

13 July 2018

Doors close at Metropolitan Cathedral

Doors that once welcomed parishioners, visitors and concert goers are now closed following receipt this week of a Structural Engineer's report. The Category I heritage listed building has been deemed earthquake prone and The Parish Leadership Team has chosen to close the Cathedral immediately in the interest of safety for parishioners and the public.

The difficult decision to close has come after months of work by engineering firm Dunning Thornton Consultants who were engaged to provide a detailed structural assessment (DSA) of the building.

The Cathedral, designed by architect Francis Petre was opened in 1901. In contrast to most other Wellington churches it's classical rather than Gothic styling has made it a prominent building on the Thorndon landscape. The Cathedral is one of only a few fine examples of Petre's work still standing today.

In the 1980s the Cathedral was strengthened and the complex enlarged to include the foyer, Blessed Sacrament Chapel, and Conolly Hall. This work was done well and the building elements that were strengthened remained rated well above the 33% minimum of NBS. However at roof level, ceiling diaphragms are insufficient to carry loads under the current building codes. This has resulted in their lower earthquake rating being applied to the building.

The closure will come as a shock not only to the parishioners, but also the wider community. Many have found the Cathedral a place of spiritual enrichment, a place of beauty, and a place to take time out from busy city life. It's fine acoustics and organ have also provided a home to musicians and community groups who have used it for concerts and recordings.

While the detailed planning for remediation work has not started yet, it is likely that the building will be closed for several years and the work will cost several millions. Raising the funds for this essential work is now the priority. The Cathedral Parish will be enlisting the help of the people of Wellington and others to preserve this Wellington landmark.

While the Cathedral is closed, weekday masses will take place at Sacred Heart Cathedral school in the short term and, Sunday masses will be celebrated at St Mary's College Hall, Guildford Terrace.

ENDS

For further information please contact the Parish Office 04 496 1700

Timeline

- November 2016 following the Kaikoura earthquake a rapid assessment by Dunning Thornton confirmed that no significant damage was observed.
- 2017 Dunning Thornton commissioned by the Parish to undertake DSA (Detailed Seismic Assessment) in two stages. Stage 1 completed September 2017 confirmed building rating to be around 40% of NBS and identified areas for further investigation as part of Stage 2.
- 8 May 2018 Stage 2 Interim report identified potential earthquake prone risk. Sacred Heart Cathedral School advised and stopped using Cathedral complex and Connolly Hall due to possible fall outward.
- 25 May DSA Results Summary received. Confirming that due to deficiencies in detailing of ceiling diaphragms the Cathedral rating was less than 33% of NBS. (confirming earthquake prone rating). Peer review of the Dunning Thornton work commissioned.
- 3 July 2018 Dunning Thornton full report received, and earthquake prone notification displayed.
- 12 July 2018 peer review received confirming earthquake status as less than 15% of NBS.
- 12 July 2018 Cathedral Finance committee met and recommended immediate closure until remedial work to bring the structure up to at least 33% of NBS can be undertaken.
- 13 July 2018 Cathedral complex closed.

BACKGROUND

THE FIRST CATHEDRAL

On Sunday, 8 September, 1850, the foundation stone of St. Mary's Cathedral was blessed and laid, the bishop recording that more than two thousand of the townspeople attended the ceremony.

On 1 May 1851, the first anniversary of Bishop Viard's arrival in Wellington, the cross was raised on the belfry of the Cathedral, and on Sunday, 7 December 1851, the building was blessed and opened.

THE FIRE

Shortly after 8.30 on the morning of 28 November 1898, when the Cathedral was being repainted, fire broke out in the tower. Within an hour the tower had fallen, and the interior of the Cathedral was a gutted ruin. In the short time available to helpers before the Fire Brigade ordered the closing of the doors, many of the contents of the Cathedral were salvaged. The only insurance was £2,300 on the building itself. The organ and other furnishings were not insured.

PLANNING FOR THE NEW CATHEDRAL

On 30 November, two days after the fire, a public meeting was held "to take steps for erecting a church to replace St. Mary's Cathedral". It was decided that as the greater population had settled in the direction of Te Aro and Newtown, the new Cathedral should be built in that part of town, and that "a serviceable church in brick should be erected on the site of the old Cathedral".

The building of the Basilica diverted funds from the Cathedral Trust, and in 1903 a new fund raising campaign was launched with an illustration of Mr Frank Petre's proposed Romanesque design.

The design was described by the architect as Roman, bordering on to Florentine Renaissance, treated liberally" and the reporter commented that "the exterior view of the Cathedral indicates that the building is of noble and imposing proportions". It was to provide accommodation for 2,100 people.

In the event, the planned laying of the foundation stone at the end of 1913 was delayed and in 1914, came the outbreak of the First World War.

The late 1930s saw an end to the economic depression and a revival of interest in the Cathedral project. Another plan was prepared, this time by Messrs Clere & Clere, who submitted a design for a Gothic type Cathedral to seat 2240. Cardinal Hinsley, the Archbishop of Westminster, agreed to come to New Zealand for the laying of the Foundation Stone, but the uneasy peace of 1938 was succeeded by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939.

From war's end till the mid 1970's more pressing needs of the Church prevented any further progress towards the new Cathedral until on Sunday 18 March 1984, the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, erected on the site of the destroyed St. Mary's Cathedral,

was solemnly dedicated by Cardinal Thomas Williams as the Cathedral Church of the Archdiocese.

STRENGTHENING THE CATHEDRAL

On the 21 of February 1985, Cardinal Thomas Williams commissioned a Cathedral Project Committee to comprise the following: the Dean of the Cathedral, two members of the Parish Finance Committee, two members of the Archdiocesan Property Committee and the Financial Administrator and Property Manager of the Archdiocese.

The first task was to determine the life expectancy of the Cathedral. This involved the examination and analysis of the fabric of the building to determine the merits and demerits of its restoration. Reports were obtained from expert stonemasons, engineers, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and the Building Research Institute on every component of the building. It was clearly established that the building was worthy of restoration, preservation and strengthening.

The next task was to design the strengthening of the Cathedral and the additional facilities to be added so as to make it a Cathedral in fact as well as in name. The Committee retained the professional services of Allan Morse, Architect, C A Dunning, Consulting Engineers and Knapman Clark & Co, Quantity Surveyors.

In July 1986 a contract was able to be let for the works which were scheduled for completion in September 1987. The works involved the demolition of the old wooden Presbytery at 10 Guildford Terrace and the old brick Redwood Houses in Hill Street. The project presented the Group with many challenges which required balancing the specifications for the "new Cathedral" against the integrity of the existing building both in terms of its strength and characteristics.

The development of the Cathedral did not stop with the reopening but involved a second and exciting stage which was the Piazza and forecourt. This element of the Cathedral was included in the development of the neighbouring chancery for the Archdiocese and created a true Cathedral precinct for the Church and people of the Archdiocese of Wellington.

(Source: <http://mcshwellington.org/>)

