, it had been largely unused.

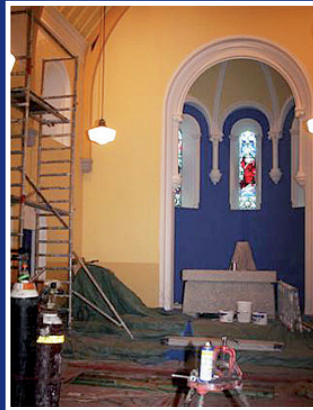
Minor repairs and upgrades were carried out (roof fixed, paint job, new heating system, seats restored, new sound and lighting system, baptismal font, notice board and signage erected) and within three weeks, it was open to the public and is used for daily Mass.

"It has a lovely prayerfulness about it. Lots of people go down there every day," remarked Fr Healy.

The second venue on their visit was the gym. This, says Fr Healy, required more effort.



All roads lead to our temporary new home.



Work on St. Mel's College Chapel begins.



Everything is taking shape in the College Chapel.

"We knew that we needed help. I remember on that Monday saying that we needed people around us," said Fr Tom, and the next day over 20 people from the Parish, Temperance Hall and Finance committees formed sub committees to chart the road ahead.

In order to create a new venue from what effectively was a blank canvas, people with experience in theatre were drafted in.

Mona Considine, member of the Temperance Hall committee, and manager of Backstage Theatre, brought in Noel Strange and Eddie Kiernan to

help transform the school's sports hall.

"They conceived this whole idea that it could be more than just a boring building. It's a gym Monday to Friday and at the weekend it's transformed into a lovely religious theatre. I think it was a tour de force really," said Fr Healy.

Noel, using his graphic design experience, recreated the famous 'The Second Coming' tapestry that hung behind the altar in St. Mel's Cathedral, as well as the Harry Clarke Studio stained glass windows that adorned the transepts.

Images of the statues that

stood behind the altar and replica pillars were also created by the design team to help seal a connection with the Cathedral.

The design team aside, there was a huge community effort around bringing together what the parish has today. Committees met throughout the months of January and February, with many people - too many to mention one-by-one - putting in long hours.

Eventually, on February 19<sup>th</sup> this year, St. Mel's Cathedral Centre was formally opened to the public with Mass by Bishop Colm.

"I think the tapestries are

extremely clever," Fr Healy remarked. "The first evening I think people thought they were arriving to an empty building and I remember them being just blown away by the artistic merit of it, the warmth of it and the whole sense of creating a connection with the Cathedral."

In those early weeks, teams of 20 or so gathered each Friday and Sunday to transform the hall into a place fit for worship.

Nowadays, David Shannon and his team of five come together at six o'clock on Friday to undertake a precision-like two and a half hour operation, which includes setting out 720 chairs and assembling a 29-piece stage that becomes the altar, and again on Sunday afternoon/evening to return it to its original use.

"It took us a lot longer when we started off, but we have a complete system and everybody knows what to do," said David. "There's no talking, no telling, and you have to stay ahead of the next guy so there's no hold-up in the process. We have some very, very good lads here."

It's not a year-round job, however, as the crew get a break when the school breaks for holidays, which includes this Christmas, a time that's undoubtedly going to be poignant for parishioners in Longford.

None more so than this year's Midnight Mass, which was the last ceremony to be held in St. Mel's Cathedral.

"We realise the space is a bit tighter, but there's an assembly hall where we will use sound and video link," said Fr Healy.

Meanwhile the Cathedral itself won't be draped in darkness, new floodlighting will be installed, and a star to symbolize hope for the future. And, most noticeably - particularly for those around town - the bells will chime once more.



Many hands make light work! Left to right: Mona Considine, Sean Gallogly, Ursula Bowler, Ronan Nugent, Edwin Kiernan, Ruth McGarry, David Farrell, Brian Lyons, Sive McGuinness, Frank McKiernan (Jnr), Thomas Farrell, Eleanor McKiernan, Frank McKiernan, Noel Strange



Work on the new pathway begins.



Sanctuary area is assembled.