

Pilgrim churches: a possibility for the Church in Wales

This article is based on a paper discussed by the Representative Body of the Church in Wales. The concept of Pilgrim churches is now being taken forward on an exploratory basis, as explained in the final paragraph.

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The issue

THE CHURCH IN WALES possesses a large number of small, remote churches and chapels in rural places. These serve a tiny congregation and have few members. They are largely unviable and cannot meet their parish share commitments.

If declared redundant, sale is possible but often at a low value and the after use does little for the mission and ministry of the Church. The large-scale redundancy of these buildings will impact very negatively on the mission and ministry of the Church in terms of reputation and public perception.

The concept

These small places could be kept as monuments or shrines; as simple places where walkers/pilgrims/tourists can visit for quiet contemplation and prayer. The approach would be that of basic care and maintenance, such as gutter clearance and minor holding repairs for safety. The buildings would be left in a 'basic state' with no heating or electrics.

A local person or group would need to be responsible for cleaning and 'keeping an eye' on the building from time to time. There would be no formal services but occasional worship activities could take place if the wider parish wished them to happen. Some funds would need to be raised annually to carry out basic maintenance and cover public liability insurance (perhaps £1000–£2000). The idea is that Community Council, Representative Body of the Church in Wales (RB), Diocese and other local parties might contribute into a joint fund.

How does it work in detail?

Pilgrim churches are redundant churches which the Church in Wales has decided to retain as simple, wayside places for visitors. Retaining such buildings costs money (insurance, repairs etc) and these costs will be covered by joint cooperation between province, diocese and local people.

To be a Pilgrim church, a building should meet the following criteria:

- Small in size – generally single cell, simple buildings
- Generally in reasonable condition – minor works only

- Heritage value is not a major criteria but generally listed buildings will fall into this scheme
- Located in a visitor area e.g. on walking or cycling routes
- A bedrock of local support including from the PCC
- Not obviously re-developable for significant value
- Supported by the bishop of the Diocese

The management arrangements for such buildings will be as follows.

1. Use

The Pilgrim church will be open every day for visitors. A local person will agree to open and lock up as necessary (or potentially a timed lock could be installed).

The local PCC should agree to hold around six public services each year in the building. The form and content of these services will be agreed with the Diocesan bishop.

It is possible for the PCC to use the church for funeral services, baptisms and wedding blessings. Marriages could only be held under Archbishop of Canterbury's special licence. Fees for such services would be apportioned between PCC and the church's fund appropriately.

Local people and groups will be encouraged to install displays, leaflets, and information about the church, community and local area.

Wider publicity for the church will be arranged as necessary e.g. local road signage, websites, tourist publicity etc.

2. Insurance

The RB will arrange and pay for appropriate insurance cover for the building.

3. Repairs etc

Local people will need to be identified to act as caretaker for the building ensuring regular inspections and arranging minor maintenance as necessary.

The Diocese will continue to include the building within its Quinquennial Inspection scheme (though surveyors should be clear that a 'minimum necessary' approach is to be taken). Action to address identified issues will be agreed between the parties.

Funding of such repairs will be addressed as necessary between the Diocese and RB.

Generally, it is anticipated that electricity and gas supplies will be cut off to minimise costs. However, a decision will be made in each case depending on the likely running costs and the condition of the electrical installation.

Grants may be applied for from external bodies if deemed necessary.

4. *Funding*

Any funds held by the PCC specifically for the church at redundancy will be held in a special fund for the church.

- Collections raised at services in the church will be passed by the PCC to this fund.
- Donations for the church may be accepted for inclusion in the fund.
- Fees for special services (baptisms, funeral services etc) would be apportioned between PCC and the church's fund on a 50-50 basis.
- Expenditure (electricity, maintenance, repairs etc) will be paid from the church's fund held by the Diocese. Any shortfall will be met by the RB and/or the Diocese.
- All expenditure will be agreed in advance by the RB and the Diocese.

5. *Caretaker*

A local person will be identified as the caretaker. This person will work as a volunteer for the Representative Body and will perform the following duties:

- To arrange regular inspections of the church to check for security, need for repair or maintenance and to keep the building interior reasonably clean
- To identify and manage other local people who wish to volunteer to help care for the church
- To report any building problems to the nominated RB/Diocesan contact to agree action
- To arrange for minor maintenance tasks to be undertaken either personally or with a local volunteer (for simple low level tasks such as cleaning or gully clearance) or via a local contractor as agreed with the RB/Diocesan contact
- To arrange to open and unlock the building each day or other timetable as agreed. This can be done personally or with the help of other local volunteers the caretaker might organise.
- To set up a hospitality table for visitors with simple refreshments such as bottled water and fair-trade products (to be funded from an honesty box)
- To liaise with the PCC over the arrangements for special services to be held in the church and organise accordingly
- If possible, to organise displays and information relating to the building to inform visitors and arrange special open days etc. This work might be undertaken by other local volunteers the caretaker might identify.

The caretaker and all volunteers will be covered by the RB's insurance arrangements for public liability.



Fig. 1: St Garmon's, Llanarmon Mynydd Mawr. The final service in the church as a parish church was held in February 2014, and the parish was amalgamated with a neighbouring parish. However the church has not closed, and six services are being organised for the current year. (Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales)

An example

The first Pilgrim church is being developed at St Garmon's, Llanarmon Mynydd Mawr (Fig. 1). This church sits on the southern end of the Berwyn Mountain range to the west of Oswestry.

The PCC do not feel able to continue their ministry from this church, but there are a number of local people who want to see the church retained. Its small size, good condition and great location make it an ideal Pilgrim church. The surrounding graveyard is owned by the Community Council.

At the time of writing (July 2014) the following weblink gave details of service times at St Garmon's: <http://stasaph.churchinwales.org.uk/news/2014/01/new-era-for-st-garmons-church/>