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A beginning not the end for the parish church?

Richard Halsey

A talk given to the Ecclesiological Society at its Annual General Meeting, 26 May 2011

THIS IS A LECTURE of three parts. I will begin by outlining the start of Government grants for places of worship; the second part will look at the adaptation of churches for twenty-first-century liturgy and worship, and other purposes; and in the third part I will make some suggestions on how the sustainability of these buildings might be assured, that go beyond just asking Government for more money.

I should make it clear now that I am referring to Church of England parish churches and most of what I have to say relates to securing a future for rural churches. The future is rosier for the urban and certainly suburban churches, though the uncertainties surrounding the use of concrete and the often inflexible interiors of churches built after the First World War are real enough. A subject for a future autumn conference, perhaps?

Government grants for places of worship

The urgency and extent of the problem of repairs to parochial churches must not be allowed to obscure the fact that in the last 30 years, the Church has carried through a vast amount of repairs in sounder and on more conservative lines than ever before and that the total of such work is a solid achievement. The primary cause of the present state of disrepair is the enforced postponement of repairs . . . from 1939 onwards.

Not the words from a recent speech, but Ivor Bulmer Thomas's June 1951 introduction to a Report on church repairs commissioned by the Church Assembly the previous year. It estimated that a total of £4 million 'extra parochial cost' was needed over the next ten years and that once in good repair, an annual expenditure of £750,000 was required. Any money from the State should be like Arts Council grants, 'unconditional', and new county trusts were considered 'suitable for attracting those who are not habitual churchgoers but are well disposed toward the cause of church fabric'. That same year, the Gowers Report recommended taxpayer's money should be given for essential repairs to outstanding historic buildings and in 1953, the Historic Buildings Council (HBC) was set up to advise ministers on the first historic building grants. The Church of England declined to become involved, fearing State control over freedom of worship – don't forget that the 1913 Ancient Monuments Bill had proposed scheduling medieval churches as ancient monuments and taking cathedrals into State ownership.

Until his recent retirement, Richard Halsey was Policy Director for Places of Worship at English Heritage. He is now actively engaged in considering the future of historic churches through other channels, including being a Trustee of the Friends for Friendless Churches and Chairman of the Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust.

The repairs problem didn't go away of course though the 1968 Pastoral Measure brought some relief as dioceses were now able to shed their worst (and sometimes, their most lucratively sited) buildings. In 1971, the General Synod created a Working Party, chaired by David Say, Bishop of Rochester, to examine the possibilities for 'state aid for places of worship in use', to include those denominations represented by the Churches Main Committee. The Government wanted facts, and archdeaconries in Lincoln and Norwich diocese were examined in a project run by Peter Burman at the Council for Care of Churches. The minister, Lord Sandford then asked that it be extended to include urban areas, so Newcastle and Cheltenham were also investigated. The result was that '£1 million at 1973 prices' was considered the annual 'additional resource' needed to repair historic churches in England and Wales.

In January 1975, the Labour minister, Baroness Birk 'accepted in principle the case for some measure of State aid for historic churches and other ecclesiastical buildings in use', but not cathedrals, subject to agreement being reached on 'conditions, methods of repair and other matters'. Aid was 'not expected to exceed £1 million at 1973 prices'. However, 'in the present economic circumstances' no specific date for the start of a scheme could be given. It was only on 4 August 1977 that the Secretary of State, Peter Shore, announced the immediate start of a five year trial scheme as part of a package of works designed to stimulate the building industry. The sum of £350,000 was immediately available, with £750,000 for 1978-9 and £2 million the following year. In fact, in the remaining eight months of 1977-8, 450 applications were received, 65 offers made and just over £312,000 paid out. It was always said that on the 5 August 1977, someone from Long Melford turned up at the office in Savile Row for an application form and that Long Melford were offered the first grant. Another early recipient, Chesterfield was chosen for the front cover of the HBC report that listed those first grants.

There were three main criteria, much as today. The place of worship had to be of 'outstanding architectural and or historic interest' as required by the 1953 Act, the fabric works urgent and the financial need proven. As greenback listing had barely done more than the major towns and cities, a newly established Churches sub-Committee of the HBC determined outstandingness on the basis of submitted photos and a report from an Inspector of Ancient Monuments. First chaired by the architect John Brandon-Jones, it came to be chaired by the late Duke of Grafton and John Newman. The required standard was determined as 'mid-way in grade II*' and given that some



Fig. 1: St Andrew, Alwalton, Cambridgeshire has a 'tea cupboard' containing a sink and urn

meetings had to judge over 100 buildings, this precise point could wander. More than one uninspiring flinty pile in Suffolk got through because the chairman told us that 'the birds rise well there'.

The works to be supported were determined by a visit from a commissioned architect, that is someone in private practice and overseen by the principal in-house Department of the Environment architect – for many years Stella Eley, a staunch United Reformed Church lay reader who had been the project architect for the extension to the Natural History Museum.

I didn't join Richard Gem as the second churches inspector at the Department until Spring 1978, by which time there were huge piles of applications awaiting attention. Grants were initially offered at 50%, 'pound for pound' as the then Historic Churches Preservation Trust liked to say. But demand rapidly outstripped supply; no less than 367 of the 1977/8 applications were carried forward to 1978/9, to join the 625 new applications received in that year. With another 746 arriving in 1979–80, the scheme was suspended in November 1980, the normal offer reduced to 40% and priority given to increases needed to complete works already in hand. By 1981, 1400 grants for £8 million had been offered and £5.6 million spent. The HBC's report to Parliament that year drew attention to the fact that the 'need had been underestimated. The legitimate demands for help can be met fully only by a substantial increase in real terms in the funds provided for some years to come'. Part of the problem was that so many more places of worship were being declared outstanding than the Churches had predicted in 1973, including many non-conformist chapels.

Fig. 2: St Mary, Orton Waterville, Cambridgeshire. A 'pod' has been inserted at the west end of the north aisle with a kitchen area, storage and toilet



That same 1980 HBC report devoted a whole page to the need for maintenance and asked that dioceses consider setting up maintenance teams – a request repeated in following reports.

In 1981, at one of the regular Archdeacons Conferences hosted by the Synod's Working Party, the HBC Chairman, Jennifer Jenkins announced the introduction of grants in 1982 for the conservation of monuments and wall paintings, a scheme run with the Council for the Care of Churches for almost twelve years, during which time it came to cover stained glass and painted screens and ceilings too. From those conferences, two issues were constantly raised by the Church: the Department's insistence on using expensive traditional materials and the control the State had over future alterations. The latter was partly resolved by the so-called 'Gentleman's Agreement', a grant condition that ran:

No works of addition, alteration or redecoration or works not eligible for grant aid will be carried out at any time from the date of this letter, except for maintenance and minor repair works and works required for liturgical purposes which are compatible with the historic character and appearance of the building and which are reversible, without the prior written consent of the Department. This is in order that the Department may be satisfied that the works will not damage the fabric and fittings or impair the historic and architectural fabric of the building, for the maintenance of which the grant has been offered.

This recognised that with ecclesiastical exemption being examined at snail's pace by the Bishop of Chichester's Group, there was no listed building consent as protected secular grants

and until 1987, the Department and then English Heritage, had no right to comment on faculties or appear at a Consistory Court. Grants were only given under normal Treasury rules if there was a demonstrated need that could not be met from the applicant's own resources. Effectively then, there could be no financial redress for the Department if the grant conditions were not adhered to, as it could never claim the grant back from an impoverished congregation.

By the time English Heritage (EH) took over the scheme in 1984, over £4 million was being spent on churches grants, a great deal more than the £1 million at 1973 prices. The next major boost came in 1990 with £3m added by Government as some recompense for the payment of the Community Charge, but the really big leap came with the advent of the Lottery in 1995. By then, the nagging problem of ecclesiastical exemption had finally been resolved with the 1994 Order and in 1998, the so-called 'Gentleman's Agreement' was buried. A claw-back condition does still exist, but has not, to my knowledge, ever been activated.

In the early 1980s, the conservation lobby drew attention to two worrying impacts of the scheme, which if anything were aspirations being realised by both the Church and the building industry.

The first worry was over restoration and especially excessive stone replacement. Early casualties were the mid twelfth-century top stage of Iffley church in Oxford and the fourteenth-century roof of Great Livermere in Suffolk, the timber of which was rotten – though not so rotten that complete trusses could not be taken off with a huge mobile crane. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and the Council for British Archaeology led the charge, the latter (quite rightly) bemoaning the lack of properly funded archaeological recording. Money was diverted specifically to fund recording, but it was a cumbersome process and there was real difficulty finding people capable of recording church buildings, especially at short notice. Parishes complained of delays caused by such grant conditions, conveniently ignoring their own dilatoriness in pursuing Quinquennial Inspection recommendations for urgent work. Inflation was of course a major issue around the early 1980s (interest rates were at 15%) and costs were rising very rapidly, especially for lead, which the Russians were reportedly hoarding for nefarious purposes.

Large scale stonework replacement on big churches like Sherborne Abbey and Bridlington Priory was probably necessary, because little work had been done on them – especially at high level – since before the First World War. It was more questionable

with smaller projects, where thorough stone replacement remained the norm. The decline in the stone industry meant that some stones were hard to match – stones like clunch and Reigate, the ironstones of Northamptonshire and any colour of sandstone than mottled pink. Much French and German stone was imported and some inappropriate stones were used in default of the real thing. On balance, I think pressure from the grant scheme did encourage a few small quarries to expand and even to re-open and some bigger roadstone quarries were persuaded to provide the occasional blocks for building. It is also clear that the church grant scheme played a big part in encouraging craft and conservation skills; it revitalised many small traditional builders; and it promoted professional training for what we now call conservation accredited architects and surveyors. So it did achieve the original aims of Government to help the ailing building industry.



Fig. 3: St Andrew, Oakington, Cambridgeshire has filled up the base of the west tower with facilities



Fig. 4: St James, Stretham, Cambridgeshire. The church has used glass screening to create a meeting room in the north aisle and used the base of the tower for a kitchen and toilet

Adaptation of buildings

The second fear expressed c.1980 could now be seen as the unexpected bonus of the scheme. By removing the fabric threats and relieving the apparently impossible financial burden of fabric repair, congregations could concentrate on their core business of mission and worship. Parishes, pulled together by fund raising to match the ‘pound for pound’ offer from Government, began to want to use the building more and to improve the context of their worship; both involved changes and alterations that some of course found inimical to the qualities for which the State’s money had been given. Nave altars are ubiquitous now and I think it was Gavin Stamp who coined the phrase ‘the rite of coffee’ in his *Piloti* articles in *Private Eye*, but such post service fellowship is now of course the norm. Three Ely diocese examples show the typical solutions that have been pursued. Alwalton (Fig. 1) has a ‘tea cupboard’ containing a sink and urn, Orton Waterville (Fig. 2) a ‘pod’ inserted at the west end of the north aisle with a kitchen area, storage and toilet and Oakington (Fig. 3) has filled up the base of the west tower with its ‘new facilities’. Stretham (Fig. 4) has used glass screening to create a meeting room in the north aisle and filled up the base of the tower with a kitchen and toilet. Larger social areas were provided throughout the 1980s through new additions, most often in inappropriate octagons usually (and somewhat bizarrely) called a ‘chapter house’. The first EH guidance on new works highlighted the drawbacks of such extensions, as did the booklet by the Council for the Care of Churches that followed. But it was Norman St John Stevas and his Royal Fine Art Commission that railed against such additions and

Fig. 5: St Peter, Peterchurch, Herefordshire. A new enclosed west-end gallery provides various facilities, and access to the tower which holds a library.

5a: The nave and new west end arrangements

5b: The library in the tower, the space also used by bell ringers



with the SPAB, vowed to stop them. They have succeeded by and large, though the ubiquity of pew clearance today for social gatherings is not perhaps what they intended.

So accelerated the move away from the sanctity of the worship space imposed by our predecessors in the Cambridge Camden Society. In 1843, they commanded churchwardens

Take care also to hinder parish meetings from being held in the vestry or in the church itself. The ways in which holy buildings are sometimes profaned by those who never go into them at other times is enough to make the very stones cry out.

In a Birmingham suburb in 1965, research to determine uses in a proposed multi-purpose church discovered that events like church socials, parish meals, films, whist drives and wedding breakfasts were still considered *unsuitable* uses for a church by more than half the parishioners interviewed; concerts were only approved by 52% and children's activities by 58%.

Perhaps emboldened by the successful conversion of numerous urban redundant churches for new secular uses, congregations are today positively encouraged by the Church of England through its *Building Faith in the Future* initiative to engage with their wider 'community' and incorporate all sorts of uses and users to give their repaired historic building extended uses beyond worship.

This only follows one mantra of government guidance issued since the 1970s; historic buildings have to earn their living and it should be possible to adapt them for modern use without losing too much of the intrinsic character and significance that makes them worth keeping in the first place. That former bastion of the use-less, the Churches Conservation Trust, is now actively seeking community use for a number of its redundant churches and even the Friends of Friendless Churches (of which I am a trustee) can be more disposed to take on a building if it does have at least a couple of friends willing to engage with it and promote an occasional community event.

The most common approach is to create a meeting space (with adjacent disabled friendly toilet and facilities to make tea) which might be used independently of worship. Attempts at creating a village hall within a nave that is still regularly used for worship can lead to some odd looking interiors that are neither one thing nor another. More thoroughgoing projects create a new ambience, such as two Herefordshire projects.

Peterchurch (Fig. 5) is a recently opened, £450,000 scheme achieved with a combination of grants. It incorporates a community cafe, a Surestart programme, a peripatetic local authority advice centre and a library in the tower, mainly run and staffed by volunteers. The worship area in the eastern half of this four-cell, Romanesque, grade I church had yet to be finalised when I visited last autumn, but it will be possible to use the nave for worship.

Yarpole (Fig. 6) – opened last summer, cost £240,000 and was much more of a congregational initiative. The Parochial Church Council (PCC) worked closely with the village hall committee and the community to raise the £60,000 necessary to ensure grant funding for the remaining £200,000. The professional team then agreed to waive fees amounting to about £25,000 (around 10.5% of the conversion cost) so the cash sum needed from the



Fig. 6: St Leonard, Yarpole, Herefordshire (above and opposite). A new enclosed west-end gallery provides a café above a shop.

6a: The nave and new west end arrangements; the entrance to the shop can be seen under the gallery.

village was reduced to £35,000. Grants were secured from 13 different bodies including a £20,000 loan from the Village Retail Services Association. The largest single funder at £49,000 was Herefordshire Council through its 'Market Towns Initiative' funded by Advantage West Midlands (AWM). That sort of funding must now be in doubt, as AWM was the Regional Development Agency (now abolished) and this sort of local authority discretionary funding has been hit hard in the cuts. Once again, it is run by volunteers; as Richard Taylor observed when he visited another church community shop for his television programme, 'let's hope the volunteers still come forward in ten years time'.

Engaging non Church of England uses and users does of course tap into a much wider circle of support which, it is widely thought, will give the building greater relevance to the community it sits in and so guarantee its future. Signed up membership of most Christian denominations is falling, even if attendances at certain services like Christmas carols and harvest festivals – especially those in cathedrals – is rising. Just what are these people coming to church for? I am not qualified to delve



6b: The café, in the west gallery, with kitchen over the north aisle

6c: The shop, under the west gallery



into their spiritual or liturgical needs, but I feel sure that they are looking for the traditional and the comfort of familiarity expected in old churches. It is the rows of dark pews, stained glass windows, white walls and a somewhat distant priest and altar that they expect to find – the archetypal post Oxford Movement Victorian interior. But these occasional participants – which includes many brides and those who drop into churches when on a walk or killing time when visiting a place for other reasons – these occasional participants do not like finding fitted carpet, rows of chairs, drop down white screens and lots of electronic equipment.

Are these nave altars, electronic aids and west end facilities not just the twenty-first-century equivalent of the reforming zeal of an 1850 priest just down from Oxford or Cambridge, or the accommodating box pews of the late eighteenth century, the obliterations of a reforming Elizabethan protestant minister or even the interpolated chantry of a fourteenth-century local magnate? That is how they are often justified in statements of need. Any unease is dispelled by further specious arguments about naves functioning as church halls in the Middle Ages, conveniently ignoring all that superstitious stuff about saints, images and the rood altar. More honest is the belief that the Church as an institution is there to support and help all those who need it and so the use of its buildings to facilitate such Christian virtues is a perfectly logical next step. In that sense, I believe that today's community facilities are indeed successors to historical uses.

Most of the statutory participants in the faculty system today, though unwilling to express opposition to the principle of such changes for worship and mission, will work hard to ameliorate the potential damage to the traditional and/or historic character. The strongest opposition to change will usually come from local residents, as it always has of course. They will be dismissed by the PCC proponents as occasional attendees but will be grudgingly accounted for because they are precisely the wider community expected to financially support and to use the church in the immediate future.

Deep down, Anglicans may also harbour the hope that they can bring people back to Christ's Kingdom through the provision of drop in mid-week cafés and after school clubs. A parishioner at St Mary Cloughton in West Yorkshire in the write-up of their project on the *Churchcare* website says, 'We hope that maybe if people get used to coming into the building, they'd be more likely to pop in on Sundays'.

Time will tell.

I doubt that much of the electronic gear, the MDF cabinets or even the upholstered stacking chairs and carpets can survive more than a generation or so. However the Ely DAC is regularly seeing faculties now for the replacement of 1980s equipment with their current equivalents. And of course, once they are removed, traditional pipe organs, pews, stalls, lecterns and pulpits rarely come back; the pews removed and stored with such fuss following the landmark St Luke's Maidstone judgement were quietly (and legally) disposed of three years later.

There is consensus with the view that listed parish churches are part of the whole nation's heritage and so the nation (whatever that means) should make a financial contribution to their upkeep. A number of polls over the last few years have shown that the

general public think the State or the National Trust already has responsibility for historic church buildings. But is there a growing discrepancy between what the general public perceive as an old parish church worthy of their financial support through taxation and the needs of what the more energetic, expanding and thus viable Church of England congregations want to do inside that church in pursuit of their core purposes of worship, fellowship and community engagement? Might any dissatisfaction lead to unease about support from public funds for congregations that are destroying what is seen as traditional or even correct? Should a distinction be made between those buildings that embrace community use and lose their familiar Tractarian interior, and the traditionally furnished buildings, more readily seen as historic relics and worth supporting as effectively untouchable ancient monuments?

The emphasis during the last decade on ‘high level work’ means that in any case, the great majority of public money goes on repairing the external envelope and any internal work only comes as a consequence of repairing the roof or drainage. Further choices on what to support are already made by some funders on purely financial grounds – most obviously by the EH/Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) scheme where the more economically successful congregations don’t get grants or are given small donations for specific work. Tiny congregations with little in the bank and not much prospect of raising tens of thousands are given large grants, to the puzzlement of some clergy who see these as unsuccessful, even failing, units in their benefice. There is indeed some illogicality in the funders’ bias: if the long term sustainability of a church is only thought achievable by engaging greater community use, why give money to those who cannot guarantee such use? And that only begs the question, *when is a congregation not the community?* in small settlements? In my experience, the impetus to create community facilities usually comes from within the worshipping congregation, probably initiated by the incumbent even if the project is then managed by a lay person and engages external organisations.

The history of any parish church is bound into the whims and convictions of those who have used it and have been responsible for its care, good and bad. Individuals not bureaucracies have created these buildings and all their wonderful quirks that we cherish. Increased, and especially formal, third party, community engagement in an active parish church brings in others (such as the local authority) without such close ties. The Amendment Measure that allows sub-tenants in a consecrated building without invoking redundancy has helped create imaginative new uses, but I don’t know how far it has been taken up since 2007 (particularly

in rural areas) and I am unaware how much it has helped or hindered congregations to manage their property better. In secular conservation, sub-division of ownership and responsibility – the breakup of an historic landscape or putting apartments into a country house – is usually seen as a recipe for disaster without an overarching management system. The faculty jurisdiction ought to do just that, though how many DACs and their secretaries feel they are properly equipped to determine the installation of a medical centre or a new arts facility in a parish church?

The prime aim of the Amendment Measure is of course to enable grant funding from ‘secular’ sources aimed at supporting or servicing a community which might incidentally help repair the fabric. Quite how much of that funding has survived the cuts in public expenditure and where it now lies remains to be seen, though application of ‘Big Society’ principles should presumably mean money is out there somewhere.

The sheer number of parish churches and the very different scale and potential needs of the surrounding populations make it impossible to provide such developed community facilities in every one; the population range is just not there. This is especially true for the rural areas with many small villages each with its parish church but few if any other communal places and without any public transport. What these congregations need to survive (if not prosper) is a toilet, somewhere to make tea and, most importantly of all, some affordable heating. No matter how uplifting the sermon and invigorating the sense of a few being gathered together against all adversity, a cold church is simply unattractive for much of the year and untenable for any use beyond short acts of worship.

But can small village populations actually resource such work? Is there anyone in the congregation willing to pursue the building process, to fund raise and to fill in all those forms? Trevor Cooper drew our attention to the facts in 2004 and I don’t suppose that the trends he spotted have changed. There are more people living in rural areas, but fewer and fewer are church members. Non-church people can be cajoled to donate and will usually rally round (especially if the church is threatened), but someone has to trigger a project and then doggedly keep it alive. Once achieved, can the heating be afforded, can the new works be maintained and managed by the small congregation, especially if the hoped for new users don’t materialise? Even if the core congregation can get these works done, by projecting the present decline in membership we have to be pessimistic for the future of engaged Christianity on the present parochial model. Some admittedly limited research carried out by the charity *Living Stones* for English Heritage last year concluded;

Across the land the problem is the same. The system currently in place, a legacy of many generations of the faith-filled and the faithful dedicatedly caring for their place of worship, often making great sacrifices in order to do so, is coming to an end. The stark truth is that, in many cases, this would appear to be the last generation who will fulfil this function. In a very few years many fine buildings could have no-one left to care for them. Some of course do have a future, and evidence was seen of a promise of sustainability over the next few years, but these are a minority. Whilst interim measures can be put in place to help those who currently care for these buildings, now is the time to plan for when those people are no longer around to do so.

And General Synod was told last year that the average age of Church of England congregations is now 61 compared to the average age in the adult population of under 48 years.

How can these small, listed rural churches be kept as recognisable churches and not converted into houses? The corporate Church of England may have a strategy but it is not widely known and for those of us worried about the care of just the buildings, the fate of perhaps thousands of historic churches in the rural areas remains distinctly uncertain. Yet history tells us that they will survive and even in my short working lifetime with churches, the impossible has happened in lots of places. In my view, it is not as dire a position as was being faced before State Aid was introduced. The positives I think are:

1. After 34 years and hundreds of millions of pounds of public money, which has also been pump priming giving by others, both EH and the National Churches Trust can claim that 90% of church buildings are in good or fair condition – which my own experience bears out.
2. The general public are concerned for the fate of historic buildings and although there might not be the regular Christian or social commitment to the parish church that existed in the past, people do feel an association with their local church, they do want to have it available for their use (whatever that might be) and are willing to support it financially (but mostly on an occasional reactionary basis).
3. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is much more permissive of non-worship uses
4. After decades of increasing separation, the Church is beginning to accept that working with local authorities and government agencies is not a threat to its independence. The Established Church really does want to engage everyone and not be perceived as just the Tory Party at prayer. Even Mr Cameron (Eton, Oxford) told the Daily Telegraph last year ‘Our churches are important to our communities and we must do all we can to preserve and maintain them’.

Sustainability

But how? There are two major issues to address: money; and organisation and culture.

There just has to be some public money, just as everywhere else in Europe, but the detail of how much and from where eludes us, mainly I suspect because neither national or local government understands who actually owns churches – both presume it is the national institution, ‘the Church of England’.

Of course, at present public money is in short supply – but that shouldn’t delay thinking about solutions. State Aid took over 25 years to arrive and if I have learnt nothing else, working with Church and State requires decades to get anything done. It is not all doom by any means. The HLF is to continue the ‘state-aid scheme’ at £25 million a year until 2013 and shows every intention of continuing to fund repairs to places of worship at that level. The Government’s VAT refund scheme, the LPWGS is also guaranteed at £12 million per annum to 2016. No losses there, then.

The fabric at risk argument run in 1973 is a dead duck with surveys showing 90% of places of worship in good condition. But there is a strong argument to make about learning lessons from the past, protecting the investment of public money in a national resource and not allowing big problems to build up in the readily foreseeable future. The target to my mind should be State support for regular maintenance rather than major repair grants, building on the various schemes already in existence and by tapping into other people-based agendas for providing basic skills (or even community service?) (see Box 1). Giving 15,000 listed places of worship £500 a year would cost £7.5m annually – less than the sum EH has just withdrawn from the joint grant scheme with HLF CADW’s recent ‘Maintenance Matters’ discretionary grant scheme does just this and has been oversubscribed. The Church of

Box 1: Some considerations for a national maintenance scheme for churches

Basic maintenance for listed churches

- ◆ annual figure for agreed simple maintenance tasks paid from taxation to an organisation working on a diocese/county/region basis
- ◆ incorporate other buildings to make it more financially viable – non-listed churches, vicarages, schools, other denominations
- ◆ use of untrained labour, community service?
- ◆ once-a-year check for the parish, to complement the five-yearly architect’s report

England's lack of corporate interest on this issue, despite years of prompting, is shameful but amply indicative of the lack of central interest in buildings.

Continuing to stress the value of using church buildings for the wider community is an astute argument to run, especially if it can bring in the Big Society and localism. But it will quickly run up against the religious aspect and supporting religion is where politicians and grant givers get very nervous, worrying about supporting one religion and not others or, indeed, helping any of them. Remember that whatever legal basis it gives for leasing to third parties, the emphasis of the 2006 Amendment Measure is that the church remains 'primarily in use for worship'. As I believe that most successful community functions are initiated by active congregations, these are precisely the people who will also have a parallel desire to modernise the context of their worship which as I have already argued, runs the risk of alienating the concerned non-Christian public with their expectations of a traditional interior. Just supporting maintenance of the historic envelope, with separate grants for external repairs should at least be non-controversial.

But what about our numerous small listed rural churches, who might have a warm space, toilet and tea cupboard but no hope of more than occasional non-worship uses? Ironically, the parochial system that has kept them going over the centuries could become their biggest threat. They are now likely to be in a team or group benefice, sharing a priest who could have another paid job and with the sort of worship that forced Roy Strong to drive six miles every Sunday from his village to Hereford Cathedral. Pressure is building on the remaining churchwardens and PCCs, with their ever rising age profile. Big repair bills can focus minds but increases in insurance premiums, the diocesan share, running costs and funding clergy they hardly see, are all taking their toll on the decreasing number of committed church members. Pressure can also come from outside the parish, from the thriving urban and market town PCCs who feel that they are subsidising a lot of underused buildings and under-employed clergy scattered around their diocese, funding that they could use more effectively to further the Kingdom. The concept of an Established Church serving all the country equally is of little interest to such parishes.

But it is precisely Establishment or an historic view of it, which is the culture that has got to be changed at national and local level to give these buildings a future – and radical change may also allow the Church of England to survive too. Far too many congregations are inward looking and with a bunker mentality, reflected at national level by sloth in the reform of historic structures and positions. The recent suggestion to merge

three northern dioceses has not been as cataclysmic as it might have been, despite the assault on fierce local pride. Perhaps other mergers, often privately discussed, will now come out. Many congregations have finally got used to not having a resident priest, but they are still unfortunately perceived as lesser entities and there is an unspoken sense that only villages with a resident priest are really part of the corporate Church.

I am clear that it is vital that occasional formal acts of worship can still take place in churches that are no longer part of a benefice within the parochial system. It is not just an essential part of the significance of the building's character; it is what is expected to occur by those local non-worshippers who come forward to maintain the fabric. Occasional worship also happens to align well with another long established tenet for historic buildings, that the original use is the best use. If the Church of England remains Established, then national spiritual coverage has to be provided but by radically re-drawing the parish map. Perhaps we are already returning to the pre-Conquest minster system, with a group of priests centred on a major church but with responsibility for certain settlements. These already exist in some dioceses, with grouped benefices centred on a church actually renamed as a Minster. Most opposition will come from congregations hankering after their own parish priest and this is certainly an issue that the Church of England finds hard to address. But it must, as one thing everyone agrees is that the present muddle cannot continue.

Currently, the only long term legal options for unwanted buildings come via the 1983 Pastoral Measure. Aside from vesting for preservation, there are only two feasible alternatives for a rural church; the widely unpopular demolition, and house conversion, which the general population might find less disagreeable in principle but which is often fiercely opposed locally. A fourth option of vesting in the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF) until a permanent use arrives, section 51(c), has either been used to deliberately ruin a building or as a device to hand it over immediately on long lease to a charitable trust (as in Norwich). Although the Measure has been decried as too rigid in its black and white approach (a church is in use or redundant) this fourth option does actually offer the prospect of the building being mothballed outside the parish system, but remaining within sight of the diocese (Box 2). The building can still be available for occasional worship until a use or users come along, which might include a new congregation.

No DBF has been prepared to take on such a role and none will without new money, knowing that the 'living' church simply cannot find extra funds for 'dead' churches. If a DBF was eligible

Box 2: Four options for caring for churches no longer needed for regular services

<p>Diocesan Boards of Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ experienced in the management of voluntary groups ◆ local ◆ already responsible for the maintenance of parsonages ◆ church remains in the orbit of the Church of England ◆ can remain consecrated and controlled by the DAC ◆ <i>no culture of funding repairs or maintenance of churches</i> ◆ <i>would require new funding streams</i> ◆ <i>grant givers would need to recognise the new role</i> ◆ <i>not thought independent enough by locals?</i> 	<p>Churches Conservation Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ established, well known ◆ has adequate legal powers ◆ only for redundant CofE churches ◆ national charity ◆ can give grants to churches in the care of the DBF ◆ <i>arm of government?</i> ◆ <i>national vs regional?</i> ◆ <i>different funding sources?</i> ◆ <i>revolving or 'holding' trust?</i>
<p>Friends of Friendless Churches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ established charity (43 churches) ◆ can take on any redundant Christian building ◆ the CCT in Wales ◆ not attached to Government ◆ <i>currently dependant on legacies etc</i> ◆ <i>revenue funding for staff?</i> ◆ <i>trustees self-appointing</i> 	<p>Independent charitable trust(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ NCT, county historic churches trusts, and Friends groups already exist ◆ 'Big Society'- friendly as voluntary? ◆ volunteer basis closer to Church ethos ◆ usually very local ◆ more attractive to Lottery and charitable funding than national trusts? ◆ <i>governance</i> ◆ <i>national standards</i> ◆ <i>reliance on grants from Government?</i> ◆ <i>volunteers</i> ◆ <i>funding for revenue costs?</i>

for both maintenance grants and able to apply for one-off repair grants, then it would be no different to a parish church in use applying; it might even earn an income from whatever group comes along to use the building. But the culture is against this sort of intermediate state – which a former director of the (then) Redundant Churches Fund, Anthony Barnes, has unkindly termed ‘Purgatory’ – both within dioceses and also grant givers. As the legislation is there, I think it is another possibility that should be explored, because what it supplies is a corporate body capable of maintaining the fabric regardless of use and users, but within a legal system which is flexible enough to accommodate all those occasional uses and users that pop out of the woodwork, including worship.

I suspect that something like this actually already operates in some multi-church benefices, with some buildings being formally designated as ‘chapels of ease’ and so the financial responsibility of the larger parish they serve. Archdeacons (and bishops for that matter) are not looking to shut churches and have more important things to do than devise those top-down strategic exercises that

resulted in so many redundancies after 1968 – such as the diocese of Lincoln's *Into Tomorrow* document that shut so many churches in villages that have now expanded. These strategies are just not appropriate or acceptable in the more fluid and vociferous population that exists in England today. Formally designating churches as 'chapels of ease' will keep the lawyers happy, relieve incumbents and rural deans from the bureaucracy surrounding parochial status and keep the building recognisably within the fold – including the quinquennial system and faculty.

Though the Church Commissioners are duty bound to get the best deal they can, and dioceses are desperate to realise their historic assets, both are reluctantly realistic about how many rural churches can actually be converted into cash. That is why I think the redundancy rate continues at such a low level; the process will only be triggered when a congregation literally dies out (which with an average supporter age of 61, might become more common fairly soon) or be triggered when a struggling benefice or deanery decides in desperation that it cannot support so many lame ducks and presses to be rid of one or two. That could also become more frequent as greater financial burdens are put on shrinking congregations.

There will usually be people outside the Church who will want to keep 'their' threatened building in some sort of communal use, and who will be prepared to form a Friends Group. It is therefore vital to get a legal ownership system flexible enough to enable them to take on this responsibility quickly so that they can receive outside professional support as well as funding, but which retains a strong corporate body in the background. Vesting in the diocese keeps ownership local, within a church context and is probably the most flexible option.

The other existing options have their advantages and disadvantages (see Box 2).

The **Churches Conservation Trust** (CCT) is the statutory failsafe for important historic buildings and the Trust's current encouragement of community uses helps to dispel any lingering thoughts by Government or General Synod that these are just museums. The bar for acceptance has risen enormously though, as the Trust's funding has been cut by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, and if its Trustees get too aggressive in pursuing community uses in competition with struggling active parish churches, they risk alienating Synod which is always queasy anyway about the Church of England's contribution to the CCT. If properly funded, the CCT could be a revolving trust for huge numbers of marginal churches, simply mothballing them until a congregation returns or another user comes along. Better funding might bring greater regional devolution on the National Trust

model, perhaps. The Trust could even become a division of a regionalised English Heritage – as more than one recent Secretary of State has suggested – but that raises the question of just how far the Church of England wants to continue to be involved in churches out of current use and unlikely to be wanted back.

A serious disincentive to local fund raising and charitable funding could be the (partial) State ownership this would imply – though I think we are wearily getting accustomed to the idea of public/private funding for public utilities. Although CCT churches remain consecrated for worship, this can only take place at the discretion of the bishop and local incumbent. As one diocesan bishop has already observed, some Trust churches hold more regular services than nearby parish churches, supposedly still ‘in use’.

The other current main contender for beneficial preservation is the **Friends of Friendless Churches**, which has 22 former Church of England churches and one Baptist chapel in England and 20 former Church in Wales buildings. Its income comes from members, legacies and gifts and grants mainly from English Heritage and the HLF – mirroring the funding of parish churches in fact. A happy windfall of recent legacies is enabling the Friends to be much more pro-active, but the poverty of its first fifty years could very easily return. Once again, the churches have to be declared redundant from the parish system and are deconsecrated, though most retain altars and have occasional services at the discretion of the Trustees who always consult the local incumbent. This is a more flexible situation with regard to use than the CCT, but is financially much less secure and the governance of the Friends does not involve other organisations working in related areas – it appoints its own trustees – and the organisation is wholly London based.

There are **other trusts** looking after redundant churches, ranging from one-church trusts like the Melton Old Church Society near Woodbridge to the area trusts like those in Norfolk, Norwich and Ipswich. All are heavily dependent on volunteers and go through difficult times when at a low ebb – just like any parish church of course. Both the Norwich and Ipswich trusts hope to raise an income from letting their buildings for all sorts of uses, but these uses can be dependant on public subsidies and so insecure – despite heavy capital investment in conversion work. Such trusts might also meet the current localism criterion and their volunteer basis echoes their historic ownership too which might therefore be more attractive to Lottery and charitable funding. But these qualities have the same drawbacks as parish churches in their long term sustainability and inability to raise revenue funding for maintenance.



To conclude. It would be best in my view for all listed places of worship that are not privately owned to be eligible for a basic annual subsidy from public funds to cover maintenance, which based on £500 per building will cost about £7.5 million pa. The money would be best administered through intermediaries who run maintenance schemes. Additionally, as now, there would be a discretionary grant scheme again funded by the tax payer and/or the Lottery, aimed mainly at major repairs to the external envelope, but possibly including some basic facilities and for getting some decent interpretation in to every church, that covers the function and meaning of the building and its contents as much as the fine details of its architecture and long dead alumni. I would also like to press for my pet priority, the conservation of works of art and other historic contents, which is what many visitors actually concentrate on looking at when they visit and want to know more about. The £25m per annum presently on offer is not enough, but with limited numbers of craftsmen and conservators available and with matching money a little harder to come by, I suggest that only a modest increase is required at the moment to maintain the present good condition of most churches.

A very large safe pair of hands is needed to take on the basic care of many small rural churches, a body that would be eligible for grants and capable of accommodating all the various local users and groups that will come forward to look after the building. In the present legislation, I would like to promote diocesan boards of finance as the most flexible and appropriate option but I fear that the required culture change is simply too great to achieve much in the near future.

There is a lot to celebrate in the current good state of repair of most listed places of worship and in the strength of many congregations and communities who are adapting their churches to modern liturgical and communal use – just as their predecessors did before the tidal wave of Ecclesiological correctness removed all but worshippers from the community's parish church. This is surely the beginning of a new chapter in the fifteen-century history of the English parish church, perhaps turning the circle rather than re-inventing the wheel. But having experienced at first hand how long it takes to adjust anything involving both Church and State, we need to begin working at planning for the future now, whilst the buildings are still standing.

The Society would welcome offers of further articles on the issues raised by Richard Halsey in this lecture.