

Diocesan Churches Trust

towards a solution for Church communities
with low population density and
congregation numbers

Foreword by the Bishop of Norwich

No diocese has a greater concentration of mediaeval churches than Norwich. And some more recent ones too. Six hundred and forty-two churches for a population of around 900,000 is generous provision by anyone's standards. The landscape of Norfolk would be spiritually flattened if they were removed. Each church building has a story to tell. They have served their communities in a variety of ways. They are often a blessing but they are also a big responsibility, and in some places a burden too.

Even where that burden is keenly felt, a church building is still a silent witness to God's presence in a world where He is often forgotten. We sometimes think the burden has become too much but it would be presumptuous to assume our generation must be the one to remove the possibility of a church building being used for prayer and worship by generations yet to come. That's not to recognise particular challenges, especially in some of our most rural communities, where the present model of organisation and maintenance of a church building has proved inadequate. The population of some of our parishes is now very tiny and there is no longer a functioning parochial church council, churchwardens or church officers. Therefore we founded a Diocesan Churches Trust which enables a limited number of church buildings to be leased to it and which holds them on behalf of their local community. In practical terms this means that the church is still available for occasional services and will continue to have a basic level of insurance and maintenance. This enables such a church to come back into regular use in a way which would be almost impossible if the building was formally closed and declared redundant.

+  Norwich

Preamble

The system which has been devised is not designed for churches in larger villages, nor for places with viable congregations, or simply for those seeking alternative ways of funding building repairs. However, it does give an opportunity to provide a safety net to respond to what, for many, seems an insoluble problem. It is aimed at holding together our responsibility for mission and ministry against the challenge of devoting missional resources to the preservation of ancient buildings.

First steps

Before embarking on an examination of this solution, church communities will need to ensure that other possibilities have been carefully considered, for example:

- A consultation exercise with the local community to seek their views on a way forward. This should normally involve an advertised meeting and a leaflet drop to every house in the parish.
- A 'Friends' organisation should be considered to alleviate the costs of maintenance.
- Plans should be explored for the addition of facilities such as a kitchen and toilet to make the building more user friendly and to encourage community use.
- A single or joint PCC should be considered together with other churches in the benefice. This is a sensible way forward for many and removes the need for a PCC and Churchwardens for a small rural Church, whilst ensuring that it is still cared for.
- Local groups or the parish council should be contacted to investigate ways of continuing regular maintenance of the Churchyard.

Providing that **all of these have been explored** the Archdeacon and Bishop will then be prepared to consider allowing the Church to significantly reduce its activity and to be leased to the Diocese of Norwich Churches Trust. However, local involvement will not cease entirely since the building itself continues to speak to the local community of God's presence in their midst (presence evangelism), there will be the need for occasional services, and those living in the village/community remain the responsibility of the incumbent as part of his/her 'cure of souls.'

The following factors need to be carefully considered:

Local contacts/Parochial Church Councils

When a church is leased to the Trust it is on the understanding that very few, if any, members remain as part of a single Parochial Church Council (PCC) for that church alone and the number of regular worshippers has reached low single digits. Once an application to lease a church to the Trust has been approved it is understood that the few remaining PCC members (should there be any) will cease to have active oversight of the church and churchyard and will hand over responsibility for these issues to the Trust. The PCC will continue in a legal form in the person of the incumbent acting as Chair or, during an interregnum, the Rural Dean. Any remaining members of the PCC (or in the situation of a parish which includes other churches, the continuing PCC) will continue to work with the Trust in the form of offering one or two local named “points of contact” and to maintain a parochial and personable presence which it is not possible for the Trust itself to achieve.

Open

It is hoped that the Church will be open as much as possible in order to enable visits and opportunities for prayer. Indeed, when churches are unlocked there are often more visitors during the week than worshippers at usual Sunday services. Some Churches are never locked and this could continue, others may have a local key holder who is very happy to lock and unlock each day. Alternatively (assuming that there is electricity), a simple electronic door lock might be fitted to allow unrestricted day time visits. A sensible approach to valuable items and security will need to be taken including the removal of some portable items to a safe place such as a locked vestry or, with prior agreement, that articles such as chalices and parish plate are used and stored elsewhere in the benefice.

Available

The Church will remain available to the local community for occasional offices (baptisms, weddings and funerals) in the usual way, although there may be limited facilities, in time, with regard to the maintenance of organs and bells. Nevertheless, there is no plan to restrict such services, indeed they should be actively welcomed for those eligible.

Worship

It is not expected that numerous acts of worship would take place, but **six** services **must** be held each year (arranged by the incumbent or, during an interregnum, the Rural Dean) in the building which would be recorded in the Service Register. There would be an expectation of a service at Christmas, probably Harvest (in an agricultural area), Holy Week and/or Easter and on sufficient other occasions to produce the required six. These may be held either during the week or on Sundays, should be advertised, but can be low key in nature if necessary. Such continuity establishes that the Church is still used for regular worship and so is eligible for a variety of sources of support if no other funds are available (HLF and VAT refund grants).

Insurance

It would be expensive and impractical to fully insure the church for 100% rebuilding. The Trust has reached an agreement with Trinitas to insure both the building/churchyard and the activities that take place within them. The insurance level has been set at 25% (subject to change by the Trust) and reflects the limited use that the churches will entail once leased to the Trust. One condition of the insurance policy is that occasional inspections will occur, by the named local contact, to ensure that there is no danger to the public from falling masonry etc. This will entail the occasional visit to the church in order to ascertain whether there are obvious causes for concern. It is essential that the PCC maintain adequate insurance for the building until written confirmation has been received from the Trust that alternative cover is in place.

Quinquennial Inspection Report

As the Church has not been formally closed, it will remain subject to faculty jurisdiction and the Quinquennial Inspection system. Currently both of these are fully funded by the DBF and so no charges for inspections or faculty applications will accrue to the individual church or Diocesan Trust. However, the appropriate local person or body to both receive the reports and petition for the faculties would need to be identified. The Churches would remain within the faculty system.

Maintenance

An annual cleaning of rain water goods would be highly beneficial and save significant amounts of money long term. A block contract may be cost effective in that regard. It will be a challenge to maintain a largely unused Church to the same extent as one which sees congregations each week and so some limited dilapidation may occur although hopefully more of a cosmetic than structural nature. See also above regarding insurance, as well as an occasional check on the integrity of headstones, trees and so on. It is not envisaged that any internal cleaning works will be carried out by the Trust.

Repairs

Aside from occasional maintenance, repairs are likely to prove more problematic. Large repairs will need to be grant aided but vandalism, plaster delamination, doors, windows and so on may require repair costs of several thousand pounds on occasion. Dilapidation will need to be balanced (as with all churches) against other calls on mission and ministry budgets. Ideally a 'trust fund' would be established in the longer term.

Timescale

It is likely that a Church will be placed in the care of 'The Trust' for a set period of time in the first instance. However, in the event of positive local developments, the Trust would be happy to return the Church back to more normal arrangements at any time, with three month's written notice. A periodic review is built in to take account of changing circumstances. The Trust reserves the right to return a church to the PCC as specified in the lease conditions.

Churchyard

Where the Churchyard is open, it remains so until full and closed by an Order in Council. Applications for memorials would continue to be handled by the incumbent (or in his/her absence the Rural Dean). It will not be possible to maintain a high standard of grass cutting right across the churchyard (unless a scheme remains in place where another body or volunteer undertakes the work *pro bono*), but every effort should have been made to gain local support and/or volunteer labour to look after the churchyard. Alternatively, as a last resort, an annual grass cut could be arranged by the Trust utilising a contractor. Any 'PCC fees' from burials or memorial applications would usually go to the Trust to assist with such costs, as well as those of repairs and insurance.

Grants

In the event that repairs were needed, it is likely that grants would need to be sought from HLF and/or others. The incumbent may need to be the formal applicant for grants, although administration and support could be provided by The Trust.

Parish Share

Before joining the Trust the parish in which the church sits will be expected to pay the remaining balance of their parish share request for the year in which it joins. If funds do not allow this, the balance should be reallocated by wider agreement between the remaining parishes within the benefice. Thereafter the benefice will need to reallocate amongst the remaining parishes the liability for parish share which has previously been met by the church now leased to the Trust. The total amount of share due from a benefice will **not** be affected by the leasing of a church to the Trust.

Finance – local

The usual costs associated with a small village parish church are around £1500-2000 each year, excluding any Parish Share contribution (see note above). This figure includes general estimates for insurance, an annual clearing of gutters and downpipes, occasional churchyard maintenance and minor repairs. Some churches will have limited reserves and it is expected that they would be available for use by The Trust, unless legally restricted to purposes other than the building and mission/ministry. Any collections from occasional services, PCC fee income, wall box donations and so on (not exhaustive) would also be expected to be passed to the Trust for use by the insurance/maintenance/repair fund. There is though likely to be a gap and with very few services or regular congregation, this is unlikely to be able to be resourced locally. Any funds transferred for and on behalf of the Parochial Church Council will be used solely for the maintenance and insurance of the building and churchyard and will not be used by other churches within the Trust.