

Chris Catling for Big Update 10 June 2025

In the next 15 minutes I want to try and give you all a picture of where we are with regard to religious heritage in Wales, the challenges we face and how we are responding.

I know that you all face similar challenges in the rest of the UK, and I will be very interested to hear whether anybody here has any suggestions to offer about how we tackle these problems.

First some facts and figures.

Wales has 1,266 Anglican places of worship

70 per cent are listed: 138 at Grade I, 331 at Grade II* and 429 at Grade II.

Wales has a further 1,838 chapels that remain in use

That is already far fewer than the 6,500 or so that have been built since the late 17th century, the oldest being the Maesyronnen Chapel, built in 1690.

Of the 1,800 survivors, 867 are listed, so around 47 per cent, including 76 at Grade I.

All told, that is a huge heritage resource – I don't need to remind anyone here that these buildings represent an extended national collection of sculpture, decorative arts, architecture and archaeology; their evidential value is massive as is their associative and community value, not to mention the spiritual value and the value of the good work done by the congregations that use and support these buildings.

The scale of the threat to these buildings is hard to estimate because the congregations do not like to publish figures that imply terminal decline.

10 year's ago Cadw estimated that 10 per cent were then at risk of closure.

I think the figure today is more like one third.

Looking at Anglican churches alone, 89 churches closed in the decade from 2002 to 2011

136 closed in the decade 2012 to 2021

If that rate of increase continues, some 300 more will close in the decade we are now in – 2022 to 2031.

My organisation, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, hopes to be able to put some more precise figures on this soon. Ten years ago we carried out an audit to find out how many chapels remained in use for religious purposes – that is where that figure of 1,838 comes from that I have just quoted.

We have applied to the National Lottery Heritage Fund for a grant to repeat that audit and if we are successful – we should know next week – we will embark on an exercise to find out how many have since been lost; we will also try to find out how many more remain at risk and what the trajectory looks like.

We are all familiar with the reasons for the closure of places of worship.

All the Anglican diocese in Wales have implemented Ministry Areas – that is, geographically-based groups of parishes, led by a team of lay and ordained ministers.

That has led to parish consolidation and the identification of churches that are no longer considered sustainable.

Something similar is happening amongst non-conformist congregations; several congregations are consolidating around one central building and disposing of the surplus.

That is something that we might regret from a heritage perspective, but that reduces the burdens of maintenance on the congregations themselves and brings in money that can be spent on social purposes.

Do I need to spell out why any of this matters? To this audience, perhaps not.

Put bluntly, we are facing a loss of heritage on a scale comparable to the Dissolution.

As I said earlier, places of worship represent a massive extended national museum of art, architecture and archaeology hundreds of times bigger than any national museum.

Imagine a world in which every church is now a private home, in which all that heritage has been closed off, in which all the buildings that form the core of the Pevsner volumes are closed forever to study, inspiration and enjoyment.

It was to try and tackle this issue that the Places of Worship Forum in Wales came together in 2015.

This is an informal body with no official status, and about half the members are property managers employed by the major denominations in Wales to look after their built estate. The other half consists of people like me and Rachel Morley, representing a range of heritage bodies with an interest in places of worship.

They include Cadw and the Royal Commission, the Friends of Friendless Churches, the National Churches Trust, Historic Houses & Places, Addoldai Cymru, Capel, God's Acre, the IHBC, various amenity societies, and the Council for Voluntary Action in Wales.

We have been meeting now for ten years – initially in person and latterly online – mainly to share and coordinate our individual activities, but mainly to showcase a number of inspiring projects across Wales, ones that have given a new lease of life to places of worship both for religious use and use by the wider community.

Approaching the tenth anniversary, we decided the time had come to take stock, so we recently undertook a critical review of what had and had not been achieved in the last decade. The results were distilled into a new draft Action Plan, and this had three very broad conclusions as well as some more detailed ones.

In broad terms, we agreed that we need to persuade everyone responsible for places of worship that disposal should be the very last resort only to be considered after every other option has been tried.

Closing places of worship is bad enough, but a mothballed building can be brought back into community use; but if you sell a chapel or church, access has been lost forever.

The 'last resort' principle implies that those making the decisions should consult widely on alternative uses that will keep those properties in

community use. They should be open to listening to stakeholders instead of acting unilaterally, as tends to be the case at the moment.

Secondly, and this follows on from the first point, those of us who care about religious heritage need to have much more of an impact.

We need to be talking to senior decision makers within each denomination and jointly working out the best ways to deal with the problem of closure. That isn't happening at the moment.

On the other hand we need to engage with the wider community to ensure that they are aware of what is at stake. Sad to say, many people are indifferent and some are actively hostile towards organised religion, and these attitudes are getting in the way of an awareness of why the buildings matter – and here I am making an explicit distinction between the buildings and whatever religious practices they support.

Our challenge is to find ways of encouraging people to come through the door and discover the richness of the heritage that these buildings represent.

We have an important job of work to do to raise awareness of the threat of closure; people take for granted that churches will always be there and that somebody else will maintain them so they are always available for weddings, funerals or school carol concerts. The people who do look after churches are already heavily encumbered – we must not add to their burdens, but must help to share the load.

And that leads to the third challenge: I was in a meeting recently where somebody said that Grade 1 churches need Grade 1 people.

So in addition to the task of instilling wider public awareness, we need to encourage people within the community to come forward and volunteer their time and services to look after places of worship. Just a sense that people are fed up with the erosion of their communities; the church or chapel is the last surviving community asset and people want to keep them going.

Now so far in this presentation I have done the easy bit – it is easy to identify problems and say what should happen in a perfect world.

I probably sound like those politicians who use the media to rant on about what they think is wrong with the world and blame the Government or somebody else for not fixing the problems without having any realistic solutions of their own.

So, lets look at solutions: we have a few.

1. Training for congregations to enhance their ability to recruit volunteers, to undertake fundraising work, to mount and manage an events programme, to undertake community engagement work and to understand the options for using places of worship for different community purposes.
2. Alerting non-religious community organisations to the potential of places of worship as homes for their activity; and alerting funding bodies to the opportunities to achieve their objectives through supporting the work of places of worship communities.
3. Mounting a sustained long-term awareness campaign designed to stimulate a national conversation about the future of churches and chapels, including a touring exhibition to highlight the extraordinary range and quality of Welsh places of worship.
4. Encouraging a culture among places of worship of being open to visitors and promoting their heritage (including a pan-Wales Churches Unlocked Festival or making greater use of the Open Doors Festival).
5. Undertaking research to understand what works best in generating visitor income and what role places of worship can play in tourism, pilgrimage and events.
6. Training for ministers (religious ministers, not politicians, though they could do with training too); training ministers in their responsibilities with regard to the stewardship of their church or chapel (especially if it is listed).
7. Working with senior decision makers to carry out audits and forward planning to underpin early warning of buildings at risk; this enables communities to respond early and for heritage agencies like mine to undertake a programme of pre-emptive recording of places of worship that are at risk of closure.
8. Clear advice on the alternatives to closure and on the legal options for community asset transfer and covenants.

9. Promoting examples of benign alternative uses, working with architects and local authority conservation officers.
10. And where closure is unavoidable, providing authoritative advice on orderly closure, archive repositories, oral history work and alternative uses for portable and fixed furnishings.

OK – arguably a lot of this is still in the ‘perfect world territory’, and there are two essential pre-requisites before any of the dream can be turned into a genuine action plan.

One is to identify people or organisations willing to make an unambiguous commitment to delivering these actions; the other is to find the resources to enable them to do so, since there are costs involved in all of them.

All I can say at this stage is that conversations are taking place about all these issues. The National Lottery Heritage Fund in Wales shares our concerns and has been tremendously supportive. As I said earlier, we are waiting for the lottery trustees in Wales to make a decision later this month on our application for a major programme of work relating to Wales’s distinctive non-conformist heritage, and if we are successful, the project will embrace several of the ten actions that I have just listed.

The National Churches Trust is currently very active in providing training and support for those congregations who want to keep their places of worship open, and we have benefited greatly in the last 18 months from the NCT’s Cherish programme – also funded by the Lottery – which has paid for a development and support officer in Wales to work with communities in Wales.

The NCT has also generated very valuable publicity over the last several years about the value of the social work undertaken by religious congregations with their House of Good report.

Plans are in hand for further publicity by the NCT and other heritage bodies to maximise the impact of the fiftieth anniversary of the groundbreaking Change and Decay exhibition at the V&A, mounted by Sir Roy Strong in 1977 which did so much to raise public awareness of the loss of places of worship half a century ago.

And there are conversations going on in Wales too about how the heritage, arts and cultural sector can be more effective against a

background of budget cuts – some of you will have seen the Senedd Culture Committee's report showing that Wales is second from bottom in Europe in terms of government funding for arts and heritage, but the Culture Minister has just published a new Culture Strategy for Wales and is inviting responses.

One question being discussed is whether we need the Welsh equivalent of the Heritage Alliance. There is understandable reluctance to set up yet another body given that the number of stakeholders in Wales is relatively small and it would be the same people involved as already work together on a range of issues, so is there an existing body whose remit could be expanded to become a Welsh Heritage Alliance? The Welsh Heritage Group, which consist of those amenity societies that statutory consultees in the planning process is due to debate the question of whether to broaden its activities, which would mirror the situation in 2002, when the initiative to set up the Heritage Alliance – or Heritage Link as it was back then – came from the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies, with seedcorn funding from the National Trust.

Alternatively, is there an opportunity for closer collaboration between the members of the Places of Worship Forum to work with this body – the HRBA – and / or with the Heritage Trust Network, the body that is already very active in supporting communities taking on surplus places of worship in Scotland and that could bring valuable experience to the Welsh situation.

I could go on to speculate on the outcome of these discussions, but it would be wrong of me to do so. I hope I have been able to give you a clear outline of the situation in Wales, and all I will say in conclusion is that we are likely over the next few months to see some solutions beginning to emerge – and we certainly need to do so because we will not be thanked by future generations if we do not provide adequate stewardship for the religious heritage in Wales and if we allow it to be privatised, thus denying access to future generations to heritage that thankfully remains at the moment a communal possession of immeasurable significance and value.

Thank you for listening.