

Comment Gaze bldgs CUT (RB) Edited by SG
**Separating the care of buildings from the cure of souls:
One way forward for rural parishes**

THERE was laughter at Synod last week as one of Archbishop Justin's sermons was quoted in debate: "There is a story of Pooh Bear seeking to ride to safety on a honeypot during a flood. . . Sometimes Pooh was on the honeypot, and sometimes the honeypot was on Pooh. Buildings can be like that: sometimes they are the servants of the Church, and sometimes they are on top, her tyrant."

This picture captures neatly the ambiguous nature of our relationship with church buildings. They can be beautiful and inspirational; people are deeply attached to them, as spiritual places, full of family memory and heritage. They help point the way to God.

As a Team Rector, however, with seven medieval churches and three ruined buildings in my care, I am acutely aware that our rural congregations are spending far too much time underneath their honeypots. We love our church buildings, but that makes us reluctant to admit how close we are to drowning. We are also less free than Pooh Bear to abandon our honeypots: we are tied to them.

THE report from the Church Buildings Review Group, which was presented at Synod last week, reflects this ambiguity. It paints a well-researched picture of the crisis which faces many church communities in the care of their buildings, but is cautious about offering solutions. "There cannot be one national strategy," it says, and encourages dioceses to come up with their own ways forward.

Given the gravity of the situation, many rural dioceses would have already found solutions if these were within easy reach. There needs to be bold, rethinking of the one national strategy that does exist: that of combining the cure of souls (by an incumbent) with the care of as many church buildings as may be found in the area.

It is a strategy that works less well with each year that passes. We need to recognise the changes which have happened in society which challenge both the theological basis and the practical outcomes of this approach — and we need to consider what sorts of future open up if we break the tie between the care of church buildings and the cure of souls.

THE nature of this tie is complicated: parish church buildings are not owned by any one individual or organisation. They are community buildings, vested in an incumbent. This means that the vicar or rector holds the property temporarily for the term of his or her office, on behalf of the residents of the ecclesiastical parish and for their benefit.

Churchwardens and PCCs are also part of this picture as elected trustees who share with the incumbent the responsibility of looking after the property assets on behalf of parishioners. This is why neither incumbent or PCC may legally make unilateral decisions about the property, either to dispose of it or alter it without the consultation and consent of the community and the many heritage bodies.

It is a model made for stability, in which change is difficult because of the number of stakeholders, and the checks and balances that have been introduced to protect them.

Many incumbents have the care of large numbers of buildings, and size of these multi-parish benefices is likely to rise further. Incumbents may seek to delegate the chairing of PCCs to others; but they may not delegate their responsibility for decisions taken about these buildings with impunity: I once received a legal letter, reminding me that I was subject to the Clergy Discipline Measure regarding the failure of a PCC to obtain a faculty for work approved by the PCC in my absence.

Furthermore, as the Church Buildings review states, in a quarter of rural parishes, the average congregation per building is fewer than ten people. Fear of the workload frequently makes it more difficult to recruit new PCC members or churchwardens.

Many of those who serve on the PCC will not be churchgoers, but members of the community who give their time to care the building as part of heritage and local life. For this reason and because so much has to be done so few, the care of the building tends to take over from the less measurable pastoral and mission responsibilities of the PCC. Anecdotally, this is a significant factor in why it is increasingly difficult to recruit parish priests to rural areas.

ANOTHER less frequently recognised change is the standard of comfort expected of community buildings. The groom for a forthcoming wedding in one of our churches came to a service in early spring wearing a T-shirt. He was frozen and amazed that we would worship regularly in such a place where we needed to keep our coats on.

When our buildings are hard to heat properly, or lack running water, or have uncomfortable seating, they are often still appreciated as places for the special event — but only that. Occasional worshippers declare that they love an unadapted medieval building just the way it is; but they usually mean as an awe-inspiring place they enjoy as a rare experience — not as a suitable venue to do anything on a regular basis. This type of building is less than fit to be all that a parish church should be.

At the same time, making changes to listed buildings has become increasingly difficult for small PCCs, especially in less affluent parishes. The administration involved in consulting heritage bodies and

seeking grants is prohibitive, unless there are professionally experienced people on the PCC. Being in an area of low population where fewer people will “benefit” from the adaptations also makes fund-raising much tougher.

The Church Buildings review illustrates this when it quotes the annual amount that rural congregations are able to raise for capital spend for each Grade II* listed building (£6200) as being less than a quarter of that spent on similar buildings in urban areas (£26,400).

Even where churches are the last community building in the village, most rural PCCs will not be able to afford to adapt and equip a building with high heritage value to become the sort of place that would buzz with community activity on a regular basis.

IN A situation where a building is being held in trust on behalf of and for the benefit of the local population, there is the difficulty of a widening gap between what different members of that community may regard as “benefit”. The idea that the parish church should be a warm and welcoming centre for regular worship and community activities is not always perceived as benefit by the wider community.

Some would prefer that the church were kept for worship only, not aware that without wider use the building may not remain viable. Others may feel that the cost of using an ancient building is too great, and are content for it to become a managed ruin, while worship and secular community activities take place in modern buildings that are cheaper to run.

Where there is no common view, the theological basis for combining the care of the building with the cure of souls is undermined. It is no longer a way of incarnational mission and service. It gives priests an agenda that is not the same as that of the people they are seeking to reach, and prevents their being able to start where they are.

THE Church of England needs better options. It is not enough to tinker at the edges of the problem by changing the status of churches where weekly worship is no longer possible. The time has come to dream dreams about the possibilities that could open up if the link between the cure of souls and the care of church buildings were broken, or at least significantly loosened.

One of the possibilities that the Church Buildings review group mentions is that PCCs could delegate their care of the building to another body. This does not, however, address the scale of the challenge, as few organisations are willing to exercise this care without some kind of ownership.

Another possibility, currently being investigated by Exeter diocese, is the creation of a new category of “festival churches”. Under a legal structure, not bound to the frequency of worship of parish churches. This is a promising seed of an idea. It could be developed so that these buildings were no longer vested in the incumbent, enabling him or her to focus on other aspects of ministry and mission. Meanwhile, festival church buildings could flourish as part of a new legal structure, created to give them the best chance of doing so.

“FESTIVAL churches” could be created by Pastoral Measure, and cared for by local Festival Church Councils (FCCs). These could be chaired by lay people, and have similar responsibilities towards the church building as PCCs, but without PCCs’ wider responsibilities for ministry and mission. Such responsibilities would remain with the PCC covering the parish in which the festival church was situated.

The FCC would hold the church building in trust and maintain it, relating directly to the diocese. The cure of souls for the parish in which the church was located would remain with the incumbent, and the festival church could have as many or as few services as needed, by agreement.

FCCs would be free to raise funds and to recruit people with skills in caring for historic buildings and adapting them for wider use. The members of the FCC should also be empowered to sell the building, if that was the best solution for its future.

THIS IS only a dream for the moment, but it is the sort of dream that I hope that many rural Christians will dare to share in the period for wider consultation which follows the presentation of the Church Buildings Review Group to Synod.

If the Church in the countryside is not to remain permanently underneath its honeypots, it needs a new approach. Buildings will always be on top of us when we are obliged to serve them, whatever the circumstances. We will be on top of them when we are enabled to seek God’s Kingdom first.

Canon Sally Gaze is Team Rector of the Tas Valley Team Ministry, and Facilitator for Fresh Expressions in the diocese of Norwich. She is the author of **Mission-shaped and Rural** (CHP, 2011) and a member of General Synod
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The consultation period on the church Buildings Review runs until Jan 29th 2016. Comments should be sent to andrea.mulkeen@churchofengland.org