

*Article written for The Eastbourne Herald by
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A year ago last month, the parishioners of St Albans Anglican church in Eastbourne ceremonially vacated their beloved church in Ngaio Street, where they had worshipped for 106 years. The church and the hall (save the kitchen and office) had both been pronounced unsafe in an earthquake.

Designed by the eminent architect Frederick de Jersey Clere, St Albans was one of the many churches in New Zealand he designed between 1881 and 1933; all beautiful and all of distinctive character. The reinforced concrete used in the constructions of St Albans was a move away from the more common brick and timber of earlier buildings. As it has turned out it does not comply with modern building standards.

In August last year, the congregation was warmly welcomed by Wellesley College and invited to make its temporary home there. Sunday services have since been held in the school's magnificent hall which looks out on to the harbour through mature pohutakawa trees.

St Albans Earthquake Team (SEAT) was immediately established and it undertook to see through a consultation process to the resolution of re-establishing the Church's home.

Though it is not listed by Heritage New Zealand nor Hutt City Council as a heritage building, St Albans's church is recognised as an iconic building in Eastbourne. The effect of its closure on the community, meant input was invited from all residents in Eastbourne and the bays in a Blue Skies consultation in the library on 19 November.

Subsequently, a series of consultation workshops presided over by a professional facilitator took place in February and March. That process raised matters that had not really been addressed till then, and insisted that the parish confront the issues of the relevance of a century old church and its customs to today's young people and those of tomorrow. That has not always been easy.

The workshops threw up several scenarios for SEAT to investigate. The team consulted further, visited St Mary's Karori, another Wellington church facing a similar earthquake problem and sought advice from the Diocese. It decided that the brains of a larger group of people needed to be engaged in the process of drilling down the options.

So a larger group of parishioners (Greater Seat) joined the working party and are currently engaged in developing what will be the eventual plan that will encourage use by community groups.

The close relationship between St Albans and the Anglican school Wellesley College has opened up discussions as to an even closer relationship with the College at a time when the College is itself looking to the future and developing its Master Plan. At the same time, the Ngaio Street sites of the church, the hall and the vicarage are being assessed with a view to re-developing or reconfiguring the buildings to provide more flexible space that will be appropriate going into the next century.

The church is missing its old home. The community will be missing a lovely venue. Whatever plan evolves it is going to cost money and when the decision is made and the final project announced St Albans will be looking to its community for support.

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