

National Churches Trust Speech

Building Resilience Conference: sustainable future for places of worship

15minute speech

It is a pleasure to be with you today and thank you for inviting me to speak about the importance of churches to their communities.

I hardly need to be persuaded on the importance of churches to their community having been raised by a Church warden and a Sunday school teacher, I used to walk to Church with my father who impressed upon me that if we didn't attend we might not have a working church to attend before helping him hand out the hymn books. For the small but loyal congregation, he went the extra mile and, as a member of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, spent many hours preserving the ancient mediaeval Church of St Mary the Virgin in Henham, North Essex, even scraping the rood screen of brown Victorian paint to reveal the craftsmanship better beneath it. So from an early age I got the message about churches "use it or lose it".

In answering questions from MPs in the House of Commons which I do on a monthly basis like a Secretary of State as the Second Church Estates Commissioner, I am a go between the church and the state. I regularly highlight projects in churches up and down the country who are taking steps to make their building more resilient by creating more flexible spaces, adding office space, post offices, community shops, banks, libraries, concert venues, broadcasting wifi to their community all while investing in the preservation and restoration of the religious space for worship. The PCCs and volunteers across the Church who are charged with the care and maintenance of our national treasures at the heart of all communities have an unenviable task.

The scale of the challenge facing churches today has only become greater as church attendance has reduced and the income from parishioners' donations has dwindled. For the last 40 years Governments of different political persuasions have been prevailed on to provide public subsidy to repair and maintain church buildings, 75% of which are listed with all the constraints that implies. In recent years we have seen a reduction in funding available to churches and in part as a response to this in 2014 the

Government opened the Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund specifically to help parish churches with essential repairs.

The recently published review of the scheme showed what a huge impact even small amounts of money have had on local communities. The fund set up by the previous Chancellor, George Osborne distributed fifty-five million pounds, which aside from making the building watertight it has been demonstrated in the report to have inadvertently improved:

- community cohesion,
- the profile of the church in the local community,
- the ability of the church to tackle other restoration and reparation projects
- and given the community increased confidence to apply for other grants.

It is amazing what a little seed corn money can do.

The watershed moment which is coming has been anticipated in a review of church sustainability by Bernard Taylor and as a result two pilots to improve sustainability are underway; one in a rural and one in an urban

setting. However, I do not believe it automatically follows that Government reserves will be provided at scale to replicate the best practice for these pilots. In addition to this there is the unexpected decision by the Heritage Lottery Fund to roll up the Grants for Places of Worship scheme into the wider funding pool due to the dwindling income from the lottery itself. To be fair to Sir Peter Luff, who is a good friend and an honourable man, has said the Church will continue to receive the same percentage from the wider pool but it is one of dwindling size, hence a reduction in real terms and the end of large scale grants which were so vital to address the multi-million-pound repair bills some church buildings face. In response to this, churches need to get better and smarter at applying for funding as their applications will now be competing with much larger and well-funded applications from world heritage sites, national monuments and historic houses.

Alongside churches needing better coordinated advice from the dioceses to prevent them competing against each other for the same pot of money, parishes need to make better use of central resources such as the 'churchcare' website run by the Church Buildings Department at Church

House to improve their bids and best practice. I am really concerned by this and with the help of the Church Buildings team at Church House we are looking at ways to support parishes better.

Your own members of Parliament can act as advocates for you, not in Heaven but at least in Parliament, and I would urge you to work with them. One of my first acts as the Second Church Estates Commissioner was to seek a meeting with the Treasury to secure the continuance of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme to 2020. I and colleagues at Church House are busy looking at the next stage, but it is too early to say where the conversations will end up. What has become increasingly clear to me is that parishes must become more resilient and less reliant on grants to fund day to day operations. This can only be achieved through partnership with the wider community and exploring new funding avenues such as church tourism.

I welcome the new Building Resilience Report - now more than ever we need the National Churches Trust to be able to scale up and help parishes become more sustainable alongside the preservation of increasing

numbers of beautiful buildings for posterity. However, it breaks my heart that later today when I am at a meeting with the Church Commissioners for their AGM we will be given among our papers a photo book of the churches that will be closing. We are searching for solutions. While I would prefer not to see them preserved in aspic, I would rather see them evolve to be relevant spaces for today and tomorrow's generation.

Indeed, Bernard Taylor recognised the community value of church buildings in the sustainability review. In rural communities the churches are now quite often the only public building left after the closure of post offices, schools, pubs and surgeries. This is very well understood by the Department I used to run. DEFRA, which has recently joined forces with DCMS to work with the Church of England by striking an accord to achieve government targets for rural broadband and wifi connectivity, making use particularly of rural churches as digital hubs to reach the last 5% of the country. This is very important for rural communities who are currently discriminated against, the world is increasingly online and farmers and schools need access. The church is proposing to use its towers, spires and land to support rural communities. This sort of arrangement can provide an annual income stream which in turn can be

invested back into maintaining the church building, keeping it warm and open and at the heart of its community. We must find more creative ways of creating an income for churches while not losing what makes them such special places.

The wifi project, if it is embraced by parishes and dioceses, may be an early example of the sort of partnership which is going to be needed to keep church buildings going for the community they serve. The Church of England is not squeamish about repurposing its buildings for service to the community, there is so much potential yet to be tapped. In north London St James's Church now holds a post office, children's play area, and café and many rural churches act as collection points for farmers to sell vegetables to local people. This repurposing of church buildings alongside their worship function is of real interest to Government who don't want to see them close because of their importance to the community.

Fundamentally innovation is essential to remain at the heart of the local community, we need outward looking parishes prepared to engage their

wider communities in mission. Significant resources are going to be needed and these too will have to be drawn from a combination of partnerships with the Church, State, public & private bodies as well as parishioners. I am aware of the needs and challenges facing churches especially those with small congregations, I recently fought the corner of the Grade 1 listed church of St Giles, Packwood in my constituency which the National Trust did not want to take on when buying the estate of Packwood House. Having no natural parish, it's hard to make ends meet as there are only a handful of parishioners. The vicar urged everyone in the parish to give up the equivalent of a Costa Coffee a week as their past due – quite inspired! and I held an event at my house to encourage the wider community to understand the support needed by the Church. What we discovered was that a large number of the local community were prepared to donate to keep the church open - even though they did not attend they did not want to lose the building from their community.

We will need to do much, much more if churches cared for by our forefathers are to still be there for subsequent generations. At the heart of successful, sustainable churches are people who feel valued, are

equipped with the knowledge and support to make innovative ideas a reality. The Church of England continually looks to work in partnership to deliver this, and I am delighted that the National Churches Trust has identified 'building resilience' to be at the heart of its work over the coming years.