

Keeping Parish Churches

Facts and figures for Church of England churches

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The volunteers who look after our parish churches are working hard to maintain them but are under pressure.

At his recent inauguration, the Bishop of Gloucester called for 'a slimmer, fitter Church', suggesting that it might sometimes 'mean letting go even of the church building we've loved all our lives.' Nor is Gloucester alone in having to give thought to the future of Church buildings. Why should this be? This article provides some facts and figures to put the situation in context. It deals only with Church of England (CoE) parish churches (using the term loosely, to include chapels), as these provide the great majority of listed places of worship.

Who cares for church buildings?

There are about 12,000 listed CoE parish church buildings (more listed churches than there are petrol stations), with about 4,000 in each of the three grades of listing and a further 4,000 unlisted. This enormous estate of listed buildings is looked after by small, independent voluntary groups – parish church congregations – using their own money, or carrying out fund-raising in their spare time (see Griffiths, 7–9).

On average, the number of adults in each church building on Sundays is between 50 and 60, totalling something over 800,000 on a typical Sunday. Not everyone, however, turns up every Sunday; probably about 1.5 million adults attend with some degree of regularity. In addition, there is a cadre of full-time staff – the clergy – with about one clergyperson for every two church buildings.

Congregations vary in size. In 2001, some 2,600 parishes (20%) had over 100 adults attending Sunday services. On the other hand, roughly 800 parishes (6%) had ten adults or fewer worshipping on Sunday. One reason for these small congregations is that many rural

churches are not close to modern centres of population. For example, 12% of church buildings are today in communities which together contain less than 1% of the population. As might be expected, parish incomes differ enormously. At the lower end, about 1,500 parishes have ordinary income of less than £5,000 per annum.

Many church buildings are already used for purposes other than worship, and this can provide a source of income as well as a service to the community. Uses range from the ubiquitous mother and toddlers group, to major

Benington Church, Lincolnshire (Grade I). The chancel is a surprise: of Early English date, it has springers on either side for a vault that was never built. The future of the church is uncertain.



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Benington Church, Lincolnshire, a Grade I listed building now up for sale following its closure as a place of worship.

schemes in which the buildings are a focus for urban regeneration. There are no overall figures, but wider use of church buildings is certainly on the increase.

Parish churches attract millions of ‘tourist’ visits per year (probably between 10 and 50 million visits), and, for many other people, the buildings are an essential backdrop, even if not visited. By encouraging tourism in this way, well-kept churches contribute significantly to local economies. Unfortunately, very little of this money actually reaches the churches to help pay for repair bills.

Pressures

There are various pressures on parishes. One is financial: the CoE has a pensions crisis. Although voluntary giving has been rising – up by more than a third in ten years, after allowing for inflation – many parishes have found that an increased proportion of their income is needed to support the central funding of clergy salaries and pensions. In one diocese, for example, 75% of parish income is now contributed to the central pot, compared with 50% in 1990. This puts real pressure on church maintenance.

Here we must scotch a myth: the CoE is not fabulously wealthy (nor, myth number two, has it lost all its money through bad investments). After pensions, the subsidy to parishes from central investments is only about 50p per week for each adult who attends church.

Another pressure is falling attendance, a problem shared with most other Christian denominations in England. In the last 30 years, all-age attendance at CoE churches has dropped by about 40% and the number of salaried clergy by a similar amount. Fewer than 10% of churches have been closed, however, and new ones (3% of the total) have been opened to meet new needs.

The option taken by other networks, such as pubs and banks, of simply closing their under-

used buildings, is not so easily available to the CoE.

Looking ahead, the best estimate is for a rate of closure of at least 60 churches per year on average for the foreseeable future – at least equal to the previous highest rate, seen for a few years only in the 1980s. Many of these closures will be buildings of very high quality, such as Benington Church, Lincolnshire (Grade I). The Churches Conservation Trust, which was set up to preserve the best buildings and has more than 300 already in its care, will be quite unable to absorb those closures, as its grant (about £4 million per annum) has been reduced by some 5% in real terms.

How well are the buildings cared for?

Despite these pressures, it seems that the majority of church buildings are being kept in reasonable condition or better. There is no register of church buildings at risk, however, so we have no firm statistics. Keeping churches in good repair costs a great deal of money. In 2001, parish volunteers raised £86 million for repairs, about £5,000 per church building on average. This was a typical year. About £50 million of this money did *not* come from large grants but was raised by parishes under their own steam. We should all be grateful.

The views expressed here are the author’s own and not necessarily those of the Ecclesiological Society. This article is based on his report, *How do we keep our parish churches?* (Ecclesiological Society, 2004, ISBN 0946823162), available for download or purchase from www.ecclsoc.org. Sources for additional material are included on the website.