

## **Diocesan Response to the Report of the Church Buildings Review Group GS2008**

This response is made following discussions at Bishop's Council and with the Rural Deans and a debate at Diocesan Synod on 13 February 2016. It also takes account of the views submitted by members of our parishes that may also have sent them directly to the consulting body.

The diocese welcomes this comprehensive report that takes a wide ranging look at the way in which the Church of England discharges its responsibility for nearly 16,000 church buildings. Diocesan Synod unanimously endorsed the Report and asked that work should now continue on developing a diocesan plan for church buildings in response. This will be happening in the next few months.

Our view is that it is an excellent report. We were particularly pleased that the Report was based on a theology of God, place and people. Contrary to media reports, it does not recommend widespread closure of churches but seeks to realise the potential of churches as prime places for mission, rather than them being perceived as a millstone. We agreed that there should be neither an idolatry of buildings, nor a belief that churches are simply places to worship.

We were pleased to read that the "mood music" should be to encourage the understanding of church buildings as essential to our mission. As a predominantly rural diocese with the second highest church attendance in England as a proportion of population, and the seventh in terms of the number of church buildings, we recognise the strong links that bind people to their church.

We feel that too often the rural church is dismissed as "struggling" or as a "burden". Reports may suggest that resources should be shifted away from the "struggling" rural church. Whilst there are indeed struggling rural churches, just as there are struggling urban churches, it is not true that the rural church as a whole is struggling.

There are many lively examples of country churches. The proportion of people who go to church is highest in rural areas, and the connection between church and community is often strong. If 3% of the population attend on a Sunday then the proportion who come at some point in the year is many many times that.

We did note that whilst this report claims not to want to see church buildings as a burden it did use the term over twenty times itself!

Some of the points raised during our discussions and debates include:

- Mission and church buildings are not mutually exclusive, and often the building is a prime focus of mission.
- In 2008 the diocese, with English Heritage, carried out a comprehensive survey of 75 churches in two deaneries looking at architectural and spiritual significance and the needs of the communities. The history of churches in Dorset and Wiltshire shows that their fortunes have fluctuated considerably. However, EH concluded that now the churches are very well loved and in the vast majority of cases are in a better condition now than at any time since they were built.
- In this diocese there is no central drive to close churches, but, if the parish determine that this is what they wish to do, diocesan officers will help them in their discussions. We agree that church closure speaks of failure and withdrawal.
- Although there are rare circumstances when a church needs to close, there are many positive stories to be told about our churches and attendance at them. For example, at Idmiston, where the church closed decades ago, the village asked if it could be open for a Christmas service in 2015 and over 200 people attended. More generally, Synod members spoke of the fact that when

churches close, congregations tend to disappear rather than move to another church. The recent Methodist experience was cited.

- Synod Members spoke of churches rooting people to their shared cultural history and to their communities. The presence of the building demonstrates that the spiritual life of the community still exists. In Tidworth, a town with a significant increase in population, new arrivals moved next to the church and have begun to fan the flames to bring a small congregation back to life because they liked what they found.
- At Diocesan Synod members spoke of the way that churches serve the community through occasional offices. For example, funerals would not be the same if carried out in a hall or school.
- Churches can be an important symbol for non-Christian people too who will often value the church building in their own community. In Fifield Bavant, with a population of 24 and a very small congregation, over £120,000 was raised to repair the church, primarily from non-church goers. The money available for buildings is often raised from people who would not otherwise contribute to the parish share.
- Churches act as a focus for sharing the experience of God; they facilitate congregational Faith and build community. In this Diocese the DBF provides loans to churches who are re-ordering or expanding in order to meet community needs or to accommodate expanding congregations. We currently have over £650,000 out on loan and in the last 10 years have loaned £2.62m and have also built new worship facilities.
- The report puts forward proposals for simplifying legislation to enable, for example, Festival Churches to be created so that otherwise little-used buildings might continue to have a rôle. Whilst supporting change we point out that it can cause difficulties, especially around principal festivals such as Christmas, Easter, Harvest when all churches would like a service at the same time. A Festival Church also still needs maintenance.
- There is considerable frustration at the complexity of diocesan advisory committees' proceedings, although there is also recognition that the ecclesiastical exemption is a necessary protection. Whilst accepting the historic significance and community identity of these buildings, comments have often been made in our discussions that cold buildings with uncomfortable seats, and no other facilities do not easily attract new members.
- The matter of welcome and being open to visitors is recognised in the Report, especially in smaller churches and in tourist areas. The Report prompted us to revisit the question of church opening that we asked several years ago to see how many of our churches are open for much of the time.
- In considering the proposal of a Diocesan Trust the general view was that communities cherish their own church and are much more likely to leave money to it than to the diocese or national Church. Nevertheless, many parishes are anxious about caring for their church so there is a challenge to change the mind-set and raise confidence. In the Dorset part of the Diocese we are very fortunate to be able to offer grants for the repair of church buildings as a result of a significant legacy. Since its inception the Erskine Muton Fund has granted £1.5m to Dorset churches.
- Friends membership groups have also raised substantial sums, as have the Historic Churches' Trusts.
- The potential for adaptation of a building to part housing or community use/part continued active worship space has been completely missed (Para 122). In this diocese we are financially supporting a development where the chancel is preserved and the nave is being developed into a space to be used by the local Church School. Another example is where the school funds the heating and lighting and carpeting of a very small village church so that they can use it as a gym and assembly hall and the congregation uses it for their services. We would like to see a recognition that church buildings should not simply be seen as a source of finance. A former diocesan surveyor has provided us with a note appended here.
- While the report focuses on securing spiritual and numerical growth in the Church, its stated intention is also to focus on "serving the common good" - and this has been largely ignored in the Report. The stated role is of a building for the worship of God and as a place of prayer "sensitively combined with service to the community". This latter feature is barely mentioned.

- In para 116, Sir Roy Strong's concept of "giving the church building back to the community" has been offered no further thought or consideration.
- The second part of the report proposing consolidation of central bodies concerned with churches was also welcomed. We were pleased to see that care had been put into this area of simplification. This, too, was agreed unanimously.

**Bishop of Ramsbury on behalf of the Diocese of Salisbury**

## **NOTE ON THE USE OF CONSECRATED CHURCHES**

### **CLOSED FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP**

1. The Mission & Pastoral Measure 2011 imposes on the Church Commissioners a single specific duty in the disposal of consecrated closed churches, namely "to make every endeavour to find a suitable alternative use", this also being the sole duty of the Diocesan committee charged with the task.
2. The Commissioners are empowered to sell, give or exchange the closed building and its land in order to achieve this objective.
3. The purpose of this provision is that the suitability of the new use is paramount, and that financial consideration is not a relevant factor. This emphasis and freedom is unique in English law, being exercisable by no other institution with charitable status and obligations.
4. The Mission & Pastoral Measure Code of Practice 2011 states:  
"Central to the Christian faith is the unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the restoration of humankind's relationship with God through Christ. Any consideration of suitable alternative uses must be placed in this context. Moreover, ecclesiastical buildings and consecrated places bear enduring public witness to the faith and values of the Christian community".
5. Furthermore, no consecrated building can ever be 'de-consecrated'. That is a doctrinal impossibility, and no ecclesiastical ceremony is ever undertaken to that end. All that the closure allows is for "the legal effects of consecration to be removed". The ongoing witness of the Christian Church surrounding a closed place of worship therefore demands a continuing ministry of that building towards the community.
6. There can be no strategic or budgetary rationale for the Church so far as financial value in a former place of worship is concerned. Any such 'windfall' is circumstantial.