

Shaped by God Together – Update on work of Church Buildings Workstream Group

The Church Buildings Workstream Group (set up as part of SBGT) was tasked with exploring some potential models for offering support to parishes in view of the long-term challenges that are faced in relation to the care, maintenance and use of church buildings. In addressing these challenges the hope is to release the full potential of our church buildings as a physical witness to the Christian faith and as a local missional resource.

Between January and March the workstream group shared the emerging models in six conversation sessions attended by over 70 clergy, church officers and church members who had responded to the open invitations on Diomail and elsewhere. The models addressed the following issues:

1. How to enable good and honest local conversations at parish level about church building challenges, including the offer of supported pathways that could be followed to address specific challenges such as: buildings in poor states of repair; buildings which struggle to serve mission (due to their need for adaptation); and buildings with a reduced missional role (that may struggle to remain open as places of worship in the same way as before the pandemic and where the Festival Church model may be helpful).
2. How to clarify, and develop access to, the professional support that could be offered to aid implementation of quinquennial inspection reports (whether by QI inspectors themselves or more collaboratively/centrally in the diocese) in order to reduce the burden on overstretched church officers and clergy in progressing general church buildings maintenance and repair.
3. How to encourage collaboration in respect of care of church buildings between parishes where such collaboration can achieve savings in insurance and maintenance costs – and what form of diocesan support might be most effective to back this up.

When there are significant church buildings challenges there can be need to have difficult conversations in order to find the best way forward. One of the emerging models is a structured way of accompanying and enabling people to have these conversations about the church buildings challenges they are facing. When this was discussed in the sessions that took place between January and March we heard and noticed:

- The opportunity to discuss church buildings was welcomed and it was felt that there should be more conversations about church buildings and for these to be facilitated conversations;
- The importance of taking into account the multiple functions and roles of church buildings (sacred space, worship, mission, community use, heritage) so that each can play to their strengths;
- Support was indicated for accompanying conversations to be held at the benefice/area level rather than just the parish level;
- A recognition that not all our church buildings are sustainable and this needs to be actively addressed;
- Awareness of a desire/expectation that there will be an over-arching diocesan strategy for church buildings;
- A preference being expressed for accompanying conversations/pathway support to be offered by people rather than merely through documents.

All of this has informed the models that are emerging, and will guide their next phase of development. We aim to pilot some accompanying conversations (and potential pathways such as a Festival Church pathway) with one or more groups of interested parishes in the coming months in order to assess and improve its usefulness.

In relation to the emerging model for provision of professional support and services, the workstream group is exploring ways of developing existing support and guidance for implementation

of quinquennial inspections, including guidance about costed alternatives for oversight of basic maintenance, for identification of contractors and for faculty preparation work, to assist parishes in purchasing professional and other services and to reduce the burden on church officers/clergy.

In relation to the emerging model for collaboration over church building insurance and maintenance costs, the workstream group is exploring in more detail one particular form of partnership that is being tested in other dioceses, whereby savings in block insurance premiums are used to provide free basic annual maintenance for all the participating churches. These detailed explorations will take into account feedback from the conversation sessions, in particular:

- the importance of long-term sustainability of any collaborative model that is offered;
- The risk of this model being associated with over centralisation and the consequent risk of reduction in local support.

The aim is to pilot some conversations about this model within one or more deaneries over the coming months.

The above emerging church building models are being developed having regard to other workstream group models, in particular the ministry group (in relation to the grouping of parishes for conversations) and the finance group and ministry support group in relation to diocesan resources.

Richard Worsfold, chair of workstream group