

Guidance on determining the future of a church building

Introduction

This guidance sets out how the future of church buildings is handled within the Diocese of Oxford and is recommended to be read in conjunction with the Church Commissioner's *What Happens When a Church Building Closes* document and the various other reference documents cited below, all of which can be found [here](#).

Church Closure - Important points to note:

- Closing a church is a complex and lengthy process and it is helpful to understand from the beginning that this is not normally a quick solution but one that requires legal changes to be made. The process usually takes at least several years to complete (often taking longer) and full public consultation is a statutory requirement of the process.
- The Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011, which regulates the closure of Church of England church buildings, sets out clearly that the primary rationale for closing a church should be that the building is 'no longer pastorally required'. The question of pastoral requirement is an issue that should be considered in both the immediate and longer term – are there changes expected in the area that might bring a new pastoral use in the medium to long term? Whilst the Measure recognises the financial aspect of maintaining the building as a valid consideration in the decision-making process, it does specify that missional purpose should be the primary factor. Closing a church should be considered after all other alternative means of resolving issues have been exhausted.
- Until a church is formally closed by a Pastoral Church Buildings [Closure] Scheme, the building remains the responsibility of the PCC. Services should continue in the church in question and the church should remain open to the public to avoid a 'premature closure' being perceived. In other words, people must be allowed sufficient opportunity to continue to use the building for both public and private worship.
- The process of closing a church is divided into 2 parts and handled by 2 separate schemes. The first stage concerns formally closing the church (pastoral church buildings [closure] scheme), the second deals with the future use of the building (pastoral church buildings [disposal] scheme). *Closure* and *Disposal* are sometimes handled together and identifying a future use for the building at an early stage can focus the progress of the closure scheme and bring about a swifter resolution.
- Where a closure has been proposed locally the relevant **Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Committee** (AMPC) needs to assess the pastoral need for the building, and subsequently make a recommendation to the **Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee** (DMPC) on whether a closure should be pursued with the Church Commissioners, or not. The **Diocesan Closed Churches Committee** focuses on identifying future uses for buildings that have either already been formally closed, or which have been approved by the D(A)MPC for *closure/disposal*.
- Many churches are buildings having architectural and/or historical significance – usually recognised by listing, and so have legal protection from demolition, and their contents are safeguarded through the faculty jurisdiction. These aspects of their significance are also intertwined with the community that the church has served throughout its existence – its dead are buried in the churchyard, or memorialised within the building, people were baptized or married there, and met together to celebrate Christmas and Easter. There may also be a local bell-ringing group. For these reasons, every effort should be made to retain the building in community use, retaining in the building as many of the significant features and items as possible.

Alternative options to closure:

- **Complementary use** – There is provision for several different legal options to extend the life of a church by seeking a complementary use. This can range from leasing greater or lesser parts of a church building, to establishing a Trust to take over the responsibility of the church. See the ***Legal options for complementary use of church buildings*** document to see the range of options.
- **Festival Church** -A Festival Church is a church building which is not used for weekly worship but is valued and required by the community for local events and for Festivals of the Church and for Rites of Passage (Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals). See the ***Festival Church Impact Document*** for technical guidance. Further information can be found on the *Association of Festival Churches* website ([The Association of Festival Churches \(afchurches.org\)](http://The Association of Festival Churches (afchurches.org))) and on the *National Church's* website (Festival churches | The Church of England)
- **Fund seeking** – If the financial burden of maintaining the church is the primary consideration, this might be the most appropriate starting point. Please see the linked ***Charitable Grants for Churches*** list prepared by the *Cathedral and Church Buildings Division* of the *Archbishop's Council*. Please note that if the building is architecturally significant Lottery Funding might be available.

Questions to ask and who to consult:

- The PCC should discuss options among themselves, but also should include interested parties (such as Incumbents and clergy, Patrons and congregations) as well as the wider community (schools, community groups, other denominations, individuals) in this dialogue. Social media is a recommended method of reaching out to the non-worshipping community. The wider the consultation that is conducted during the informal stages, the greater the ability to either establish a network of support and identify potential ways forward, or to evidence insufficient interest in the building. Thorough local consultation will strengthen the proposals suggested by the PCC. Try to approach the issue with an open mind and a creative heart, sometimes the best solutions are not the most obvious.
- Although a church is attached to a specific parish and benefice, the future use should be considered more holistically and align with the deanery strategy and will require conversations with the Area Dean and the Archdeacon.
- Whilst the financial aspect may be a considerable driving factor, before making a decision it is recommended that you separate the financial considerations and firstly contemplate the church building as a resource and a part of the community. Are you, as a PCC/ as a local community happy to lose this church building? What impact would this have on how you worship/ on how the community interacts? What other purpose locally or within the wider area might this building serve? Financial issues will still need to be addressed and closure may ultimately be decided as the best solution, however by employing this approach it should ensure that your proposals for closure are in alignment with the legislation and that sufficient consideration to all options has been made. If support and purpose for the building are strong, but financial resources limited potential external funding sources could be explored.

Helpful resources:

- The ***Germinate/ Arthur Rank Centre*** offers comprehensive online resources of interest to Rural churches and can be accessed by clicking [here](#)
- The ***Crossing the Threshold Toolkit**** was produced by Hereford Diocese in 2017 and offers a in depth guide on how to approach adapting a church building for wider community use. It features actual case studies and guides you through how to perform a community audit. This toolkit can be accessed by clicking [here](#)

Helpful resources (continued):

- The **Churches Conservation Trust (CCT)** is the national charity protecting churches at risk. As well as working alongside local communities to care and maintain closed churches vested in them by the Church Commissioners of the Church of England, they also have a Regenerating Communities Team who can share their skills and experience in bringing new life to historic places of worship. Click [here](#) for more information.

What next?

- Once a PCC has raised the future of a church building with the Incumbent, it is recommended that they engage with the Diocese by completing the **Exploring Church Futures Parish Enquiry Form** which the Pastoral Secretary will share with the Archdeacon, Area Dean, Senior Buildings Advisor and Parish Development Advisor, as appropriate.
- Usually, a site visit is arranged with the Archdeacon present to have an initial conversation with those involved locally to talk about general options and next steps. Where the condition of the building is causing concern or where building works are being proposed, the Senior Buildings Officer may request Diocesan Buildings Team to make an assessment.
- The PCC should start considering their options and engaging with both the interested parties and the local community. Proposals for alternative uses should be evidence based and reflect the needs and wishes of those affected. Conducting a Community Audit is a good place to start and advice on how this can be conducted can be found in the **Crossing the Threshold Toolkit** (see above).
- Where a closure is proposed the PCC need to demonstrate that the building is no longer pastorally required within the parish. Where a Festival Church is proposed, a *Mission Action-cum-Business Plan* should be prepared and submitted, setting out the proposed uses (both worship and secular), users, resourcing and governance for the initiative as well as where else in the benefice regular weekly worship will take place. N.B In both cases where proposals affect a single-church parish in a single-parish benefice, wider pastoral reorganisation may be required (see the **Church Buildings Impact Document**). To progress the issue further a motion should be agreed at a PCC meeting, minuted and sent on to the Area Dean and the Pastoral Secretary, along with a report of any local informal consultations or conversations that have taken place.
- The Deanery Synod should review the proposals and assess how they fit in to the overall deanery strategy. If the proposals are recommended by the deanery, the proposals can then be submitted to the Pastoral Secretary and the Archdeacon for consideration firstly by the **AMPC**, to assess the pastoral need for the building/ the proposal to become a Festival Church and, where appropriate, subsequently recommend, the proposals either for approval by the **DMPC** (for closures), or directly to the Bishop (for Festival Churches).
- Where closures meet the approval, the DMPC then approach the **Church Commissioners**, who have ultimate oversight for the closure and disposal of CofE Churches, to work with the Diocese on preparing a Pastoral Church Buildings [Closure/ Disposal] Scheme, and the **Diocesan Closed Churches Committee** to start exploring use options for its future use.

Please note that proposals submitted to the **Archdeaconry/ Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee** are assessed on their individual merits. Approval is not automatic. Where there is concern that further investigation at the local level would be material to the proper evaluation of a church's pastoral need/ viability, the PCC may be asked to carry out further work before a final decision can be made.

For further information please contact the Pastoral Secretary (pastoral.secretary@oxford.anglican.org/ 01865 208243