

Rural Evangelism Network

This paper is an extract from the website at www.ruralevangelism.net. It is part of a series exploring issues for “Small Churches”. This and other papers, and much more, can be found in the “Knowledge Exchange” Section.

Buildings

Buildings as an asset or liability

All across the country we have a rich heritage of church buildings. Especially in rural areas, many are in locations where a place of worship has stood for hundreds of years. Situations may have changed in the twenty-first century however and, in most rural areas, population and demographics have altered, with the church building located away from the centre of population, and falling congregation numbers. A few dedicated people may be custodians of a building that was constructed to provide a worship space for many more people and, with rising costs falling on a decreasing number of people, such a situation sometimes leads to the building being viewed as a liability. This need not be the case however, and the range of activities taking place around the country in rural churches shows that, on the whole, these buildings are still viewed as an asset, and are being used by their local communities.

In some rural areas, the church is the only public building left within the community, and it is thus able to fulfil a need in providing community space for a wide range of activities, in addition to worship. Even in a village where there are other community buildings, there may be a need for additional facilities, and the church building can be a valuable asset in providing this. Some now house the Post Office, some hold farmer’s markets; others have made alterations to provide a meeting space that can be hired by a range of outside groups. Church congregations are realising that they have a resource that [which] can be used for more than a few hours a week, and are turning what could be a liability into a useful amenity.

As well as providing community space, the building itself can be used as a valuable tool in outreach and mission in areas such as education, heritage and tourism. Church buildings and churchyards can offer many resources for the National Curriculum, and local schools should be encouraged to use this as much as possible. Churchyards for example can be used for wildlife conservation, social history etc. The church building can offer resources for religious education, art and history.

Many rural churches are located in areas attracting tourists, and this can be used as contact point with visitors. Church trail leaflets can detail popular walks in the area taking in local churches and chapels, and leaflets for, and directions to other local amenities - such as the shop, pub, and tourist attractions - can be displayed in the church building. Churches that are on well-known walking routes could provide [set up a stall for] cream teas in the summer for those walking. As well as providing a source of fundraising people see that there is life and activity in the church, and may be encouraged to go in and explore further.

Despite the opportunities available for rural churches to use their buildings as an asset and open them up for wider use, there are undoubtedly, and unfortunately, some situations where a church building is a liability that detracts from the church’s real life and mission. When there is a declining congregation, a backlog of fabric repairs, a lack of willing and able voluntary help, and no facilities or available finances, it can seem an impossible situation. Some may take the decision to turn things around, and to take positive steps to make the building an asset once again, but for some small rural churches there will be some genuine cases where it is not sustainable or financially viable to continue with a building, and the hard decision to declare the building redundant, and no longer use it for public worship, may have to be taken. Before contemplating such a course of action however, a good assessment of the current situation needs to be undertaken.

Looking at what we have

Some churches may already view their building as an asset. However others may have taken the decision to turn the building from a liability into an asset and are wondering where to start. Those that already appreciate that they have an asset may want to take a fresh look and see how they could best enhance what they already have. In both situations, assessment of the current situation will need to be made. In some rare cases this may lead to the hard decision to close the building for public worship.

Before plans are drawn up and changes decided upon, groundwork needs to be done in preparation. When looking at 'what we have' this can be divided into three areas: people, finances and assets.

People - include any paid employees or voluntary helpers and the regular congregation: how many are on the electoral roll, what are the average attendance figures? - and the local community: do they support the building at times of major festivals, do they use the building for any other purposes?

Finances - does the parish currently manage to pay its share to the Diocese or equivalent? Is there a separate fabric fund for ongoing repairs? Is there any regular income, such as from the hire of the church hall or the church itself? It should go without saying that the finances need to be in order before building any projects, are embarked upon.

Assets include the church building and churchyard, and any other property such as a hall (could this be upgraded and made better use of?). If there is only a need for one building (the church), could the hall be sold and the money used to incorporate facilities into the church so that the maintenance burden is reduced to one building?

If the church building is being looked at with a view to making changes, then a good tool in assessing 'what we have' is to write a Statement of Significance and Need. These are two separate, but interrelated documents, which are required when making significant changes to a listed Anglican church as part of the faculty permission process. They can however be useful for unlisted churches, and for those of any denomination to help them start to look at what they have. Guidance on writing these documents is available from www.churchcare.co.uk.

In writing the first part, the Statement of Significance, parishes should start from the outside, and work their way around the building, describing and detailing the building, listing features of significance. This is not restricted to physical features of the building however, for example some church buildings may be significant for an event in their history. Undertaking the research to write these documents may uncover facts that weren't previously known, or may clarify or dispel long held myths about the building or events that have happened in it! This may help not just with writing the Statement of Significance, but also with a Church Guide, or with displays in the church, or for education programmes with local schools.

Look at the whole building. It is easy when thinking about proposals for change to become focussed on just one area, but this needs to be taken in the whole context, and how changes will affect other aspects/activities. It may be that permission would be given for something more radical in certain churches, so it is best to aim for utopia and start with the big picture and then work towards realistic solutions. If the building is looked at holistically from the outset this should ensure that work is not undertaken that might jeopardise any future changes; if necessary work can be phased and undertaken in stages as finances permit.

The Statement of Need is the parish's justification for why their needs cannot be met without making changes to the building. It should be drafted as early in the process as possible. It should not be a document that is a rationalisation of work that has already been decided upon, but should set out the needs before the designs and plans are formed. For example, there might be a need for a

meeting room for a maximum of 20 people that can also be used for crèche and one-to-one interviews. A professional advisor - e.g. an architect or surveyor - should be employed for such projects who will understand what solutions would be most appropriate for the building. This will ensure that any proposals put forward are a response to genuine needs, and will also help with an application for permission to carry out the work.

Undertaking an Access Audit will help to see what restrictions there may be with the building for those with impairments - of mobility, sight, or sound. This will identify areas that can be reasonably improved; some changes may be relatively simple such as having some large print hymn books or service sheets, but it longer term projects need to be examined to create level access into the church such as those which would involve permanent physical changes to the fabric of the church or churchyard.

A really good way of getting an honest impartial assessment of the church building as it appears today is to get someone who doesn't usually come into the church to walk round and give their first impressions - they are likely to see things that the regular congregation doesn't. First impressions really do count, and may in some cases have an influence on whether people wish to enter the building or not. Questions to be asked are - Is the entrance welcoming? Are there out of date notices? Is the churchyard well tended, are walls overgrown with vegetation? This last may be the only part of the church that some people see, and if the surroundings look uncared for, then this may give the impression that this applies to the building as well, which may be far from the truth.

Involving the local community by consulting them on any proposed changes to the church building, and any uses that they may wish to see the building put to, is essential with any major plans for re-ordering. By undertaking a community buildings audit of the whole community, it may identify that there is a genuine need for another community hall in the village. It may however be that there is a church half a mile down the road where there is a meeting room, catering facilities etc, and there may not be any real need for two such re-ordered churches in close proximity. Every church cannot be expected to do everything, and by looking at how the church building fits into the local community, it may to establish what facilities the church already has, and what it needs.

Making the building more useful: for worship, church and community use

Many of our rural churches are ancient, listed buildings. However, just because a building is listed doesn't mean that changes cannot happen, but that any change is managed. This is done through the various permissions that Anglican churches need to obtain to carry out works to their buildings. The Statement of Significance will help to inform what is special, and significant, about the church building and churchyard. By having identified the needs, these can be balanced against what is significant, and sensitive alterations planned. Many parishes are now looking at their church buildings as outlined above and finding ways that they can adapt them for both changing worship patterns and for wider use. In order to make themselves more sustainable, they are looking at using the building for more than an hour or two a week.

Changes for worship may include introducing a nave altar to allow for westward facing celebration, removal or relocation or adaptation of pews, or the installation of modern audio-visual facilities. Other frequently-made changes to enhance the building's usefulness for both wider church and community groups are the introduction of toilet facilities, kitchens, and/or meeting rooms. Some churches that no longer need a large worship space may consider screening off part of the church, to allow for other uses, with a smaller worship space retained at the east end. Each church is judged on a case-by-case basis, and what may be appropriate for one church may not be for another. Recent examples show that appropriate changes can be made which retain the character of the church whilst providing necessary facilities. The following example shows how this has been achieved in one rural Anglican church in Devon.

A Story of good practice

Stoke Canon is a village located approximately 5 miles from the county town of Exeter in Devon. The parish church of St Mary Magdalene stands in the village centre but which only a few years ago was threatened with closure. In 2004 the roof structure was discovered to be unsafe and the building had to be closed to the public.

Worship had to be transferred to a nearby hall. The PCC seriously considered closing the building permanently, but there was overwhelming support from the local community to keep the church open, so funding was raised from donations and grants to undertake the necessary repairs to the roof. Following the repairs, the PCC felt it right that having had such support from the village that the building should in future be used for more than just an hour a week, and considered how they might be able to re-order the building.

They undertook Community Appraisals and numerous consultations with parishioners. This clearly demonstrated the community's need for more social events, activities and support services, particularly for senior citizens and young people. Large numbers of people expressed interest in adult education classes, including 56 for computing.

As a part of the feasibility study, consultations were held with potential service providers for which needs had been identified. Providers were asked for their requirements in terms of space, furnishings, equipment and storage facilities. The C of E primary school next door to the church had insufficient accommodation to meet its needs and had no way of expanding. Assemblies and termly services were held in the church but there was an urgent need for additional space for drama and music activities. The outcome, after extensive consultation with all the relevant church and heritage bodies was to expand the facilities and create a more flexible space within the existing church building, to accommodate the needs of the worshipping community and its mission, and to put the building back at the centre of community life.

The physical alterations made to the building included reinstating a gallery at the west end of the church, and creating an open space beneath it with sliding partition doors. This can now be used as a meeting room, and the whole church can be opened up for occasions when a large number of seats are required. A lift to the gallery, a new staircase in the tower giving access to it, a vestry/benefice office, toilets; a servery for refreshments, and storage facilities have all been provided.

In order to facilitate the more informal services needed at times by the congregation and to provide space for music and drama both in services, school presentations and community events, the pews are being rearranged in a near collegiate 'in the round' formation, with a movable altar placed centrally when required.

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