

THE CORNER STONE – 50th anniversary – 28th May 2021

A Venture of Faith

Members of the congregation might be interested that 28th May this year sees the 50th Anniversary of The Corner Stone coffee house, for which the near-derelict St John's crypt was converted, under the auspices of the then Council of West End Churches (St John's, St Cuthbert's, St Andrew's & St. George's, St George's West, Palmerston Place and St Mary's Cathedral). The proposal for a coffee house emerged from CWEC's earlier Cephass Cellar and Cephass House projects, the former a beat club with live bands, providing a safe place for teenagers in the basement of St George's West on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday evenings, and the latter a large house offering accommodation and support in a community setting to young people with work and other problems, alongside other more settled young people in their first jobs. Out of these projects grew the recognition of a need within the West End of Edinburgh for a late-night coffee house where 20–40 year olds could meet at the weekend in the centre of town in a safe and relaxed environment after visiting pubs (which then closed at 10pm), concerts, theatres, cinemas, etc.

And so, in May 1971, The Corner Stone was born, opening every Friday (9 – midnight), Saturday (9 – 1am) and Sunday (8 – 11.30pm) until the premises were handed back to St John's in 1985. In its hey-day The Corner Stone was run by a team of up to 100 volunteers from the west end churches and elsewhere. It fulfilled a much-appreciated ministry of hospitality, reaching out with a welcome to a broad cross-

section of the community, especially up to the time when pub licensing hours were extended. In pursuing 'mission without strings', exploratory, ecumenical and lay-led, and providing a service to the community, it also proved, for many of those involved, a thoroughly challenging, formative and fulfilling experience in their own personal journey of faith. Throughout its life The Corner Stone was immensely grateful for the consistent support and encouragement of members and ministers of the West End churches. In the early 1980s it was becoming clear that, owing to the changing social context and circumstances, The Corner Stone in its original form was reaching the end of its natural life, and after a time of opening during the day, the difficult decision was taken to wind down the voluntary project. St John's then ran a commercial café which continued until major redevelopment of the terrace and reopening in 2018. One reason for volunteer support reducing prior to 1985, was that specialised needs were being identified among the clientele. Teenagers had already moved to Eclipse, a club in the original Cephias premises, but a number of hostel-dwellers and homeless men, especially, craved a nutritious meal rather than coffee and snacks. And so the "Steps" project was initiated and run for almost two decades by a small band of helpers who provided a homely evening meal atmosphere from, first a flat in the St. Cuthbert's complex, and then in Kirk House, Candlemaker's Row.

But by 1999 a number of other voluntary agencies were providing food and support to street sleepers and loners, and so those committed volunteers reluctantly agreed that Steps

would also close permanently. By then, Edinburgh was a very different place from the 1971 era when the Corner Stone first opened.

But the original helpers remain as a community, with many enduring friendships over the years and distances.

Copy by Norman Shanks, Irene MacKenzie, Eileen Mackintosh, Clephane Hume and Anne Sturrock

Church Contact for further information : Yvonne Mills
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