

A POSTCARD TO THE FUTURE

SLIDE 1: A POSTCARD TO THE FUTURE

Good afternoon, I am Susan Rowe and I served as a Trustee of Living Stones, but before I talk about that organisation I'd like you to know my background and how I came to be involved, so first, a little story....

About 25 years ago I took some American friends to visit the market town of Newark on Trent, which is about 10 from where I live. As we were looking around the town we passed a building which had been a church but,

SLIDE 2 CHRIST CHURCH, NEWARK ON TRENT

as the sign outside proudly proclaimed, it was now a carpet warehouse. One of my visitors was horrified and said

" Susan, how can you let an historic building be used in such a way? Especially a building that is a house of God?"

Let's face it, the building isn't that historic, it isn't particularly pretty and the American idea of historic is somewhat different to ours.

This church, Christ Church, now a furniture store, was Anglican, consecrated in 1837 and built when the population of Newark was expanding. It closed in 1957, when the population growth shifted to the edge of the town, and Christ Church was rented out to fund the upkeep of the new Christ Church, built on a housing estate. Even 25 years ago this use of a place of worship did not strike me as unusual, church buildings were being used for all sorts of things.

Due to shrinking congregations and population movement, there were more church buildings than were needed – surely *any* alternative use made sense.

Fast forward to 1998 and a small job advertisement in The Daily Telegraph, someone was required to run a programme, *Rural Churches in Community Service*, funded by the Millennium Commission, money secured by a bid from the Church and Community Trust, later to become Living Stones, and the National Rural Officer of the Church of England. The aim was to enable rural churches to be used for community use as well as worship. I thought that it sounded like an excellent idea; I successfully applied for the job and my association with the trust began.

SLIDE 3 THE CHURCHES COMMUNITY

DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANCY

Living Stones was founded in 1975 as The Churches Community Development Consultancy, the name by which it was registered as a charity.

SLIDE 4 HISTORY

It soon became The Church and Community Trust, and latterly Living Stones the Church and Community Trust. Living Stones ceased to exist at the beginning of this year, but we were kindly invited to come here today with a ‘Postcard to the Future”, based on our experiences over the forty-odd years of our work.

There’s a lot in a name, and our changing name in some ways reflects the changing challenge we faced over the forty years of our existence. It’s that changing challenge which I want briefly to project

forward today in this postcard to the future.

Our charitable aim, set out in our foundation document, was :

SLIDE 5 CHARITABLE AIMS

“To assist Christian churches seeking their new role in society, and to encourage them to become a positive influence of change in their community.

To enable such churches to influence the process of change, development and growth in contemporary society, and in the provision of suitable buildings and furniture for the promotion of the church’s charitable work in society.”

A most worthy aim and miles away from my acceptance of the idea of using church buildings for **anything** was better

than not using them at all. At the time that I took the rural churches job I was not particularly interested in historic buildings and, although I was a regular church goer, I wasn’t exactly burning with religious zeal.

Neither of those things mattered!

My brief was to enable rural church buildings to be used for community activity **not** to promote religion and the “not” was a big “not”.

You may remember that it was around that time when the then Prime Minister suggested that he would talk about his faith publicly and Alistair Campbell most famously reminded him

“We don’t do God, Tony”

SLIDE 6 RCCS

And I was put in a similar position when I ran the Rural Churches programme. Church communities had to realise that kitchen and toilet facilities to enable coffee after Morning Prayer was not counted as Community Service! The programme was a great success, meeting its targets and bringing the programme in to time and to budget – and not many Millennium Commission funded programmes achieved that!

But, as we all know, God moves in mysterious ways and by the end of the Rural Churches programme I was inspired by the work that churches were doing to serve God by serving their communities. I became a Trustee of the renamed trust *Living Stones, the Church and Community Trust* **and** I started training as a Reader – licensed lay minister for those of you not of the Anglican persuasion.

Now, why I have brought the Rural Churches programme into this talk is, that not only is it still very dear to my heart but because what happened next is very pertinent to our postcard to the future. The Millennium Commission had inadvertently given us a controlled experiment, 99 church projects undertaken at the same time and under the same criteria.

In 2003, three years after the Rural Churches programme was completed I commissioned by Archbishops' Council to review the 70 projects that had taken place *within* Anglican churches located in England. I was to look at each project to establish

SLIDE 7 2003 REVIEW

- Success against the original aim
- Who had benefitted from the new facilities
- The impact had been on the church congregation
- How had the church finances been affected, and
- What lessons had been learned.

The results were very encouraging:

- 92% were successfully running community activities
- 75% reported a positive effect on congregations
- Community projects in church buildings ease the financial burden of upkeep when a charge is made for use

Many lessons were learned, and this report is still available, but

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one of the most important findings was that you need committed volunteers with useful skills, volunteers drawn from both the church and the wider community, both during the development phase and afterwards to run the church as a community resource.

In 2009 I was asked to revisit the churches reviewed in 2003 with the brief to look at

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- What each project had set out to do and what had been achieved at the 2003 review
- What was happening *now* and who were the beneficiaries *now*
- Impact on church attendance and finance.

This review was trying to establish what makes community projects, and indeed churches, sustainable.

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It found that whilst community activities were still taking place, generally there was less happening than in 2003 and in some cases the vision had been lost. The reasons included overstretched volunteers and a surprisingly high turnover in leadership.

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One of the most positive things was that the vast majority of *churches* had benefitted from the provision of good facilities giving opportunities for different forms of worship, fellowship, training courses, festival meals and financial stability.

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But the overarching finding of this review was that community projects, ***and churches***, are successful and sustainable due a regular supply of willing, reliable and competent volunteers. A good example being the church of St Mary the Virgin in Wirksworth

SLIDE 13 EXTERNAL ST MARY THE VIRGIN

which, due to its kitchen in the transept,

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is still doing Soup and Surprise lunches every Thursday and lots of other things as well. I slipped this one in because both Becky Payne and I have connections with this church!

Living Stones has drawn on these findings over the years and has used them to inform and work successfully with individual churches. But we found that

churches were changing and building work to enable wider activity had given way to 'New ways to do church'. As a response to this and our dwindling workload Living Stones did a bit of navel gazing and after much thought and prayer changed our Mission statement to:

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"Helping church communities:

- *To reconnect with the society around them,*
- *To find a renewed gospel purpose, and*
- *To put their resources of people, buildings and money to best use in serving God and their local community."*

Living Stones was more about serving God than buildings.

(PAUSE)

In 2010 Living Stones was commissioned by

the then English Heritage to conduct a national review of "Listed Places of Worship at Risk". Its purpose was to provide information relating to Listed Places of Worship, to inform and enable the launch of EH's proposed "Listed Places of Worship" stream to their "Heritage at Risk" programme.

We produced a comprehensive piece of work which we called "Blessings or Burdens: Listed Places of Worship and their role in communities". It's still there, somewhere, buried deep in Historic England's archive mountain.

SLIDE 16 BLESSINGS AND BURDENS

What we found in our research was that, thanks to the heritage movement's excellent work on maintaining the built fabric of the nation's stock of cherished religious buildings the majority were in no

danger of being lost to the ravages of time and tempest.

What we also found, which alarmed us, and dismayed English Heritage since it was outside their control, was that many were in danger of being lost through irrelevance.

What people said to us were things like, " We have given our lives to caring for this building, but we have no idea who will take this on when we are no longer able to".

A young man who came to one of our focus groups in a rather fine historic place of worship said " As soon as I walked in here today I knew that this was a church I would not want to come to. I could see that all my time and energy would be spent on caring for this wonderful building, and that is not why I go to church".

Words like 'redundant' and 'friendless' have entered the vocabulary of those with an interest in church buildings, and our study suggested that more and more of today's Listed Places of Worship were at significant risk of becoming tomorrow's abandoned Historic Religious Buildings.

Lost, through irrelevance.

By changing the Living Stones' Mission statement

SLIDE 17 MISSION STATEMENT

We were acknowledging that many church communities **were no longer** connecting with the society around them, church was not seen to be relevant to most people's lives.

To be effective, the church must always be the Body of Christ in its particular place and time, to be relevant and add meaning to its own social and cultural context.

If relevant the church *can relate* to today in today's terms. In relating, it can *connect* and through connecting it can serve and add meaning to the society in which it is placed, by showing that the ultimate goal of humanity is found beyond itself, beyond culture, beyond fashion, beyond tradition.

But to *be* relevant it must set aside all that is *not* relevant. Not by reinventing itself, because much of what is valuable is the heritage from which it is formed, but by repositioning itself, evaluating *all* of its resources, re-working, and if necessary letting go of, that which hinders or does not serve its present-day calling.

And, as well as its language, its rituals and its traditions, that includes *its buildings*.

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This is a conundrum that preoccupied Living Stones for over forty years: how to help the body of Christ to be relevant to the community it serves whilst trying to hang on to, and care for, its heritage of religious buildings.

One of the questions we raised through the Blessings or Burdens focus groups was whether, like in several European countries, the state should take over the care of historic religious buildings – the answer was a resounding “No”! People seemed to think that if the state had control of the *buildings*, the next thing would be control of the *church*.

But, as I've already argued, if the historic building cannot be made to serve a relevant gospel, then either the building must go or the relevance of the gospel must go. But the building must be protected, that is the law of the land. And

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society, in its wisdom, entrusts that protection to those same people whose *real* stewardship is the fragile living gospel.

And those people, especially in rural areas, are getting fewer and older and these numbers will not increase unless the church regains its relevance to people's lives.

With only about 5% of the population regularly worshipping in church buildings, there are an awful lot of "casuals" those who enter church only for baptisms,

weddings and funerals. To many of *them* the church *building* important and something that must not be changed. To most of those people the "history" of that historic church building is *their* history, where they were baptized, where mum and dad were married, where great aunt Elsie was buried – they couldn't give a toss that those Victorian pews are preventing café church or services in the round happening – things that might help making the church relevant to today.

To many history professionals, the historic church building is viewed as a repository for fine alabasters, stained glass and wall paintings with little thought to their actual purpose or those of us working in them.

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Church buildings are not museums, they are the place where the *living* gospel is preached. If the church is going to survive

then it must be relevant and that means that if church buildings need to change then let them be changed.

For me the history of historic religious buildings is what has happened in them. History is about *people*, and as our research has shown, the survival of all that happens in church buildings is about *people* - and most of them are volunteers.

So, the message on my postcard is:

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- Volunteers are the greatest resource the church has, listen to them, value them and support them in every way. Those are the people who are caring for our historic religious buildings, those are the people who are keeping the church going, and

- If the church is to survive it must be allowed to be relevant to today and this includes how historic buildings are used.

If we don't let church buildings be used in a way that is relevant to today then surely we are preventing what will be the history of tomorrow.

Thank you