

# **BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE - towards a strategy for our church buildings.**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 When the Bishop set up the 'Days of Dialogue' it was intended that they would provide an opportunity for people throughout the diocese to air and share their views on matters of Ministry, Community and Finance, and that they would be more than talking shops. Action would follow. Some has already happened and more is on its way. This report is part of that further action in one particular area - that of church buildings. It appears alongside the Report on Ministry produced by the Archdeacon of Suffolk.

1.2 Church buildings featured in all three areas of the Days of Dialogue. They are obviously a matter of lively concern. The cost of buildings, their upkeep and repair, their insurance and their heating, their reordering and future use, are frequent items on the agendas of PCCs. For some their buildings are a burden that is becoming unbearable. For others they are a treasured delight. For most they are a mixture. They certainly cannot be simply ignored. The Days of Dialogue called for some strategic thinking about their future.

1.3 With the blessing of the Bishop and under the chairmanship of the Archdeacon of Sudbury a small group with representatives from each of the archdeaconries was convened in February 2003. We have met seven times. The more we have looked at the question, the more complex we realised it was. We became cautious about articulating an overall strategy. As a result we produced an interim report in 2004 to inform the diocese what we had been doing and where we had reached. This final report builds on that and the further work we undertook through parish questionnaires and strategy checklists in an attempt to gather factual information and to stimulate thinking about buildings in the parishes.

### **Group Members:**

*Ven John Cox (Chair)*  
*Mr Stewart Barber (until January 2005)*  
*Canon Edmund Betts*  
*Canon Robert Clifton*  
*Revd Norma Cole (until summer 2004)*  
*Mr Perry Hunt*  
*Mr Barry Vincent*  
*Mr James Halsall (Secretary)*

1.4 The question of church buildings is a matter of national significance, as the recent report 'Building faith in our future' from the Church Heritage Forum (2004) clearly shows. But we are convinced that we have to begin with what is local, for there are features here that are vitally important. Of course there are also central aspects of law and funding, policy and ecclesiology, which must also be taken fully into account. Sometimes there is a tension between what is desired

locally and what is allowed centrally. Some of the constraints feel out-dated, some get in the way of the mission of the church locally. But a free-for-all, even if possible, is not desirable either. We are inheritors of our church buildings and as such are stewards and not owners. But neither are we custodians of museums.

Church buildings are part of the resources we have for the mission and ministry of the church today and tomorrow. Mission is the priority.

1.5 It is the mission of the church that we seek to keep at the forefront of our thinking. And we wish to encourage the church in each location to view its church buildings from this same perspective. If we do not start there we shall become even more dominated and determined by finances than we are already. That is not healthy, nor is it the way forward for a faithful and hopeful church.

1.6 But while what is local is vital, it is equally vital that the church's view of its buildings is not, in the pejorative sense, narrowly parochial. Local identity, commitment and initiative are important when it comes to care for buildings but if the mission of the church is to be served by buildings and not bogged down by them, then our buildings need to be seen in a context that is wider than just the parish. To use language that has become popular in ministry, there need to be collaborative attitudes, decision making and action.

#### **St Edmund Way**

Five parishes came together in this new benefice and under a new incumbent are discovering the value of working in close co-operation with one another, sharing resources. Each community and building is looking to its strengths to contribute to the mission in the whole benefice. One village is the centre for youth work and a church that was getting close to 'redundancy' has gained a new lease of life, re-ordered for an emphasis as a place of quiet, learning and retreat.

1.7 Realism may bring the local congregation and wider partners to conclude that maintaining the church building in a particular place is no longer, nor likely to be, sustainable. Ways will need to be found for dealing with that. But even then the primary underlying concern is how best the mission of the church can go forward, not simply how can we save money.

1.8 Churches are not like retail outlets or service stations that can be simplistically evaluated in financial and 'commercial' terms. But nor can their future be assumed just because they are there. Both the mission of the church locally and the mission of the church more widely have to be considered. And in increasing numbers of places going it alone is no longer an option for a small congregation or community. In the secular world, and increasingly in the church nationally, there is talk about partnerships. And partnerships will be important if we are to sustain and keep alive our built heritage. But in this report we more

often use the word collaboration, not because it is particularly elegant but because that is the word used about ministry. Ministry, mission and church buildings are closely related.

1.9 We need also to be aware of the wider religious and social context for our buildings. Demographic changes have moved populations once served by the local church, age patterns in communities change, communities are more mobile socially and in terms of transport, family patterns have changed, as has the nature of Sunday, patterns of worship have altered with more occasional and less weekly attendance, being a church does not mean simply what happens in church. All this (and more) has its affect on the way we view and use our buildings.

The way we see and use and care for our buildings needs to be linked with the way we understand the church's ministry, the way we are being church and the way we undertake mission. It will not be enough for us to be the same church as we have been but a bit slimmer. We have to think in new ways.

## THE MAIN THRUST OF THE PROPOSED STRATEGY

The church of the future cannot simply be today's church - but a bit slimmer. It will need to be a transformed church.

- To **celebrate** the enormous commitment and generosity shown by church congregations and officers, often with help from the community, in the care of church buildings.
- To encourage all parishes to review their buildings in terms of the total call to **mission** - in outreach and nurture; in worship and spirituality; in welcome and education; in a just stewardship of the heritage; in service to the wider community.
- To encourage the church locally and more widely to view its buildings realistically and positively in terms of their **value** and not simply in terms of their **cost**. Every church should produce a Statement of Significance, describing something of the history, main architectural features and their importance, the place of the church in its landscape and setting, and major artefacts and their heritage significance.
- To encourage a shift of culture from parish to benefice (in multi-parish benefices) and to deanery whereby church buildings are seen as resources in a **collaborative** church so that the local building plays its part alongside the other benefice and deanery church buildings each with its own particular contribution and characteristics in the life of the wider church and community. Each church building does not have to do everything that a church building could do.
- To ensure that parishes are **supported** in this by the actions and decisions of deanery and archdeaconry pastoral committees.
- To provide parishes with the support of **appropriate information** about the care, maintenance, repair, reordering and community use of church buildings as well as information about funding resources and possible partnerships.
- To **share** stories about what has been possible as an encouragement and inspiration.
- To **explore** with parishes, benefices and deaneries what can be done when sustainability is not felt to be possible.

We have not felt able to produce a fit-all blueprint strategy that will either meet all the opportunities or solve all the problems. It wouldn't work if we did. The situation is too complex and too particular. There are a number of pressures working in tension: conservation and contemporary use; local identity and wider collaboration; the deep reluctance to be the ones who close a church yet the impossible burden of maintaining it; all the good things to be celebrated and the lack of resources to sustain them; a deep commitment to the buildings and a low level of theological awareness of their significance.

What we offer here are some first steps on the next stages in a journey that for many of our buildings has already lasted many centuries. We are convinced that we can and should find ways for that journey to continue for many more years. In very few cases do we have to conclude that this is the end of the road.

## 2. SOME THEOLOGICAL THOUGHTS

2.1 From earliest times place has been significant in people's religious experience, as the site of encounter and revelation, of sacrifice and worship, of mystery and fellowship. To help 'capture' and convey that significance shrines are created, altars erected, buildings put up. The building itself becomes part of the witness to the experience and a stimulus to help others share it. What may be as diffuse as a sense of 'the other' is in the Christian story much more defined by its understanding of God and the way in which He meets people as creator, as friend and saviour, and as guide and comforter.

2.2. PRESENCE. Solomon was wise enough to know that the great temple that he had erected in Jerusalem could never contain the God he worshipped. Yet it was known as the house of God, the place of His dwelling. There is a particularity about a building which focuses a truth but does not contain it. Here the presence of God is to be found, but never only here. A church is a holy place, a place where the holy is known. What makes a building holy is the mystery of prayerful faithfulness, of faithful prayerfulness. Consecration does not make it holy, only the presence of the divine and the mingling of the prayers of the faithful can do that. Holiness cannot be contained, imported nor easily expelled - the holiness of places survives different regimes, destruction of buildings, even changes of faith.

2.3 Christian churches are sacraments of presence. Their walls and windows, their furnishings and artefacts, their roofs and rafters speak through the very actuality of their substance of a God who is known in the 'stuff' of his creation and most supremely in the person of the incarnation. The buildings speak of the God in our midst. Consciously and unconsciously they convey what kind of God it is that is worshipped there. The church building is a reminder, for those who can read its message, of the God involved in the midst of each community.

### *Tranquillity*

*St Mary at the Elms, is open every day from 9.00am - 5.00pm, and welcomes visitors to a place of peace amidst the commercial area of Ipswich. On Wednesdays soft music is played from 12.00 pm - 2.00pm during the 'Time of Tranquillity' and visitors are encouraged to come and pray quietly, and light a candle. Drinks are available to those who wish to bring their lunch with them. As well as an excellent guide to the Church, leaflets about the Christian faith and local activities are available.*

2.4 A church building bears witness to the spiritual dimension of life, to that mystery at the heart of things which goes beyond what is utilitarian and merely functional. It is a constant reminder of the 'more than' element to life - more than eating and drinking, more than bricks and mortar, more than salaries and status, more than here and now. It is a presence that here and now points to the past - the past of its own origins, be they mediaeval or modern, but also to the historical nature of the faith set in past events. It is a presence that here and now points also to the future - God's future, the coming of the Kingdom, the hope for the

morrow. A church building has a historical and an eschatological dimension made present now.

2.5 A church building is much more than a 'club house' for a religious society. It is set within a landscape or urbanscape, in the context of community, however fragmented and diverse that may be today. It is, perhaps especially in the Church of England understanding, a place of and for the community. It is a public building, not a private institution. It speaks, should speak, of the God who is available to all. The building is there precisely to be taken advantage of in the name of the God who longs to be taken advantage of. It is a place of gathering in the name of God who opens his arms to welcome all comers, a truth which is hardly conveyed by locked doors.

2.6 In localities, especially in small rural places, the church has come to be a focal point of identity. Not because everyone goes to church but in the sense that it is the only public building left, the only place that speaks of a corporate identity that makes a place more than just a collection of dwellings. It plays a part in defining what a community is and has been. Visitors' books bear witness to the fact that people return to churches not only because they played a part in their own lives but because of associations for the family even generations back. People often visit churches as a way of finding or reaffirming their roots.

2.7 PRAYER. A church building is a place of prayer - of that attention to God which is focussed in word and in silence, in fellowship with others and in the solitude of the individual. It is thus both a public place and a private space - the place of the gathering of the faithful in worship and the place of individual thanks and grief, reflection and confession. A place for joyous celebration and silent contemplation. Its very space and organisation, the way it draws the attention and focuses thought, should assist that possibility for both great gatherings and individual encounter.

2.8 Church buildings are, or can be, the focus of a community's celebration or grief, its search for meaning and for ways to handle its confusion. Such events as the Soham murders and the flood at Boscastle illustrate this. The building is, can be, a focus of a community's identity perhaps when it is at its most chaotic, be that in joy or in despair. What is said in church can be felt to be done on behalf of those who seldom enter it. The place of prayer should be where the community is included in the prayer of the place.

2.9 PROCLAMATION. Church buildings are not simply contained space for the meeting together of the faithful but are themselves 'proclaimers' of the God who is worshipped, of the mystery of the Gospel message, of the call to people to join in God's work in his world.

2.10 A church building makes a statement, bears witness just by being there. Like all communication the message is held within the dynamic of the telling and the receiving. What a building says to the faithful churchgoer may be very different from its message as perceived by the occasional visitor or passer-by. By intention it points to the presence of the God and the Christian story as living and vital present realities. It may convey only a dying faith and a faded power locked in the past. By intention it points to a welcoming, ever-available God concerned for all people. It may convey a 'closed shop' unwelcoming, uninterested, unconcerned.

2.11 The 60's notion of 'the medium is the message' still holds a truth, for the very physical condition of a church will make its own proclamation and convey theological points - pointers to what is believed about God and his relationship to the world around. A basic element of the message about God is that he is welcoming and accessible. A closed church is a very poor witness to this. By contrast the open church speaks clearly of the ever welcoming, accessible God. Of course in some places this constitutes a risk and that needs to be carefully assessed. But there is good evidence to suggest that open churches are actually less likely to be vandalised and damaged. This is reflected in the views of the insurance companies that prefer churches to be left unlocked during the day - claims for thefts and vandalism being less than claims for damage done to windows and doors by forced entry when a church is locked. The risk itself is a theological point - for God risks what we will do to him when he makes himself available to us, just think of the cross. He thought the risk was well worth it.

2.12 Church buildings are like 'talents' given into our keeping - they are neither to be buried by neglect nor lost in a shroud of conservatism. They are to be used and risked for the sake of the kingdom and the community. But they are in the end only means for a greater end - to sustain the Christian presence and witness and to serve the mission of the church and the needs of the community. God is not contained nor restricted to church buildings. He can be served by them.

When church buildings no longer serve the purposes of worship, witness and mission it is not God's future that is put in question but there may be a question about the buildings' future.

### 3. A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE - why the change is needed

3.1 The enormous energy, commitment, and financial generosity of church people in relation to church buildings are truly staggering. Something like £100million is spent annually on the upkeep of church buildings and only a small proportion of this comes from grants. The rest results from the efforts of church people, volunteers. They have made it possible for the majority of church buildings to be in a better condition today than perhaps for hundreds of years. And we gratefully and readily acknowledge this. We should celebrate not just the splendour and heritage of the churches of the diocese but also the commitment and care of so many church members and officers.

#### **WICKHAMBROOK**

*The 2000 quinquennial survey report recommended church repairs of £250,000, in a scattered parish of 1200 people. Thanks to the drive and initiative of one person drawing upon the efforts of many others and much goodwill in the community, together with substantial grants from English Heritage, 2005 should see the completion of the major part of the work. IT CAN BE DONE.*

3.2 But buildings constantly demand attention and expenditure and we have to recognise that it is not possible simply to continue as we have been. *"Repair costs are higher than congregations can easily bear. There is a substantial gap between those costs and the funds available."* (Building faith in our future p.1)

3.3 We exist in a church with a rich heritage of resources of both people and buildings. But the resources traditionally deployed and called upon to support both buildings and congregations are limited and cannot sustain either buildings or congregations in ways common in the past. We have been learning this for some decades when it comes to ministry. We have moved slowly, and sometimes painfully, from the clerical monopoly of ministry, through an 'unfreezing of the people of God' to an increasing acceptance of every member ministry and a more collaborative church.

3.4 The Archdeacon of Suffolk's report on Mission and Ministry illustrates this and sets out the necessity for further developments in this understanding and practice of ministry at a time when stipendiary clerical numbers are falling and there are increasing financial constraints.

3.5 We have hardly begun to relate similar thinking to the way we view our church buildings. Yet the need for new approaches is increasingly obvious. The number of churches, the size and average age of congregations, the costs of repair and maintenance are placing huge question marks about the sustainability of the current situation. Yet as numerous parish responses to the checklist indicated there is a huge desire to maintain parish churches and church people feel strongly that their loss would have a negative effect upon the witness of Christian presence and the work of mission locally. So new ways of dealing with our churches are needed.

As with ministry, there is a need to move to a more **collaborative** understanding of how we see, use and maintain our church buildings, in multi-parish benefices and also in urban single parish benefices.

3.6 In part the traditional 'father knows best' approach to ministry gave way to the understanding of ministry as the responsibility of the whole body of the church as a result of the negative problems of declining clergy numbers. But only in part. There has also been the development of a positive theological and ecclesiological understanding of the place of the whole 'laos' of God. So too while the negative aspects of **costs** and numbers have led many to question the viability of some of our church buildings, there is also the more positive aspect which is calling us to reassess our understanding of the **value** of our church buildings as community resources as well as congregational resources.

3.7 In February 2004 the Building Group sought to encourage all parishes to have a fresh look at their buildings not simply in terms of **cost** but also as:

- valuable resources in the way they express our theological understanding of God,
- spaces in which to discover and nurture the spiritual awareness and development of individuals and congregations,
- resources for the community,
- a focus of a community's identity

3.8 The checklist sought to help PCCs to see the **value** of their buildings and how that could be enhanced, and not simply the **cost** of their buildings and how that could be borne (or not).

3.9 We are grateful to all who undertook that exercise and sent in their reflections. For those who did so it had generally been seen as a valuable exercise and a number have indicated that they will be undertaking further thought and discussion. It has, however, saddened us that more parishes did not feel they could give the time and thought to this, not least because the cost of buildings so often occupies a considerable proportion of many PCCs' time and energy.

If we are to meet the situation our buildings present us with in a positive and sustainable way then it will not be enough to take the **value** of our church buildings for granted and respond only in terms of the increasing **cost** of repair and upkeep.

3.10 The best hope for our church buildings is for them to be places of life and activity. Crudely put: 'use them or lose them'. But there is a need for more imaginative ways of using our churches - in part by returning to how churches were viewed centuries ago. Then they were the place of community activity both spiritual and 'secular', of worship and social gathering. There are good examples of how this has been rediscovered so that the needs of the community rather

than the agenda of the church shape the use of a building that is a public, as well as a holy, space.

3.11 Churches should therefore actively look to how the building might be used in the service of the community and what partnerships with local or wider bodies, secular and ecumenical, could be entered into to provide the necessary facilities and resources. An example of such a partnership is found at St George's in the North Bury Team where the church, the local residents and the local authority are working together to enlarge the church building for wider community use. The deanery or Diocese will need to provide help in identifying such possible partnerships. Help is also available through Suffolk Acre, Church Urban Fund, the Community Affairs adviser. (see TOOLBOX 5)

3.12 But this will not be possible in all places. There may simply not be the need - because the community is well served by a good community hall catering for local needs, be it toddler groups or lunches for the elderly. Provision of the necessary facilities in a particular building or location may be very problematic. There cannot be just one answer (the community service answer) for all our buildings. But in a collaborating benefice each church building will have been carefully audited so that it is known what it can best offer, while not attempting to do everything. One church in a benefice might be the obvious place for the large festival, occasional service when smaller buildings just could not cope. Another might be most readily adapted as a place of quiet meeting, for retreat or for educational use. Another might be the focus for youth and children's work or as the centre for a heritage trail. Another might be most readily adaptable as a commercial or retail unit.

So long as we expect every church building to stand alone and to provide every need in order to survive, we shall fail. Working together in the use of our building resources we should more readily be able to draw upon the strengths of each.

3.13 The question must change from how shall our parish church survive to how can this building best serve the mission of the church in collaboration with others in the benefice or deanery. Where appropriate this will also need to be considered from an ecumenical perspective.

3.14 Achieving such collaboration will need an enormous change of culture and it will take time to come about. Churches will move at different speeds according to their circumstances and to the people involved. But ignoring the symptoms of unsustainability and hoping for the best will bring its own inevitable conclusion.

Lemmings racing towards the cliff edge feel fine all the time they are running on the cliff top. When they reach the edge it is too late to ponder why they didn't think more about the direction in which they were heading.

3.15 Collaboration does not of itself suddenly solve all the problems but it could produce a more rational approach to the way we view and use and maintain our buildings. Decisions for example about levels of insurance might better be decided on at a benefice or deanery level than by a parish on its own. This could have financial repercussions and these too should be dealt with more collaboratively. It will mean a growing together of parishes in a benefice, of developing greater trust and encouraging less parochially defensive attitudes. It may mean that new ways of looking at the roles of officers (such as church wardens and treasurers) and their tasks in relation to the use, care and financing of buildings will be needed. Collaboration should extend beyond our church into ecumenical collaboration. It should extend beyond our diocese into collaboration with our neighbours. The development of tourism opportunities could, for example, be undertaken by an effective partnership between our Diocese and Norwich, exploring the possibilities of European funding, drawing upon the experience of the Ripon and Leeds Diocese.

The parish system has been, and still largely is, a tremendous strength in the way the Church of England fulfils its way of being church. But narrow parochialism is a chronic weakness that will stifle the church's life.

#### 4. POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

4.1 Some congregations view their buildings from a negative perspective - the problems they cause, the cost they involve, the trouble there has been with vandalism, with funding, with the DAC. These problems are not imaginary and it is important that they are taken seriously. But to begin there is much too negative and can wrongly colour the overall discussion there needs to be.

4.2 The Church report 'A future for Church Buildings' (GS 1514 2003) prepared for the General Synod by the Church Heritage Forum was much more upbeat. *"We need to set the challenges surrounding the use of church buildings within a framework which articulates and celebrates the positive value of church buildings to the Church and nation alike."* p. 13. The follow-up report 'Building faith in our future' again emphasised this and urged government to recognise the very significant part churches and cathedrals play in *"the historic environment which is so important to our society and as a physical focus of community activity."* P.4.

4.3 It would be hard to calculate the immense value church buildings have had in the spiritual awareness and development of innumerable worshippers and pilgrims throughout the ages. They are not simply places where people express their spirituality, corporately and individually, but are places that initiate a response, by evocative sight and sound, imagery and atmosphere.

4.4 Architecture itself gives expression to theological understandings - the boat shaped nave, the building's cruciform foot print. The grandeur and intimacy convey the scope of God and his nearness. In few churches is everything revealed all at once. There is mystery and discovery. The position of font and altar speak of entry and offering. The arrangements of furniture determine the way we face and our view of the one we worship - the sovereign God who is high and lifted up, the God in our midst. The windows tell stories and remind us of our forebears in the faith. But this is the language of symbol and if we are to serve the many visitors to our church and attract even more then we shall need to provide guide books and interpretative leaflets to help people catch something of the richness and wonder of our splendid buildings and artefacts and through them the good news of our faith.

4.5 Each church, no matter how grand or how small, has its own particular qualities, and consideration should be given to how they might be maximised for worship.

4.6 In some places the way things are feels as though that is how it has always been - although that is very seldom, if ever, true. While this may give a sense of continuity that is valuable in times of change, it may also mean that the building is no longer speaking as it might to the contemporary spirit, to the way we understand and present the Gospel and worship in this our day. It can be helpful

to look again at the local church with fresh eyes, with the eyes of a visitor, and to ask why things are the way they are. Could they be better arranged as the space for the worship of God now?

4.7 Churches, especially those in rural areas, have a place to play in the regeneration of rural communities and a positive part in the rural economy. Churches are places of pilgrimage as well as of worship. Some are part of well-worn trails with particular associations to the heritage of the past. Others are simply places of rest and quiet, a place in which to reflect and pray. Churches have a significant place in tourism and increasingly are seen as potentials not yet fully realised. The work of Margaret Blackall as Diocesan Tourism officer bears witness to this. Keeping a church open is not simply sentimentalism - and, contrary to popular myth, does not normally mean any increase in insurance premiums.

**AS WELL AS WORSHIP**

*churches have other uses and values:*

- *For community use, e.g. public spaces for lunch clubs, mothers and toddlers, concerts, exhibitions, meetings etc*
- *In tourism as part of a heritage trail that not only highlights churches but other local places of interest, providing literature and guide-books*
- *In education e.g. for collective worship, and school visits as part of the national curriculum.*

4.8 We have already noted the theological significance of churches as buildings with a community aspect, speaking of the God whose mission is to the world, not the church. In places where the church is the only public building there is particular potential for development of its community use. But to do so requires imagination, perseverance and a willingness to enter into partnerships with others, not least to assist with the financing. There are still many churches that lack basic facilities and it is not always easy to see how these can be provided without damage to the mediaeval structure or appearance. It is the mission of the church and not conservation that is the priority, and careful dialogue and imaginative design can often overcome what appears to be an insurmountable problem. A survey of the needs of the local community can raise possibilities that go beyond the annual art festival or quarterly concert, and place the church once again in the general life of a community and not merely on its religious edge. Discussion with a local head may also raise interesting and powerful ways in which the church building might be used as part of the school curriculum as well as for the termly service. In many instances fund-raising efforts have themselves resulted in a new or re-newed sense of co-operation within the whole community, drawing it together in a project that effects all.

4.9 The '*Building faith in our future*' report recognises that there are sometimes problems in forming partnerships and attracting grants because churches are faith communities. Pressure is being brought to bear nationally to

get the government and local authorities to recognise this so that the church is not penalised when conscientiously wishing to serve the community.

4.10 This is a good time to be looking positively at the contribution church buildings can make in the life of the church and in the life of communities and society more generally. Heritage has its positive aspects and church buildings are a significant part of this country's heritage. Government policies have highlighted the need for partnerships and regeneration of rural areas. The Church's Heritage Forum is giving a positive lead at the national level, ensuring that the contribution already being made by churches to the national well-being and the additional contribution they can make in the future, are kept in the Government's line of vision. The Amenity Societies too can play a positive part in supporting or in establishing the value, of individual buildings.

It is important to accentuate the positive. The problems have no difficulty in bringing themselves before our attention.

## 5. THE PROBLEMS TO BE FACED

5.1 Being realistic about the positive requires that we should be similarly realistic about the problems. In a rural diocese like St Edmundsbury and Ipswich there are too many churches that are only used occasionally and then only by small numbers of people. The repair and maintenance of 479 churches, of which 443 are listed, is an enormous burden both financially and in terms of people's efforts. Resources, it is argued, are being squandered while the mission of the church is neglected.

5.2 If true, this is a telling point, for we have consistently stated that it is the mission of the church which must be a priority. At a statistical level things do not add up. Voices that are often heard give the message: there are too many churches and with capacities far in excess of actual congregation numbers; costs have cleared out reserves and require persistent and energy-sapping fund-raising; buildings absorb a disproportionate amount of time and attention that could be better spent on direct mission. A retail chain would have long ago closed outlets that drained so many resources and produced so few obvious returns.

5.3 Some of the evidence for this is anecdotal rather than hard statistics. But even good statistics are not the whole picture. It is necessary to ask what the criteria are by which we assess such value judgements. What is meant by 'too many', 'too few', 'too much', 'disproportionate'? How do we assess and who does the assessing when it comes to the value of an open church in a settlement? To put it crudely there may be other and better criteria than 'bums on pews.' Small congregations should not have to shoulder the added burden of being made to feel guilty. They often represent real faithfulness and dedication, maintaining the witness to faith.

How do we assess and who assesses the place of a building in the mission of the local church, in the benefice as a whole, in the mission of the deanery and diocese? **We are convinced that has to begin at the grass roots.** But the local view also needs to be put in a wider context.

5.4 When all this is said the reality is that changing patterns of community life, changes in demography, movements of population, the increasing financial responsibility placed upon congregations, still have to be faced. On top of this are a number of wider social issues that add to a sense of burden, especially upon parish officers. Central Government legislation has had a marked impact on church communities in recent years: Health and Safety, Charities Act; Disability Discrimination Act; Child Protection, to name but a few. The power of the

### **OWNERSHIP**

*In the Anglican Church in this country churches are owned by the Church of England and held, for legal purposes, by a representative owner. Where there is one this will be the incumbent. Where the benefice is vacant or there is a priest-in-charge, it will be the bishop.*

*Legal ownership does NOT reside with the local community.*

conservation lobby and the higher profile that heritage matters have in the nation as a whole have produced some financial assistance through bodies like English Heritage (though never enough) but have increased the work required to gain local authority permission and the granting of a faculty. In themselves many of these things are important safeguards but together they impinge heavily upon churches because they all have implications for limited resources, be they in terms of people or finances.

5.5 The cost of repairing and maintaining church buildings nationally is not easy to calculate. But it is estimated that the Church of England spends each year something like £100 million on the repair and maintenance of its buildings. Most repairs attract the full rate of VAT although the welcome introduction of the Listed Places of Worship Scheme has helped with grants to offset that cost. The national campaign for the reduction of VAT on listed church building costs has yet to persuade the European Commission of its case. Over the years English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund have made substantial grants to churches and cathedrals but, in spite of all the government's rhetoric about heritage, the actual amounts have not grown and indeed in recent years have dropped. The Lottery Bill, currently going through Parliament, further threatens funds available for the churches. In Suffolk, churches have benefited enormously by the grants made available by the Suffolk Historic Churches Trust. Many places have set up 'Friends' of the local church and their efforts have proved vital in funding the repair of well-loved buildings.

5.6 The quinquennial survey of church buildings has helped to ensure that the majority of our church buildings are in a better state of repair now than they have been for centuries. Yet parishes usually await the survey report with anxiety and a sense of dread. Where work has not been completed from the previous report there is a sense of guilt or defeat. Grants are limited in the scope of the work they cover and the percentage of the bill they meet. Without creating an even greater problem for future generations, consideration needs to be given to whether these reports are over-detailed and looking for too high a standard of repair. The DAC is encouraged to enter into discussion with inspecting architects and the Registrar (on behalf of the Chancellor) regarding the way in which particular buildings might be maintained at a level of care and repair that is financially sustainable but not necessarily meeting every piece of work that ideally should be done. This will need care so that the Church is not thereby seen to be undermining its responsibilities under the Ecclesiastical exemption. Similarly conservators will need to exercise some level of pragmatic compromise if medieval churches are to be modified for current use and so kept 'alive' rather than remain fossilised and so 'die'. Conservation at all costs has to be challenged.

5.7 Repair costs are a major concern but it is increasingly recognised that good maintenance can play its part in reducing repair problems. Many churches do have a maintenance programme and quinquennial survey reports identify maintenance

needs. But Health and Safety regulations have made maintenance more difficult than in the past. Local volunteers running up long ladders to clear gutters become a risk that cannot be ignored. Yet too many long term damp problems have been caused by blocked gutters and downpipes.

A short-term saving on maintenance usually means a long-term increase in the costs of repairs.

5.8 When a parish does finally decide that its church is no longer needed and should be made redundant the procedures can be complex and prolonged. (See TOOLBOX 3). There are current proposals for simplifying the procedure but it is unlikely that redundancy will be an easy solution, especially in rural areas where an alternative use for a redundant church is not always obvious or easy to conclude. Nor can it be assumed that the Church's Conservation Trust will be able or willing to take on a particular building. Its funds are limited and likely to become even more restricted. On redundancy a church becomes the responsibility of the DBF. If an alternative use is not found and the church is not vested in the CCT it remains the DBF's responsibility and repair costs fall ultimately on the parish share. New ways of dealing with this whole matter need to be considered.

5.9 A number of possibilities could be explored.

a. Occasional use. There are already a number of churches e.g. Langham, Hargrave, Wantisden that are used for worship for a limited number of times a year. This may in part be due to the lack of electricity so that summer use only is practicable or because of a somewhat isolated position. Worship patterns indicate that there are certain services that can attract good numbers even when regular worship has almost ceased: Harvest, Remembrance, Carol Services, Mothering Sunday, Easter, pet service etc.

b. 'Mothballing'. Full redundancy may be both a problem (no obvious alternative use) yet in practical terms the building is currently surplus to the needs of both church and community. Limited insurance and repair would still be needed.

c. Chapel of Ease. Parishes can be combined under the Pastoral Measure to form a single parish with more than one place of worship. The Chapel of Ease could be then retained for occasional use.

5.10 None of these will produce a complete reduction in financial and 'management' responsibilities for a church building but they might be an appropriate way forward in particular circumstances. Desperation and frustration may in some instances suggest that the only way forward is to walk away from a building and take the consequences. This is not a strategy that can be recommended. However, discussions should be held with local authorities concerning their attitude to a 'redundant' church and

what might be done. They themselves are not always in a particularly strong position when it comes to listed buildings on the 'at risk' register!

Any strategy for church buildings will not only need to look at the situation at the grass roots, but take into account the national legal structures that surround many aspects of these buildings. Part of a strategy must face these issues if the more local strategies are to be realised.

## 6. A TOOLBOX FOR THE PARISHES

6.1 Many of the problems that parishes have to face in relation to their buildings involve knowledge of procedures and information about available resources. Some of this information already appears on the diocesan website and there are guidelines that can be downloaded. Other sites such as Church Care ([www.churchcare.co.uk](http://www.churchcare.co.uk)) provide a wide range of information and links to other websites. But not everyone has ready access to the internet and we are therefore producing a small portfolio of information for parishes to help them in the care, use and development of their church buildings. It is intended that this should be an ongoing project so that additional sheets can be added from time to time and information updated. (See Annex A).

6.2 The sharing of information, of good practice and bright ideas is important. The size of the problem can sometimes feel daunting or opportunities are missed simply because what is happening elsewhere is not known about. Sometimes it is a matter of simply not having the resources - of people, not just money. But while it may be true that a problem shared is a problem halved, the fact is that sharing a problem is not always that simple. Feelings of inadequacy or the fear that others will take over can inhibit looking for help from elsewhere. Building up trust takes time. But if we do not begin now it will be too late when the crisis really hits - and for some that may not be very far ahead.

### **WORKING TOGETHER**

*Glemsford had been looking for some time at the problem of a decaying north porch. The arrival of some keen new comers led to plans being produced but a considerable sum to be found in a parish that is far from wealthy. Advice was sought from Canon Jim Pendorf and what felt nearly impossible became more manageable.*

*Local church, community and diocese working together. It makes a difference.*

## **7. RECOMMENDATIONS for ACTION**

**Our aim: that each church building is an effective vehicle for mission with optimum use and sustainable resourcing.**

### **PARISHES AND BENEFICES**

1. To develop a culture of collaboration within the benefice and more widely, including ecumenically.
2. To produce a clear and full Statement of Significance and a programme of maintenance for church buildings.
3. To develop a strategy for the most effective use and resourcing of the church buildings with mission as the priority.

### **DEANERIES**

1. To review parish and benefice strategies for church buildings and relate them to deanery ministry and pastoral arrangements
2. To provide a forum for the exchange of good practice and information in the deanery
3. To review the tourism, community and educational potential use of local churches

### **ARCHDEACONRY PASTORAL COMMITTEES**

1. To review benefice and deanery strategies for church buildings and relate them to ministry and pastoral arrangements

**DIOCESE** - as represented by appropriate offices and bodies e.g. Community Affairs Adviser; Tourism Officer; DAC; DBE; Parish Resources Officer; Communication Officers, Ecumenical Officer

1. Keep parishes informed of developments nationally, regionally and locally that affect church buildings, including the sharing of good stories.
2. Make national representation on issues affecting church buildings e.g. VAT, Lottery Bill, representation on regional bodies e.g. local strategic partnerships
3. Create action plans alongside parishes, benefices and deaneries for the development of local and regional partnerships for community use of church buildings and their funding
4. To provide information, advice and encouragement to local congregations on the wider use of their buildings
5. To confer with local authority planners and conservation officers on their priorities and any development proposals

## **8. TIME-TABLE for ACTION**

**By the Spring 2006** Archdeacons, Rural Deans and Lay Chairs produce action plans by which parishes and benefices may be encouraged and supported in the creation of strategy plans and in developing a collaborative culture i.e. they, in collaboration with others, produce action proposals for managing a cultural change and the way in which the strategic plans can be executed. Training for this should be made available to ADs, RDs and Lay Chairs.

**By May 2006** - every parish should have produced a Statement of Significance for its church buildings. The Articles of Enquiry in 2006 should include the question: Has your PCC produced a Statement of Significance? If not, why not? Statements should be attached to the completed Articles.

**By the summer of 2006** all relevant Boards, Committees and Officers produce action planned responses to this report. These are reviewed by the Bishop's Council and further developments are reported on a regular (at least annual basis) to the Bishop's Council.

**By Autumn 2006** - every benefice should have produced a buildings strategy and submitted it to the Deanery Pastoral Committee. The matter for discussion by Deanery PCs being: How is the potential effectiveness and sustainable resourcing of each church building in the deanery being developed and what is the action plan for those buildings that have no such potential?

**By May 2007** - Archdeaconry Pastoral Committees should create action plans based on benefice/deanery strategies, linking buildings, ministry and pastoral arrangements.

**In 2008** the Bishop's Council should carry out a review of progress and recommend further action as necessary in a report for the Diocesan Synod.