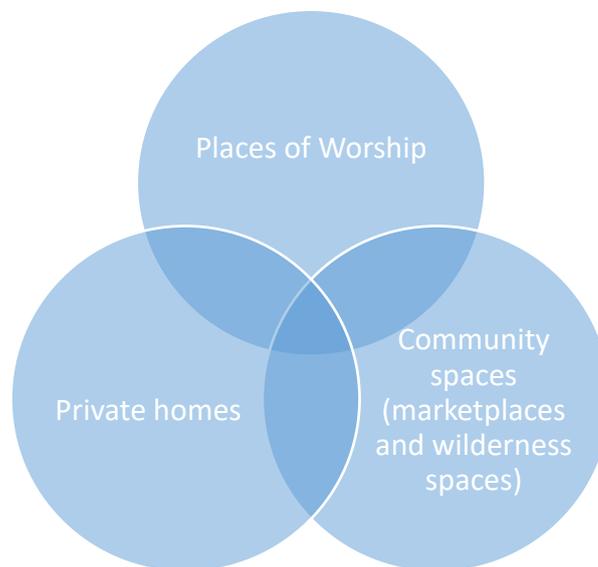


Appendix A

Theological Reflections on Sacred Spaces

1. Jesus and the early church, and what this means today

In scripture, Jesus and the early church make use of three different types of physical space in which to live out God's calling in their lives - their mission and ministry. The three spaces are:



Below is a small selection from many examples that show how all three different spaces were essential and mutually beneficial -

Places of Worship

'Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret'. (John 18:19 – 20)

Public 'on the streets'/community spaces

'When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them...' (Matthew 5:1)

¹⁶ 'While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there'. (Acts 17:17)

Private homes

'And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved'. (Acts 2:46 - 47)

It is sometimes mistakenly said that Jesus and the early church only met in private homes before heading out for missional work in the countryside and marketplaces. As can be seen from this small number of scriptural references, places of worship also matter. They are God's, built for his glory, open to all (publicly accessible) who hear his call to respond to his grace. Every person, for example, is freely available to attend a church service to hear the Word of God and see it in action.

An increasing number of churches are open outside service times for people to drop by for prayer or quiet reflection, benefit from provision such as a community café, foodbank or group activity, or explore the heritage.



Overall, in considering the Church of England's use of the three different types of spaces, it could be said that establishing and maintaining places of worship (church buildings and halls) has been heavily prioritised, despite considerable challenges. There have been less (although varying) levels of emphasis on nurturing Christian community, discipleship and mission in our homes. There seems even less presence of the church in community spaces, either where people naturally gather, (the modern-day physical or online 'marketplaces'), and/or the wilderness places where those on the margins of society often dwell.

Overnight, however, the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21 shifted the balance of spaces, with church buildings forced to closed during national lockdowns, except mainly for small-scale funeral services and eventually some opened for private prayer as the first stage of the easing of restrictions. The forced closure and urgency to move to a digital or other platform, (as gatherings were prevented through social distancing restrictions), created the opportunity to reflect on what is the right balance of places and spaces for effective ministry and mission? *Where* are people seeking? *What* are people seeking or missing in the early stages of the pandemic and now in the recovery phase over 12 months later? Do views differ between members/regulars of the church and non-members?

On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic instigated a dramatic increase in engagement beyond the church walls, which has been a wonderful opportunity, including online streamed services, missional engagement in neighbourhoods and delivering food parcels. Yet on the other hand, the impact of social isolation, loneliness and poor mental health have come to the fore, showing the negative impact of and individualist culture. National research has shown this has led to an increased appreciation of spaces for gathered worship and social interaction, as well as spaces for prayer, reflection or support as more people experience bereavement, loss, and/or poor mental wellbeing.

In particular, the report, [Churches, COVID-19 and Community: experiences, needs and supporting recovery](#) by the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, University of York, March 2021, shows that churches and their buildings have provided COVID-hit communities with crucial support in social care; well-being (in mind, body and spirit), place-making and heritage; and support for people suffering grief and loss. The report includes Section 2.2.1: 'Church buildings: spirituality, individual wellbeing, and worship', (p55-65). Findings include:

- 45%, nearly 1 in 2, non-members of the church stated during the pandemic they might have wanted to come to a church building to pray or leave a prayer request
- 41% said light a candle
- Most of the other reasons why non-members wanted to come to church buildings connected with a prayerful ambience:
 - 75% quiet reflection
 - 68% peaceful space
 - 50% remembering someone who has died
 - 10% new perspective.

This means the desire for prayer, reflection and spirituality goes far beyond the church congregation, and they are looking to church buildings as spaces to help facilitate that desire.

The focus of this paper is to explore the first of the three spaces initially mentioned - public places of worship; primarily church buildings, with some reference to church halls. This is because there are 348 church buildings in our Diocese, with an estimated nearly two million* visits each year in our Diocese to attend church services alone. However, this fact alone raises a significant question:

What is the right balance of places and spaces for more people to hear the Good News of Christ and grow in their faith? What is right to cherish and use more effectively, and what is right to let go of in order to embrace something new?

This research paper may be one facet in beginning to explore that question further.

2. Why do places and spaces matter? A theological reflection



'*The Report of the Church Buildings Review Group*¹', published in January 2016, led by the Right Reverend John Inge, Bishop of Worcester, includes a theological reflection of places and spaces. In exploring the role of church buildings, the report states:

*'The primary purpose of churches is and should remain the worship of Almighty God, to be houses of prayer. But that can and needs to be sensitively combined with service to the community. The imaginative adaption of church buildings for community use in many areas is breathing new life into them.'*²

The report argues that this fulfils God's Law, which summarises the Ten Commandments as loving the Lord with all our hearts, mind and strength (worship) and loving our neighbours as ourselves (service), based on Mark 12: 29 - 31.

In terms of the right focus on places and spaces, the report discusses how The Bible is based on the relationship between God, people and place. Therefore, places matter. They are a revelation of God; that he moved in this place. In the Old Testament, for example, there are many instances of the Hebrews using stones to mark the spot where God intervened. This concept continued down the centuries to the founding of churches, particularly the early church, which were often built on the site of visions, miracles and martyrs.

The report makes the point that it is not that buildings or spaces themselves that are holy; simply, that they create space that is set apart as a reminder of who God is and what he has done. It is a way of remembering, the need to set aside the busyness life, to

¹ The Report of the Church Buildings Review Group, p1 – GS 2008

² Ibid (in the same place)

spiritually 'look up' and be still to the truth of the sovereignty of God. As the report states,

*'Our attitude to cathedrals and churches should be a bit like our attitude to Sundays. It's not that Sundays and churches are nearer to God or more excellent: they are fractions, set apart to represent the truth that all time and space are God's. The part is consecrated, not instead of the whole, but on behalf of the whole.'*³

Church buildings, therefore, not only enable members of the body of Christ to gather in a sufficiently large enough space, but they encourage a deeper spiritual journey of pressing the 'pause' button on the routine of life to consider The One who gives and sustains life.

In 'Church Buildings for People', Nigel Walter argues that church buildings are active partners in creating space where the family of God grows together in closeness to God and one another, for he writes,

*'Belonging to a church is the means by which we partake in God's narrative, which is always communal. Church buildings are the way in which we take part in God's communal narrative in a particular place.'*⁴

As God is relational, so too is the church, as we are designed to live our lives in community. The need for spaces that strengthen these relational bonds and provide a sense of rootedness, therefore, is an essential factor in how we use and adapt church buildings.



³ Ibid, p25

⁴ *Church Buildings for People: Reimagining Church Buildings as Nourishing Places*, Nigel Walter, Grove Books, 2014

3. Role of sacred space, including church buildings

Sacred spaces could be viewed as places that we intentionally use for the glory of God, whether church buildings, halls or temporarily using community space such as halls and cafes.

Well maintained and enhanced church buildings are a strong witness that the Christian faith is very much alive and making a positive difference in our communities - our buildings 'speak'. They are our place for collective worship, a house of prayer and a resource for mission.

Our church buildings are where our worshipping communities come together- they are a sacred place where they participate in doing God's work and where they are equipped and strengthened to live put their faith in their home, at work and in their communities for the remaining six days a week.

Our buildings are a House of Prayer. A growing number are open for visitors to offer a space for prayer and quiet reflection. They are also a gathering place for collective prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ, our communities, our nation and the world.

Church buildings are a visible Christian presence on our high streets and in our villages. Our buildings are a distinctive part of the skyline and character of the area, encapsulating personal and community stories through the generations. They are instantly recognisable, acting as a 24/7 noticeboard of a Christian presence. This could be described as 'evangelism in stone', as our church buildings are a witness to the permanency of God, and in turn, the resilience of the body of Christ through changing times.



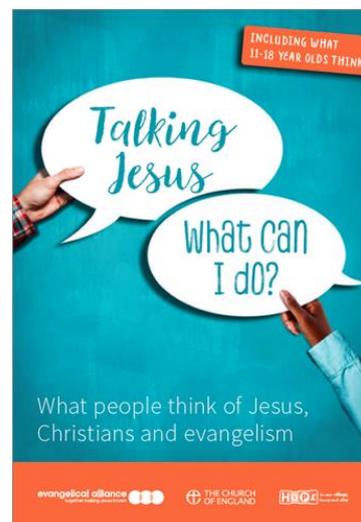
The symbolism of 'permanency' in our buildings conveys a further significant message to local people and stakeholder organisations - the longevity of the commitment of churches to local communities. Over the years, numerous community initiatives and spaces have ceased, but churches and the spaces they provide continue in the life of villages, towns and cities as a place of connection, support, fellowship, social action, enrichment of life and marking major life and community events. In some areas, churches are the only, or one of few, public spaces remaining open and active for all. In the paper, *Churches and Faith Buildings: Realising the Potential*⁵, published in 2009 by a working group of officials from the government and Church of England, it states,

'Faith communities bring distinctive resources to local communities, supporting and empowering individuals, embracing a rich diversity of experience, skills and people motivated to change their communities for the better. Typically deep rooted, they are there 'for the long term', having unusual qualities of resilience and commitment, particularly in deprived areas.'⁶

Research shows sacred spaces are one conduit to enable people to encounter Christ. In the ComRes research report, *Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and evangelism (adults)*, the research includes the main reasons, or factors, why people become a Christian.

The second most important factor (out of 18) is 'Attending a church service(s) other than a wedding or funeral' (28%). This shows the importance of buildings as places of collective learning and worship in order to draw people closer to God.

'Visiting/praying in open churches (i.e. not in a church service)' scored 4%, which although initially seems of low significance, is only slightly less than attending an introductory Christian study course, which is at 5%.



⁵ Churches and Faith Buildings: Realising the Potential, 2009

⁶ Ibid, p3

In the research report, *'Talking Jesus: Perceptions of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism (11 - 18 year olds)'*, young people stated the joint - 4th reason for becoming a Christian is 'Visiting a Church Building' (13%). This equates to about one in every seven young people. It tied with 'Going to a Church wedding, funeral, Christening, Baptism or Confirmation' and 'A Youth Group'.

This means that for young people, visiting a church building has a greater influence on becoming a Christian than a 'Faith activity in school e.g. assembly' (9%), 'Church based youth service' (8%), or 'Youth camp or summer club' (4%)

The research therefore shows that church buildings play a significant role in young people and adults coming to faith.

The following diagram explores the foundational role of church buildings. These are the qualities imbued within them for centuries. The way the roles are described deliberately use a 'non church' language to widen the range of people who can join the conversation; also to provide a different lens in which to consider them. It may be helpful to consider whether your church building inhibits or enhances each of their foundational roles.

One way of seeing the role of church buildings is reflected in the following diagram, of which an explanation follows.



1. **Pray, Reflect** – A House of Prayer. Praying together as a Christian community, with people, for people and for the world. Open for all (church building and churchyard) as a sacred space to be still, calm and reflect on life in the sacred ambience as a House of Prayer; a place for vigils at times of great need; facilitating Christian spiritual awareness.
2. **Encounter, Learn, Enrich** - Growing personally and as a Christian community in our understanding of and closeness to God through proclaiming the Good News afresh and maintaining a Christian presence locally. This becomes a foundation for a positive sense of identity, value, purpose and belonging. Volunteering enhances personal development and fellowship.
3. **Relational, wellbeing** - Hub of community life, bringing people together, supporting and caring, reducing social isolation by building friendships; a place of refuge and sanctuary; equipping people to deal with life's challenges through drawing closer to God; helping create a more just world through prayer, support, encouragement, practical help and social action.
4. **Celebrate** - Rejoicing and thankfulness in God's blessings through worship and fellowship; celebrating major life events of baptisms (christenings), weddings and blessings; celebrating special times and events in local and national life, held in often the largest public building for villages and some towns.
5. **Respect, Remember** - An open door for all to enter; a space for conversations and action that transform injustices. A place of remembrance, respect and honour to God, people's lives, significant events (past, present and future) and creation, including commemorative services, memorials, funerals, prayers and projects or initiatives.
6. **Be Inspired, Discover** – Inspiring, creative, and uplifting space with a special ambience, often historic, with great acoustics. Treasure-houses, built to the glory of God and so often amongst the finest architecture for an area; increasingly open for visitors, part of heritage and cultural tourism and local life.
7. **Be Rooted** - Symbolising the permanence of God and longevity of commitment to local communities; encapsulating stories of people's lives, often in landmark buildings, creating a sense of rootedness of place and identity on a personal, local and national level; site of pilgrimage, preserving historical/cultural research and artefacts, custodians of churchyards.

4. Developing a vision for sacred space

To realise the potential of sacred space, we first need to discern God's vision for the locality, opening our hearts to what is on the heart of God. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, succinctly summaries this discernment of mission in his presidential address at General Synod in 2003, by saying,

'Mission, it's been said, is finding out what God is doing and joining in'.⁷

Once a Godly vision is discerned, then is the right time to consider how this relates to the church building by discerning what we need *from* our buildings to fulfil this Godly vision, rather than focusing on what we want to do *to* them.

In this way the role of church buildings could be seen as creating the right environment for people to be more open in spirit, heart and mind, (a clear straight path, a conduit), for God to freely work in people's lives.

It may help by asking such questions as - What is 'the wilderness' in your locality? What's on God's heart? How can our buildings remove barriers and build bridges to people encountering Christ?

'A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God'.
Isaiah 40:3

⁷ <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1826/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod-york-july-2003>

5. Stories worth sharing

Here are some stories worth sharing that demonstrate how sacred spaces such as church buildings are one conduit to help people encounter the living God. They can help create the right environment, (a sacred, uplifting, open and safe space), in which stories are created of God moving in people's lives. These examples, however, also show another dimension that is needed – intentionality to help people explore their Christian faith journey further.

Story 1

'As the designated 'taxi driver' for the morning, a granddad came into a Church Centre with his granddaughter and great – granddaughter to drop them off for the Monday morning toddler group. As it wasn't worth driving home to return an hour later, he decided to wait in the large, open-plan lobby area. I welcomed him and asked why he was here this morning. He asked if I was from the church and if I was 'religious?' By this, I guessed he meant, 'Do you know something about God?', so I said 'yes'. He then shared how he had been through two near - death experiences, during one of which he had met with God, and God had said to him, 'You are mine.' This had happened over fifty years ago. I fed back to him that he had met with the living God and God was saying that he had chosen him. Also, that God was waiting for a response to say yes, as he doesn't over-rule our free will. I then shared a little of what God had done in my life, to show God's good character and it's safe and right to invite him in. I suggested he may like to consider coming to church and looking for an Introductory Christian course such as Alpha, saying it was something to think about, to which he said 'Yes, it is something to think about'. I walked away amazed at what had happened; I'd only gone over to say hello and see if he needed any assistance! I wondered if he'd ever shared his story before? And if he had been waiting fifty years for someone to help him make sense of it and what to do next? I'm not some great evangelist, but we're all called to share the reason for the hope we have inside. It's simply seeing the God - moments and sharing who God is and what he's done for us, whenever and wherever the conversation begins.'

Creating suitable spaces for people to open up and share stories, build relationships and have meaningful conversations is so important. The Church Centre lobby area in this case was at the St Mary's Handbridge (Chester) new Church Centre, which opened in 2018. It has a wonderful lobby area for welcome and refreshments as people arrive or depart for their various activities. Important too is being intentional when those 'God moments' arise in an ordinary and unassuming way, meeting people one by one.

Story 2

'At a church prayer meeting, there was opportunity to give thanks to God and encourage one another with such stories. Paul told us about last weekend. He had been prompted by God to go into the streets of Chester and pray for people that God directed him to. He imagined this would be on the streets itself, but was led to go into St Peter's Church, (which is open every day), and just sit there and pray. So he did. Not long after, a woman sat down in a seat nearby. Paul noticed she was crying. He offered to pray for her and she said yes, and he prayed for healing and deliverance. She then left. About ten minutes later, a man came in and sat down in exactly the same seat as the woman. He also looked troubled. Paul offered prayer for healing too. The man left. Paul then went home to rest from a serious prayer time, having been a vessel for God to offer his healing grace.'

When I heard this story, it struck me that we simply do not know how many people are seeking God in troubled times, even if the people involved cannot articulate or are fully aware of whom they seek. Two people deliberately entered a church building to sit and reflect, somehow knowing that this sacred space was a beacon, a conduit, to finding the only true and lasting answer to peace. To make this happen, several things were needed. Firstly, the church building needed to be visible, so people could find it. Secondly, it needed to be open at a time when people were around. Thirdly, it needed to have space where people were welcome to simply come, sit, reflect, pray or be prayed for. Fourthly, it needed a Christian, whether from the church or from another, to intentionally seek or be aware of people that are seeking God and offer prayer and guidance as God directs.

Story 3

'A woman attended a funeral in a church building; a place she rarely, if ever, entered. As she sat down, her thoughts were solely regarding the funeral. However, afterwards walking back through the streets of the town, her mind raced with questions she had never considered, such as - What is the purpose of my life? Is there a God? Why am I here? Is life, is my life, meaningless? The woman was suddenly aware of a small group of young people, who asked if she was okay and if she would like prayer. To her own surprise, she said yes. It was then that the spiritual and emotional floodgates opened as the woman heard about the life - transforming love of God the Father through Jesus Christ; that in Him she had a purpose, was of immense value and could be in a loving relationship with God and so find true inner peace. In that very moment, she gave her life to Christ. It was also a special day for the young people, as they had just begun to pray in the streets, believing the God had called them to be more missional. They were totally depending on God to direct them to who He was calling to Himself, and so were led to this woman. It was quite a day for all!'

Without a church building that offers space to think, a caring and dignified place to mark such occasions as funerals and a public space to hear the Word of God, the person may never have stopped long enough to look deeper at her life. Without the young people being intentional and dependent on God to lead them to her, the woman may have continued walking with her mind overburdened by questions but no hope of answers.

I hope these stories have made you think about your own church building(s) and halls/centres and their role in God's plan to bring his kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. It may also have stimulated thought about the three-fold use of places and spaces in Jesus' day and what this means for us today in our ministry and mission.