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Omitted credit: the photograph of St Mary's Mundon, Essex on the back cover of the previous edition was by Chris Bright (www.flickr.com/SparkeyB).

Challenges facing congregations undertaking major projects

Becky Payne

Becky Payne is a former policy officer at the Church of England's Cathedral and Church Buildings Division where she helped to promote the potential of church buildings as a resource for the whole community. She is now a freelance consultant on sustaining historic places of worship.

IN A RECENT BOOK (details of which will be found at the end of this article), I described the changes that have taken place in Oxfordshire's churches over the last 30 years, focusing on projects to meet modern worship needs and open up the church space for wider community use, and discussing the successes and limitations of extended use.

Twenty-five churches were included in the book, chosen as examples of best practice and because they illustrated the full range of situations to be found in Oxfordshire, and because on the whole they are successful. Some churches, often those which had been sub-divided in the 1970s or 1980s, wished to return to a single architectural space, while others wanted to create enclosed zones. To give some context, the projects I looked at ranged in cost from £100,000 to over £1 million and from major re-orderings of the interior to housing new facilities in an extension, at the base of the tower or at the end of an aisle. Overall, just under 50% (12 cases versus 13) kept their pews or retained at least half of them.

Most of the churches in the case studies reported positive outcomes, including an increase in footfall and income, new people joining the congregation, a stronger relationship with non-churchgoers, increased community well-being, and an increase in the number of people who value the church and who will help to maintain it.

Yet there were six major areas of challenge that came up time and again. This article discusses these challenges, in the hope that this will be useful to those undertaking a similar journey.

Challenge 1: Managing Opposition

All the churches recognised that consulting with the wider community was essential to identify how to help to meet some of their community's needs, and to gain additional person-power to make these projects happen. Most churches had tried very hard to communicate in various ways, with questionnaires being pushed through doors asking people for suggestions on how they would like to see the church used, open meetings held to discuss proposals, and regular updates being provided through newsletters, websites and public displays of plans and drawings.

Yet most if not all of them faced opposition. They found it required a good deal of sensitive negotiation to bring people onside when major changes were being proposed to a sacred

place, loved by its community. Along with the many positive responses, there are often those who expressed genuine concerns and in a very few cases, downright hostility. Such objections came from within the Parochial Church Council (PCC), from members of the congregation and from the local community.

This is not new and the major changes made by the Victorians in the nineteenth century also met with opposition. Those undertaking research into the history of St Thomas of Canterbury, Goring where concern was being raised by members of the local community about a present day proposal, found that opposition to changes proposed in the 1880s led to several animated public meetings and the then incumbent being accused of 'suppressing criticism and advice from the Diocesan architect'.

Some of the opposition comes from fear of change, which can evoke complex emotions, and in this context, challenges many people's expectations of what a church should look like. For instance, many people, both from the wider community and the congregation, see pews as essential to the spiritual feel of the church. 'They don't think they've been to church unless they've sat on a pew' was one remark made by a churchwarden, whilst the other churchwarden explained how she has gone along with removing the pews because she realised that it was for the good of the church but that for her, 'it doesn't feel church any more and some of the mystery has been lost'.

As for facilities, even today, there are many who do not feel it is quite right to have a toilet in the church – fearing disruptive noises and saying 'that we haven't had a toilet for a 1,000 years and what's wrong with using the gravestones' – needless to say, this objection is made in the main by *male* churchwardens.

In a small community, any such discord can be painful. Churchwardens and incumbents told me that they listened to objections, and by acknowledging that there were genuine concerns were better able to openly engage in discussion. Some organised trips to other churches where projects had been completed or invited speakers from those churches to come and talk to a public meeting. Others amended their original proposals, some acknowledging that it had produced a better result.

One lesson is realising how hard some people find it to imagine the finished outcome (see box on the project at Chadlington (Figs 1–2)). Another is to ensure that everyone involved in the project is telling the same story. This means everyone - the incumbent, the churchwardens, flower arrangers, people who run the coffee mornings – being able to say what is happening clearly and simply e.g.: 'we are putting in toilets and a kitchen so that more groups can come and use the church'. Mixed messages can start the rumour-mill which can take a long time to unpick.

St Nicholas, Chadlington: dealing with a range of views

In Chadlington, a small village of about 800 people, the Parochial Church Council (PCC) at St Nicholas (Grade II*) was proposing a fairly radical reordering of their church. (Fig. 1) The PCC sent out a description of the proposals to the whole parish together with a detailed questionnaire. Respondents were asked if they were in favour of developing the use of the building for community activities and if they were in favour, against, unsure or undecided about each of the proposals. In all, 450 questionnaires were delivered and 246 replies were received – a 55% response. The replies were collated and a detailed report was produced which recorded the yes and no responses graphically, and also recorded verbatim all written comments. Responses from regular church members were differentiated throughout from those of the wider parish.

There was an initial degree of opposition to all the proposals; some from those who attended church but most from the wider community. This was particularly so when the questionnaire listed specific areas, such as the addition of a kitchen and facilities, the possible relocation of the organ, the replacement of the pipe organ with an electronic instrument, screening the north transept and using the church for drama.

The biggest recorded 'no' was over the proposal to remove the pews to provide a more flexible seating system; and this came from the wider parish. Many saw the pews as essential to the traditional spiritual feel of the church and there was general anxiety over losing the special atmosphere of the building expressed by someone who wrote 'its essential characteristic 'tranquility' should not be sacrificed'. Among the concerns expressed were the huge 'unnecessary' cost of introducing new features, and, as one person put it, trying to turn the church into an 'entertainment centre and café'. Others recognized that changes had to be made if the currently cold and dark church was going to survive, but there was genuine concern that the building should retain its special quality. One person wrote that 'it is a beautiful building and changes must be beautifully done, (however) change is very important to bring the church into the new century'.

Other comments illustrated recognition of the tension between holiness versus homeliness or even office-ness, one person writing 'much of the appeal of going to Church lies in the fact that one is spending time in a place that does not resemble everywhere else. The kind of modifications that would work in a modern office building would not work in a Church'.

The responses to the survey helped to narrow down what the project should be setting out to achieve, and enabled the

PCC to respond sensitively to the concerns, as well as to take on board the positive suggestions made.

A surprise

This project also illustrated that some of the concerns can arise from the difficulty of visualizing what the resulting building will look like, especially if you are not used to looking at plans. While the new underfloor heating and floor was being laid, all the pews were stored in a local barn so that they could be put back into the church, this being the overwhelming wish that came out of the survey. However, in the period between the new floor being laid and the pews being collected, people came into the church to look, and so loved the new space that the suggestion was made that maybe it could be retained. In the end – despite the initial opposition to pew removal – only twelve pews were put back and the west end is now clear for community space (Fig. 2).

In the end, some told me that, despite opposition, they had to take a decision even if at times it felt lonely. After all, they were the ones faced with large repair bills and declining congregations and the fear that the church might not survive if more people were not invited to make use of it. For them, it was clear that even if a congregation was prepared to endure a cold and damp building with no facilities, it was unlikely that community groups would. And in most cases, there was a positive resolution. As one vicar said, 'if you carry the majority with you then hopefully more will come on board and if they see it done others will come around'.

However the pressure of dealing with different views can continue long after the works have been completed. I have come across two cases where a church has taken the decision to remove the Visitors' Book temporarily. One vicar explained that they had met with very little opposition to the major re-ordering in the Grade I church and that it is now being used successfully for a wide range of community events as well as a place of worship. However, a short while after completion they took the decision to remove the Visitors' Book because of adverse comments written about the pews being replaced by chairs. It was felt that they were made by visitors from elsewhere and were not a true reflection of how people in the locality, whose church it is, felt about the changes.

Challenge 2: Obtaining permission

The churches all understood the need to gain formal permission for the project, but many felt that negotiations took too long. One church described it as a 'necessary evil' while others expressed

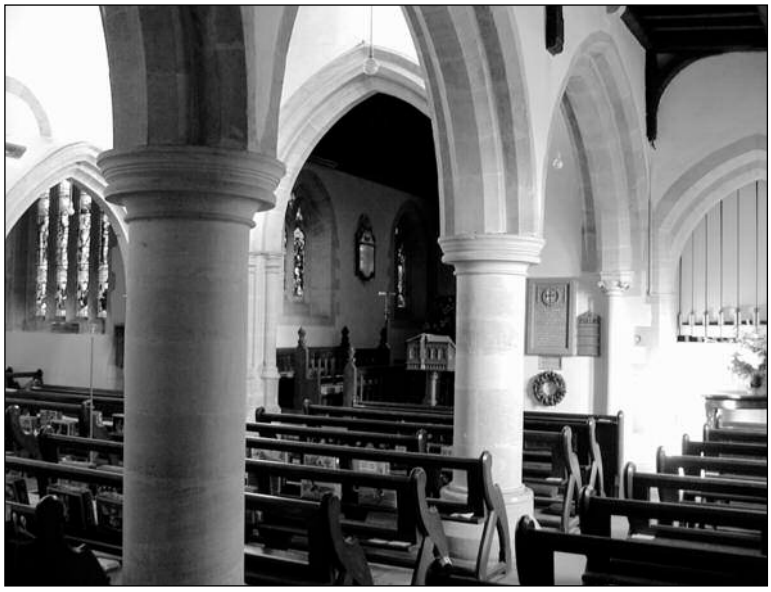


Fig. 1 (top): St Nicholas, Chadlington, looking across to the north transept before the recent alterations. (Revd Mark Abrey)

Fig. 2 (bottom): St Nicholas, Chadlington, looking from the south aisle towards the meeting room in the north transept and showing the retained 12 pews. See box in body of text for details. (Becky Payne)

frustration that they were prevented from making what they saw as essential changes. To them it was 'illogical' that in a church that had been re-ordered every century since the 1300s they were being prevented from implementing their vision and making changes for good liturgical reasons or to achieve a more flexible space.

It may be helpful to know that the most common area of conflict between a church and the denominational authorities or the statutory Amenity Societies was the removal of what a church would describe as a standard set of mid-Victorian pews and/or the wish to move other pieces of furniture. For an Amenity Society, moving the lectern two feet to the north might be removing it from its historical context; while for the project

committee, it might be key to being able to install a stage and encourage the wider use of the building.

A common theme was that churches should involve the denominational authorities and English Heritage as early as possible, if possible at an informal site meeting. When this was done, there was praise for the Diocesan Advisory Committees (DACs), English Heritage and other experts whose advice could unlock previously insoluble problems and who were often able to suggest solutions which helped to minimise impact.

The Amenity Societies came in for some criticism. As one churchwarden put it 'Those putting their oar in are not the ones dealing with the real issues'. But they have an important statutory role to play and in addition can be a source of advice and knowledge, and can help prioritise what is important and explore areas where a compromise could be reached. Ideally, churches should consult with the Amenity Societies at the same time as the DAC, when ideas are still being developed, but it is clear this does not always happen, and consulting them when plans have become to some extent fixed, perhaps with inadequate documentation as to how this point was reached, may create unnecessary difficulties.

Challenge 3: Fundraising

The PCCs involved in these twenty-five cases raised hundreds of thousands of pounds through a combination of congregational giving, local fund-raising and grant applications. For some of them it took years, especially when unforeseen problems resulted in additional works and therefore costs. Maintaining energy levels over many years is a big challenge, with many churches making more than 50 grant applications. But many churches said that local fund-raising activities, although hard work, were important as a way of continuing to engage with the wider community by keeping them up to date with the project and building strong relationships.

These lengthy timescales may mean that permissions can run out of time. Likewise, most major grant bodies attach tight deadlines to their grants which can also run out of time if seeking permission goes on longer than expected. In addition, grants are awarded with a variety of conditions and monitoring requirements e.g. the money has to be spent within a year, it can only be spent on a certain part of the project, or it has to be proportionate to the total cost so will only pay a certain percentage of any bill, but also has a one year deadline.

Several projects told me they very nearly lost big grants because of such interrelated problems. And there was fear of contacting the funder and explaining problems in case this meant that the grant was cancelled. In fact, those who did take courage

and contacted the grant bodies found them sympathetic to genuine reasons. Several churches told me that they found the Heritage Lottery Fund especially helpful in this area.

For those not used to completing application forms it can initially be a major task, and several churches said that a big frustration is that all the funders ask for similar information but in slightly different formats. Many of the larger projects reported that keeping track of the applications requires the dedication of someone with financial skills, experience and meticulous attention to detail.

Challenge 4: Individuals carrying the burden

I found many amazing people who were not only the catalyst, but also the driving force behind a project over all the years that it took to complete. Many of these people are rightly proud of their achievements, but are now exhausted and desperately looking for others to take on the future management of the project.

It is for this reason very important to set up committees or project groups to take on responsibility for the various aspects of a large project such as fund-raising or looking after the building though I recognise this can be difficult in small communities. The key step is to identify the skills needed; and if people with those skills cannot be found within the congregation, then looking for them in the wider community can be a great way of strengthening links between church and community. It is also important to continue to welcome volunteers, and encourage new blood to come on board.

Challenge 5: Sharing and managing the space

As one vicar said, 'Of course, some churches if they could raise the money totally themselves, would prefer to do it that way, so they could totally regulate the use of the building'.

However, if you have genuinely gone into a partnership with the wider community and asked them for their views and then for their money and they have given freely of both, then you have to be very sure your vision for the 'new' building encompasses 'the new ways in which the building will be used'. I found, however, that even those churches who believed in their vision of creating a building that is both an active place of worship and one that welcomes the wider community for a variety of activities (Figs 3–6) can find the reality bit of a shock.

Another vicar explained that 'I've had to sign documents that compel my successors in perpetuity to make available the new Room for everyone within reasonable hours. At times it has been quite tricky re-engaging with [what is] a new building for all intents and purposes and, moreover, a new or renewed

Fig. 3 (top): Witney Food Festival, in St Mary's, Witney, May 2013. (Rosemary Harris)

Fig. 4 (bottom): Sign for Farmers' Market held in St Peter and St Paul, Deddington. (Judy Ward)

relationship with the community. All of a sudden people wanted to come into it and use it for non-religious purposes and that is great, but it does lead to some complexity and negotiation'.

One vicar commented that the for the worshipping community, the concern is that in order to sustain our churches, 'We are in danger of turning our churches into tourist attractions and commercial venues rather than places of worship where God's people meet and where the gospel is preached, and they are possibly losing their specific role within the local community'.

Others expressed concern that people will come and use the building who may not understand its sacred aspect and may not show it sufficient respect.

The balance needs to be right and many people said that it is important to be clear and set out in a hire agreement what is allowed and to define what is appropriate. For instance, in one church, if an event is to include music then the vicar will always make sure that it is appropriate.

The benefit as one vicar explained is that wider usage has changed the way the village views the church for the better. 'I think that some of the younger people, those with young families, who have come to a dance with a bar in the church – and they are the age group when you didn't do that sort of thing and now you do – have been quite taken by the fact that the church is making the effort, and it is refreshing to them.'

At St Peter's, Hook Norton, there have been other unexpected benefits. For a dinner dance held in the church, a local man organised a light show which the Vicar said 'gave a tasteful nightclub feel to the church, but it was so stunning, he was invited to produce a light show for the Christmas Eve carol service, which was equally impressive and beautifully done, and very well received'.

Fig. 5 (top): A Pilates class taking place in St Mary the Virgin, Kirtlington. (Terri Hopkins)

Fig. 6 (bottom): Using St John the Evangelist, Stoke Row for Maths Week. (Stoke Row School)

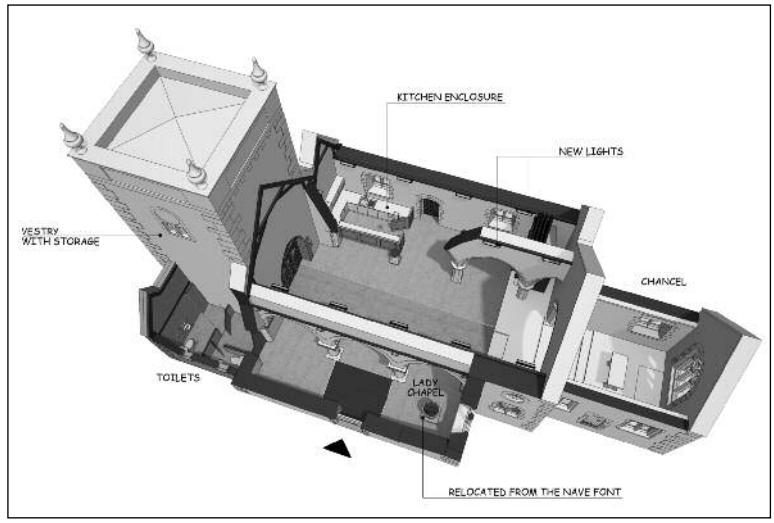


Fig. 7 (top): St John the Baptist, Stadhampton - 3D plan of the re-ordered church. The church is discussed in the box overleaf. (Wallingford Architecture Ltd)

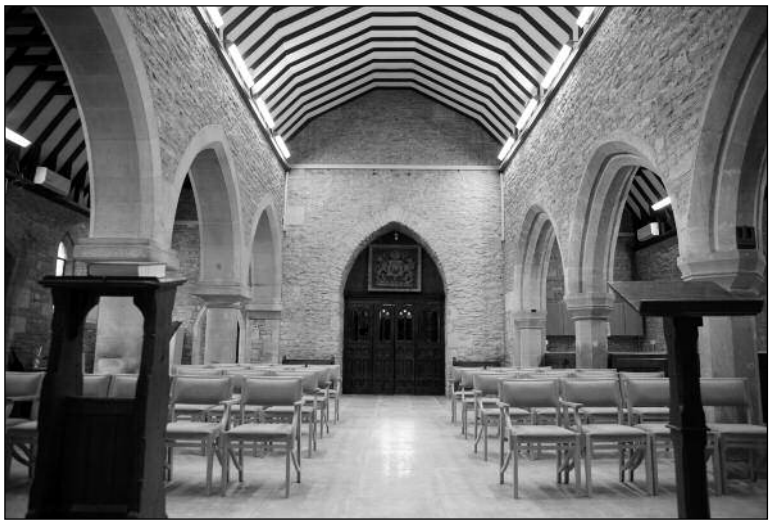
Fig. 8 (bottom): St John the Baptist, Stadhampton, exterior. The new extension on the south side of the tower can just be glimpsed. See box in body of text for details. (Mike Peckett)

One issue that is often not completely resolved is how to retain a quiet space for reflection at times when other activities are taking place. All recognised that it is important for churches to continue to provide a such space, which people still want – whether they see it as somewhere to pray or as somewhere to sit and reflect in the midst of a busy day. Often the chancel is identified as that space, or in other cases separate soundproofed spaces have been created to hold noisy activities such as the toddlers' group; but in some churches, for a lot of the time, that quiet space is lost. This does need thinking about in advance.

Challenge 6: Sustainability over the long-term

As we all know, a major key to sustainability is the long-term willingness of people to volunteer, and to serve as active

committee members. As many congregations are getting smaller, it is crucial that churches find other ways of making people feel connected to the church so that they value it and are willing to give time to help support it. One very practical outcome of a major project is that it can encourage additional people to help manage or maintain the building.



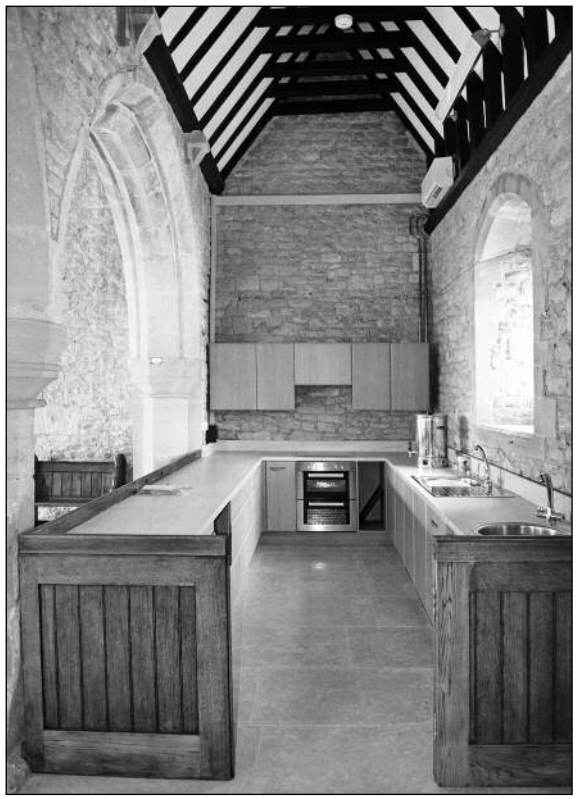


Fig. 9 (top): St John the Baptist, Stadhampton, the interior, now also acting as the village hall. This view towards the west end shows the new floor, chairs, and ceiling. Just glimpsed are the kitchen to the right (north side of church), and doorway into toilet extension on the left (south side). (Jola Reczynska JR Photo Studio)

Fig. 10 (bottom): The completed kitchen at the west end of north aisle at St John the Baptist, Stadhampton. (Mike Peckett)

St John the Baptist, Stadhampton: partnership agreement

In October 2013, St John the Baptist, Stadhampton reopened as the church and village hall following a major internal re-ordering; the building is now being used for a wide range of activities (Figs 7–10). This village of about 800 people had not had a community hall since the 1960s.

Protecting long-term interests

A village Building Project Team had initially been set up which invited the PCC (Parochial Church Council) of St John's to discuss the possibility of using the church. One of the major hurdles before the project started was desire for a formal agreement between all the key stakeholders to protect various interests. The Parish Council wanted a guarantee that if the church ever became redundant (that is, was no longer routinely used for worship under the control of a PCC), it would not be sold and that the new 'village hall' would therefore continue to be available for community use.

The situation was ultimately resolved quite simply by two letters to the Parish Council. The first, from the PCC, outlined their commitment to the project; their desire to see the church continuing for both worship and as a village hall for many years to come; and their eagerness to work in partnership with the Parish Council in the ongoing management of the new facility. It also explained the Church of England's policy on closing churches. The second letter, from the Team Rector of the benefice, reinforced support for the project. It explained the Church's redundancy policy in more detail and the statutory requirement to consult with the local community if redundancy were ever to be considered under the Pastoral Measure (1983).

Management of the building

For the first year of its new dual use, an interim management committee made up of both church and wider community managed day-to-day issues, while they worked out how a partnership model of management might operate. They have now set up the Village Hall Management Committee (VHC) which reflects a partnership

> *between the Parochial Church Council (PCC) (representing the views of the church community also the 'landlord' of the property) and the Parish Council (representing the views of the remainder of the village community). The aim of the partnership is to ensure that the remodelled Church, that resulted from the Community-Building Project 2008–2013, continues to work towards the Project's aim of creating a cohesive and caring community within Stadhampton and its environs. It is recognised that there will be some grey areas of responsibility as the building will have a dual use as both a 'Village Hall' and as a 'Place for Worship' but*

that by working in a spirit of partnership a way will be found to resolve them.

The partnership document sets out clearly all aspects of the partnership starting with the membership of the meeting which states that *the fabric of the building remains the responsibility of the PCC. However, it is in the interests of both parties that the building is sound, well insulated and well maintained at all times. Where significant funding is required it may be necessary for the PCC to apply to Grant Making Bodies for assistance. The VHC and the PCC should work in partnership in this Process.*

the VHC shall consist of not less than 7 and not more than 10 members. These must include: two members of the PCC (one of which will be the Churchwarden); one representative of the Stadhampton Parish Council; and the Vicar will have a standing invitation to all meetings.

It also identifies the responsibilities of each party in respect of running and capital costs including the cost of repair and replacement of village hall equipment which is the responsibility of the VHC, and the fixtures and fittings relating to the church which are the responsibility of the PCC. It goes on to state that.

The document sets out priorities for any income raised as well as a protocol for fund-raising. The chairman of the Management Committee, Ann Stead explains that for the most part fundraising is undertaken jointly by the Committee and the PCC. The main challenge is that because the VHC is a sub-committee of the PCC, and some funders exclude religious organisations, they are finding they are often shut off from these funding opportunities. She says that if this becomes a major problem, they may have to look at setting up a separate charity.

Part of this is down to perception: if the wider community becomes engaged with the building by coming in and using it, then they will start to see it more as *their* church rather than *the* church.

Shared responsibility

New models are emerging for managing church buildings in a way that involves the wider community. One example is Stadhampton (see box and Figures 7–10). Another is Elsfield (Figs 11–13), a small village of 100 people, where the new 'Village Room' was built in 2003 at the west end of the church. The main building remains the responsibility of the Parochial Church Council (PCC), but the village room is managed by a committee made up of church members and non-churchgoing residents. They raise the funds to cover its running and maintenance costs, currently £4,000 a year.

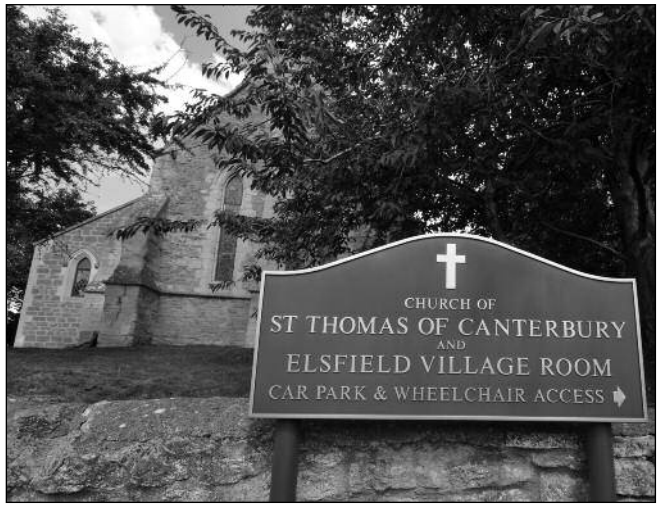


Fig. 11 (top): St Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield from the north-west, showing the existing vestry annexe (the north transept) and the north aisle extension housing kitchen, toilet and storage area. (Becky Payne)

Fig. 12 (above): St Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield, sign board for the church and village room. (Becky Payne)

Fig. 13 (left): St Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield looking from chancel to the new village room, screened off at the west end. (Becky Payne)

A third example is St John the Evangelist, Fernham which is now both the parish church and the village hall (Figs 14–16). The whole church building is now managed under a 30-year repairing lease from the diocese by the Fernham Village Trust, which has responsibility for routine maintenance. The PCC pays to hire it for services and other church activities such as weddings and funerals. The lease states that the Trust will pay 60 per cent of the cost of any necessary major works while the PCC will contribute 40 per cent, reflecting the split between chancel and nave.

Fig. 14 (top): St John the Evangelist, Fernham showing facilities at the west end. (Becky Payne)

Fig. 15 (bottom): St John the Evangelist, Fernham looking towards the east end. (Becky Payne)

Managing the building for income

There was a range of different experiences in terms of wider use and the effect on financial sustainability.

An online hiring system has been introduced in some churches while others use the benefice office staff to provide this service; in a smaller village it can done perhaps more informally. However some projects are finding that their new building is not being used as much as they had hoped and are having to learn how to market it more effectively. And some of the larger churches are having to decide whether they move to the next stage of employing a manager or becoming even more proactive in promoting and using their church as a cultural venue by employing a Programmes Development Manager.

In some cases, where the building is being used a good deal, and creatively, the church is still uncertain about whether this wider community use is going to bring in a sufficient income to help sustain the building in the long term. They do not want the church to be seen as a money-making organisation so do not always charge commercial rates, despite the fact that the running and maintenance costs of the building have increased – e.g. heating, lighting, hot water, and cleaning. There is also the question of who will move the chairs for all those concerts, set up

Fig. 16: Watching the Royal Wedding 29th April 2011 in St John the Evangelist, Fernham. (Neil Sutherland)

the platform for the orchestra or the drama group, put out the tables for the Safari dinners, and then make sure it is all put back ready for Sunday morning service at 8.30am?

Again, it is sometimes easier in a smaller place where volunteers are 'doing for themselves', but the time and effort needed for this work must not be underestimated. Whether large or small, people developing church projects need to realise that their business plan should cover life *after* the building works have been completed as they will be managing a much more complex operation than before, with the increased costs that flow from increased use.

Increased use brings in more income, which may well cover routine maintenance and minor repairs; but it will not necessarily cover future major repairs or further improvements to the building. Capital intensive schemes such as these will need more donations and more grants which again means more volunteer time spent in fund-raising. One vicar, who had been the incumbent at the same church for twenty-one years, said he 'doesn't know a time when I haven't been raising funds for the upkeep of the church. It's a credit to a village of this size that they have been constantly stepping up to the plate for the last twenty-odd years'.

Mission

Having more people crossing the threshold can also provide opportunities for mission. One vicar said to me that she had had more conversations about God while selling stamps than during her other more 'vicarly' duties. On the other hand, there is disappointment expressed by some whose hopes of the project increasing their congregation has not necessarily come to pass. One vicar said, 'My experience is most people who come to musical events, come to musical events and this notion that maybe they will be struck with the truth of the Gospel doesn't usually happen'.

❖ ❖ ❖

More research is needed to understand what these types of projects are delivering for the congregation, the wider community and the church building over the much longer term. One important study was done by Susan Rowe some years ago, and is still worth reading: she looked at those places of worship that were awarded Millennium Fund grants to provide community facilities to see what shape they were in, first after three years and then

again after ten years.[1] She found the majority were still healthy, a few had had to find new users and only a couple had failed to live up to the original vision. But many had suffered from key people leaving the village, interregnums, changes in population, and other organisations setting up in competition.

Such research would help those developing future projects to take the necessary steps to maximise their success, and would also help identify those areas where churches need the most support.

In the meantime, the six challenges I have outlined above were common to most of the projects I looked at, and I would strongly encourage churches to think about them well in advance of starting any major project.

The twenty-five case studies referred to in this article can be read in Becky Payne, Churches for Communities: Adapting Oxfordshire's Churches for Wider Use, *2014, 136pp, 150 colour illustrations, ISBN 978 0992 7693 07. The book was commissioned by the Rt Revd Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester and the Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust, and published by the latter, and all proceeds go to the work of the Trust. Available from www.centralbooks.com or through all good booksellers.*

Notes

1 Susan Rowe, *Ten Years on: a Review of Rural Churches in Community Service Programme*, 2009, available at www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/images/stories/resources/Ten_Years_On.pdf