

Hope in a Double-Decker

Bus workers are among the heroes of Northern Ireland's history. And thanks to a charismatic Church of Ireland congregation, they're once again a driving force for community transformation.

During "the Troubles"—civil unrest from the 1960s to 1990s—public transport took a heavy toll. Workers were killed and injured, their vehicles damaged or destroyed. Now a Spirit-filled crew is taking a more hopeful bus down the streets of Belfast.

In this era of peace and power-sharing government, outreach workers from Willowfield Parish Church, part of the charismatic Church of Ireland denomination, are using a double-decker bus to meet the physical and spiritual needs of Protestant and Catholic communities alike.

"The thing about the bus is that it's so big, you only have to park it," says Willowfield Rector Canon David McClay, who also heads the charismatic movement New Wine Ireland. "The bus attracts a crowd. It advertises itself."

To be sure, the HOPE bus—part of a nationwide initiative supporting churches of all denominations in the United Kingdom—is a gathering point wherever it goes. Families and children swarm around it for activities as varied as barbecues, parties, pamper events and football competitions.

A team of drivers shares the duties to make sure that every Saturday the double-decker bus leaves its parking bay in the city's world-famous Titanic Quarter to support Willowfield's Healing on the Streets initiative on the Cregagh Road. "Our church on the streets" is how one woman summed up this ministry.

The bus is also used in Streetreach, an initiative that

involves various congregations, including Willowfield and Mount Merrion Parish Church—also known as The Church of the Pentecost—working together in Cregagh Estate.

Cregagh covers an area of more than 2,000 households in mainly Protestant East Belfast. It is perhaps best known as the home of former Manchester United soccer legend George Best. A huge mural of the “greatest player to ever pull on the green shirt of Northern Ireland” is at the center of the neighborhood.

“The HOPE bus has enabled us to go to a large communal area in the center of our community and have a visible presence that just draws people,” says Adrian Green, leader of the Church of the Pentecost. “The HOPE bus has enabled us to take God’s love to the community at large and helped us engage with those who’d never dream of coming into a church building.”

The Church of the Pentecost has witnessed children receive salvation through the bus ministry, and Green says the HOPE logo is often a conversation-starter with adults.

“By using the bus and other community events we’ve connected with those living in Cregagh in ways not previously possible,” Green says. “Through these initiatives we’ve seen the influence and impact of our church grow.”

Recently, the bus helped promote an “early intervention” initiative to 5,000 homes in Colin, West Belfast. Colin Neighborhood Partnership distributed sports bags packed with resources for children and families in this predominantly Catholic area.

This government-backed scheme involves politicians, community workers, church leaders and others in a bid to regenerate an area of the city stricken with high unemployment and health and wellness problems.

“The bus was very eye-catching,” says Kieran Drayne, manager of the group’s Early Intervention Program. “It generated a lot

of excitement ... and was perfect for our purpose.”

The Colin Neighborhood Partnership is just one example of several different projects run by both church and government that are working to bring new hope across Northern Ireland’s capital city. As one visitor told Drayne, “You’re trying to pave the streets with love.”