

Latest News

Contesting heritage

The Church of England has published guidance for parishes and cathedrals addressing concerns over memorials with links to slavery and other contested heritage.

It enables churches and cathedrals to consider the history of their buildings and congregations, and to engage with everyone in their community to understand how physical artefacts may impact their mission and worship. It offers a framework to approach such questions locally and, where necessary, to engage with the relevant bodies who oversee changes to cathedral and church buildings.

In June 2020, the Church of England announced a consultation on approaches to contested heritage following a series of cases around the country. The work forms part of 'Open and Sustainable Churches', a long-running programme seeking to identify issues affecting the ability of churches and cathedrals to provide worship and welcome, offering support and resources to tackle these.

The guidance published today has been informed by a wide-ranging consultation which has included every Church of England diocese and cathedral, as well as heritage bodies, specialists in church monuments, and those with an interest and specialism in UKME representation in the Church of England.

It notes that while churches and cathedrals are, above all, places dedicated to the worship of God, for a range of reasons, members of communities may not always feel welcome in these buildings. One such reason could be the presence of objects commemorating people responsible for the oppression and marginalisation of others.

The guidance specifically addresses the issue of heritage associated with racism and the slave trade – including plaques, statues, inscriptions and other monuments - but hopes that by doing so it will establish a methodology for addressing other forms of contested heritage.

The guidance does not prescribe solutions, but presents a range of options and considerations, together with suggested models for local consultation and discussion. It encourages balanced, inclusive decision-making.

It also states that while 'no change' may be the outcome of such a consultation, this is not the same as 'no action' and encourages research, consultation and reflection where concerns are raised, to assess how much objects may impact on missional, pastoral and liturgical activities.

On publication of the guidance, the Church of England's Director of Churches and Cathedrals, Becky Clark, said:

"With this guidance, the Church of England is seeking to provide a framework for parishes and cathedrals to lead discussions about how the heritage in our buildings can best serve our commitment to be a welcoming and inclusive Church today.

“Church buildings and their interiors have been adapted over centuries in response to practical needs, architectural styles, as well as to society itself.

“The issues of contested heritage require us honestly and openly to discuss ways in which our buildings can demonstrate our commitment to social and racial justice as a reflection of our faith in Jesus Christ.”

The Guidance on Contested Heritage follows last month’s report from the Archbishops’ Anti-Racism Taskforce, which suggested that the forthcoming Archbishops’ Racial Justice Commission should “...take decisive action to address the history and legacy of the Church of England’s involvement in the historic transatlantic slave trade.”

It added:

“Regarding monuments and the built environment, deciding what to do with contested heritage is not easy. While history should not be hidden, we also do not want to unconditionally celebrate or commemorate people who contributed to or benefitted from the tragedy that was the slave trade.”

Responding to the publication of the Guidance, The Dean of Manchester, Rogers Govender, who Chairs the Church of England’s Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC) said:

“The Black Lives Matter Protests which took the world by storm last summer have had a huge impact on how we view racism in church and society in general. Our history, faiths, attitudes, actions and heritage are all under scrutiny.

“This guidance on Contested Heritage offers practical resources for places of worship to respond to concerns over church buildings, examining how we can offer a balanced message and interpretation, ensuring we are not perpetuating a biased historic message. This is not about destroying heritage or history, but providing a more balanced view.

“This is essential and appropriate in the light of the discrimination and injustice experienced by people of colour in all walks of life, not least in the life of the Church of England. I would encourage all parishes and Cathedrals to respond in a positive way to this challenge.”

The guidance also mentions that a number of churches and cathedrals are already in the process of researching, consulting and considering the place of monuments, statues and memorials, and these experiences have helped to inform the guidance. The national Cathedral and Church Buildings Team will continue to work directly with these places to learn from their experiences and provide them with support where needed.