Church Buildings: Blessing or Burden?
Address by Rt Revd Vivienne Faull, Bishop of Bristol
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Once upon a time I was a keen and somewhat naive Deaconess in St Matthew and St James Mossley Hill in Liverpool, and was delighted to be so.

After a year or so, I began to discover the ambiguities around that church building, not least in its patronage, named after Matthew James because its benefactor was Matthew James Glenton. But there were other ambiguities, not least in the sheer size of the Victorian Gothic building, which for a while was Pro Cathedral of the newly created Diocese of Liverpool.

The church sits on a ridge south of the city and became a landmark for bombers of both sides during the Second World War. Eventually it was bombed, but not destroyed, and was restored in the late 1950s. It was therefore rather sounder than most Victorian Gothic churches. I commented naively to my Archdeacon wasn’t it useful that the church had been partially bombed and was therefore in good repair. The Archdeacon, generally a benign and pastoral person who had obviously had to read too many quinquennial reports on badly built Victorian gothic churches, replied (with expletives): “I wished they’d done the job properly and bombed the place to smithereens…”

I had my own experience of the bother that buildings cause when I moved to Leicester Cathedral, having been assured that the building was in a good state. Within weeks of my arrival the boiler was condemned, the electrics were condemned and, on the first day of the Millennium, the gable of the south aisle collapsed. Months later I was told the spire would have to be rebuilt. All that before we could even start on the desperately needed liturgical reordering.

The Diocese of Bristol has responsibility (according to the DAC) for 212 church buildings (to give you comparators, Portsmouth has 171, and Oxford has 810). This gives an average of two-and-a-bit buildings per stipendiary clergy person (in Hereford the ratio is four; London is less than one).

In the briefing for my recruitment I was told that 57 of our churches were Grade 1 listed, 49 were 2*, 40 were Grade 2, and 54 were unlisted. You might wonder what has happened to the other 12 - and so do I!

So what about our responsibilities towards them? These are legal, practical and theological. To focus on the theological, are church buildings a burden or a gift? The answer to that will depend on your temperament, experience, and spirituality.

You may be amongst those who find some places particularly holy; ‘thin places’ as George MacLeod put it (and that is what we set out in Church of England Policy with the consecration of church buildings and their churchyards; places which, because they have been set aside, can catch people up in relationship with God).

But giving absolute priority to that thinking encourages idolatry, and anyone who has been involved in debates around removing pews knows the insidious power of idolatrous thinking.
If you have known that power, you may see church buildings as burdens, because for you the crucial relationship is between God and God’s people and the building is incidental. We have seen that in newer churches, set up in out-of-town warehouse sheds, or school halls, some of them of no fixed abode, pilgrim churches on the move…

But prioritising people does not do justice to the importance of place in God’s ways of relating. The Garden of Eden, the Promised Land, Nazareth, Galilee, Jerusalem.

*When God chose to enter the world, it was not in some ethereal, generic manner, but in a particular family, in a particular town, in a particular country with particular socio-religious practices. Just as Christ became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood (John 1.4) so also the people that comprise the local church in the parish are meant to be a tangible expression of God’s love in the everyday reality of life*¹

Our Resourcing Churches acknowledge the importance of place: St Nicholas’ reopening of one of the oldest parish churches in the city of Bristol, situated on the major river crossing and therefore at a crossroads for many people; the Pattern Church opening at the heart of what, in this Diocese, has been one of the alternative creators of identity, the railways - a place which holds memories for many of the engineers of Swindon and, in some ways like St Nicholas’, has symbolic power. They will become special places, where Christ transforms lives; and so they will become thin places.

Meanwhile, Sir Roy Strong and Simon Jenkins have argued energetically for increased community use of churches, pointing out it is a wasted asset to use our churches for a couple of hours a week, and that, years ago, churches would have been intensively used.

It is good to see wonderful current examples of community use in both our urban and our rural parishes. That was how at least some of our churches used to be, and we see the opportunities still: not least in reports from flooded parishes where churchwardens and clergy have responded heroically, turning their church buildings into rest centres, communications hubs, feeding stations and much more. And across this Diocese, many of you stand ready for moments of great need, opening the doors of your churches with generosity, grace and goodwill for all sorts of events and purposes.

Richard Giles, who has worked so hard to help church communities, particularly in areas of deprivation, to re-imagine the space in which congregations worship, so as to, as he puts it, re-pitch their tent, writes of the power of churches to bear witness as they make connections between Christian faith, the building which symbolises that faith, and people’s experience of life.

Church Buildings which hold that triangular relationship well can, he says, *‘tell the story of creation, of the self-inflicted pain of disobedience; of slavery, exile, and estrangement, of wandering and helplessness, of waiting and longing, of rescue in the person of Jesus, showing us for the first time what it means to be truly human. It can go on to tell the story of that particular group of people who meet regularly within its walls to encounter the living Lord and to grow in faith and love. It can leave the visitor with something to chew on, something to make them think that perhaps there is something in this Christianity lark after all, if this particular group of people can tell their story with such pride and vigour.’*²

But for some communities it is no longer possible to sense pride or vigour. Some buildings are now past their use by date, or require thorough costly reordering. Others are now situated in communities which can no longer produce the volunteers to keep the building open and safe and welcoming.

¹ P Sparks, T Sørensen and D Friesen *The New Parish. How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* IVP 2014

² R Giles *Re-Pitching the Tent. Reordering the Church Building for Worship and Mission in the New Millennium* Canterbury Press 1995
Funding is scarce, and takes time and skill to bid for. Lead theft is on the rise again. Contractors prepared to quote are becoming scarce, wary of lengthy permission and grant application processes. The wider community may not need to use the church, particularly when they are cold and dark and where there are alternatives in local schools or village halls. But we find it so difficult as human beings to choose to stop something, to end something, to close something, particularly because of the sense of story and place which each parish church holds. In Leicester, a neighbouring parish did decide that it was time its church was closed and sold. The community moved to the church hall, and marked the occasion with a liturgy. And the title was instructive of their feeling about the move. They called the service a liturgy of exile. Not a liturgy of resurrection.

There are some here having to think about closure of churches. But for most of us the tension is the one common to all of us in this Christian life lived between the resurrection and the return of Christ. In this interim, we will continue to live holding the subsidiary tension between gift and burden, the tension between the past and future, the tension between what we long to do and what we can do, not least about reordering, increasing accessibility and reducing our carbon impact.

And the legal framework within which we are obliged to work can add to the sense of burden. But there is help at hand even from the Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Care of Churches Measure 2015. Where we read ‘a person carrying out functions of care and conservation under this Measure, or under any other enactment or any rule of law relating to churches, must have due regard to the role of a church as a local centre of worship and mission.’ Even if you represent Historic England or the Victorian Society or Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, you have to acknowledged that priority.

I have had conversations with our Chancellor, and recently attended the Diocesan Advisory Committee which is (and I am not going to spare his blushes) led by one of the best DAC chairs available in the country. Simon Pugh-Jones and the DAC membership hold together deep Christian conviction, profound understanding of the complexities of parish life, practical skill to enable good schemes to happen and commitment to finding ways in which our buildings can be, in every sense, power stations for the future, resourcing the spiritual life and spiritual capital of communities, and sustainable for the future. I had the honour of presenting the DAC awards for exceptional work on church fabric in the Diocese last year. From the repair of a churchyard wall (through the determined action of one woman), to a long term complex reordering, the witness to the potential of our church buildings for good was palpable. It was a wonderfully spirit-lifting occasion and I am glad there is a date in the diary for the 2020 awards.

There is huge responsibility handed to us in our buildings, but also great joy, because they are places of symbolic power and signs of Gospel hope. May we, despite the burdens we carry, know the gift our church buildings bring.

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