

Festival Churches Conference

Summary of a one-day conference held at Sheffield Cathedral, 25 March 2019

Introduction: Sir Tony Baldry, Chair of the Church Buildings Council

Tony began the conference by outlining four points that describe the ambitions of the Festival Churches model:

1. Festival Churches are local, decided upon by parishes in consultation with their diocese, not a top-down initiative forced on them. Festival Churches will only work if there is a clear local drive to make it work; deciding on local festivals and events to celebrate, getting more local people involved, with a PCC who are willing to let go of some of the control of the church so that other people can come in and help.
2. Festival Churches are a positive choice, not a decision made in a crisis or a stop on the road to church closure. Festival Churches remain open churches, continue to contribute Parish Share, are part of their diocese, and actively look to open their building to more people locally.
3. Festival Churches are part of growth, providing a varied way of 'doing church' within an area, signposting other forms of ministry and pastoral provisions nearby, and use their different patterns of worship in a way which draws in those who might not see Sunday worship as an offer for them
4. Festival Churches are supported. Both at diocesan and national level, there is recognition that becoming a Festival Church take effort: people on the ground, money in the bank, work for the diocese. The Church Buildings Council wants to support all of this and has produced guidance and templates to help.

Becoming a Festival Church means formally altering the patterns of worship, something which will only be legally possible once amendments to Canons B11, B14 and B39. This should come into force this summer, or early Autumn. After this, each individual church needs to hold a minimum of 6 services a year to be considered a "place of regular worship" in the legal sense, but can hold as many as it wishes, including occasional offices. Not all churches that choose to alter their patterns of worship will become Festival Churches – and the name is not a legal one, so dioceses may choose to call this category something else. The model is intended to imply a church that is actively seeking to involve more people from its community both in the care and maintenance of the church building, and in the life of the church community, through both worship and 'secular' events.

Tony also announced the formal launch of the Association of Festival Churches. This will be separate from and arm's length from Church House, potentially an organisation somewhat akin to the Church Monuments Society, i.e. an unincorporated Association with its own constitution, its own officers and its own programme. Church House has offered to host the website and to work closely with the Association, which Tony will be inaugural Chair of. The Association is intended to be a convening group that helps support churches using the model, and work with dioceses who are engaging with it. Details of how to join will be available soon.

Festival Churches: How to develop flexible buildings for vibrant congregations and communities

Dr Joseph Elders, Church Buildings Council

Joe began by reminding the conference of the extent of the Church of England's building responsibilities: 16,000 church buildings, over 12,000 listed, 4000 at Grade I, making up 45% of all England's Grade I listed buildings. 60% are in rural locations where only 17% of the English population lives.

He then reiterated Tony's points about what Festival Churches are and are not. They are NOT:

- Closing or "Mothballing" by another name
- A way to avoid parish share
- Locked up for 359 days of the year
- Churches which can only be used for a maximum of six services

They ARE:

- A key recommendation of the 2015 Church Buildings Review
- The subject of a change to Canon Law (Canons B11 and B14) which was passed by Synod in February 2017, to become law in February 2019
- Open Churches, a key part of the Church Buildings Council "Open and Sustainable Churches" campaign, together with Resource Churches and Major Churches

The characteristics of open and sustainable churches can be summarised as:

- Open for prayer and for visitors during normal working or daylight hours at least, if possible; otherwise clear directions on how to gain access;
- Open in the sense of providing a welcoming atmosphere for all, regardless of reason for visiting;
- Open for partnership with community and commercial interests, and for cultural, educational and tourism uses;
- Open in the sense of providing wherever possible good access for all and modern facilities;
- Environmentally sustainable, striving to meet Church of England Environment Programme targets;
- Sustainable in the true sense of conservation, which is "the responsible management of change";
- Socially sustainable, by providing a resource which is accessible and attractive to large sections of the community;
- Economically sustainable, in terms of covering the costs of mission and maintenance, while maintaining healthy reserves.

Festival Churches are intended to be fully open and sustainable, but especially socially open, presenting a view of churches as social hubs and centres of communities. More community stakeholder-ship is necessary; Church of England churches belong to everyone in the parish, not just the worshipping congregation. We must get away from "private club syndrome".

Becoming a Festival Church

Whilst there are many, many ways of being a Festival Church, there are a few key steps to actually becoming one. It must be part of a conversation and consultation with community, deanery, and diocese. It cannot happen in isolation.

Step 1: Consult within your community, parish, benefice and Deanery, involve your Archdeacon and Area Dean

Step 2: Seek and pass a PCC Resolution to ask the Bishop to vary the service pattern, with a minimum of 6 services a year, ensuring a service is offered in one church in the benefice

Type 3: Submit a letter to the Bishop, appending the resolution and proof of the consultation outlined in Step 1 and the conditions given in Step 2, for their consent.

Templates for the resolution and letter to the bishop will be made available on the Church of England website.

Management

Changes in governance are possible; Trusts can be formed to not only look after the fabric of the building, but use the space inside and around it. Setting up a trust may be one way of Festival Churches managing their buildings. There are three main types already in existence:

Type 1: Passive - "Friends" who raise money - informal arrangement

Type 2: Active - "Friends" who raise money and help with repairs, maintenance, development – formal arrangement such as a memorandum of understanding

Type 3: Managing Trust – takes over work of maintenance and/or management of building, sometimes leasing part of it from PCC under contract

Deciding what might be best for a church, or a group of churches, will require extensive consultation with the diocese, other churches in the deanery or benefice, and with local people. Archdeacons and the DAC and DMPC would be good first ports of call.

Insurance

Festival Churches may require a different level of insurance from churches operating on more traditional models, so there is a need to think about cost and level of insurance required. Is 100% insurance to cover the costs of reinstatement needed, or instead an option simply for repair or just clearance of the site if the building were to suffer a catastrophe. There is of course still a need for incumbent's insurance and public liability, and perhaps for other types as well. It is wise to consult specialist insurance companies, the Archdeacon and DAC. If a group of churches is being managed by a trust then there might be potential for collective buying to further bring down insurance costs.

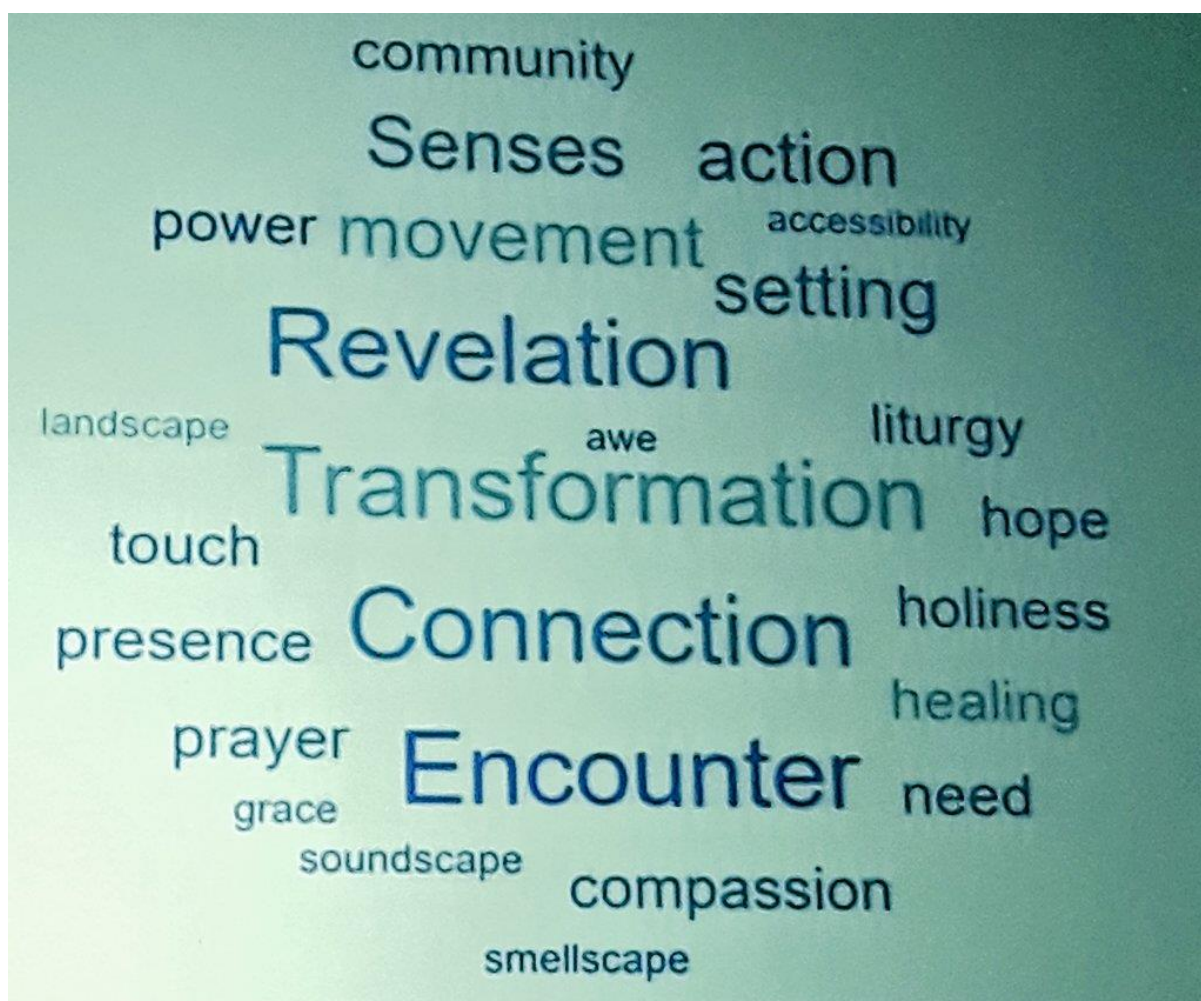
The Church Buildings Council is working to provide a comprehensive resource to support Festival Churches. They are always keen to hear from churches and dioceses with ideas of what sorts of guidance, templates and training might be useful.

The public need for Festival Churches: why do people value their church building?

Dr Kate Giles, The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, University of York

Kate's research has been focused on the concept of pilgrimage, and of the way that modern-day people assign value to churches and sacred space. Her team has worked with hundreds of churches to understand how history can be used to engage people now. The 'standard' concepts of value are historical, evidential, aesthetic and communal. How do people value your church? Do these values help us with management? In moving towards becoming a community-focused Festival Church it is crucial to acknowledge that there can be tensions between different members of communities, who often have different ways of valuing their church. It is important to be sensitive to a variety of opinions and feelings. Feelings of ownership of a church are not limited to those who worship there; churches are places of memory, place, pilgrimage, story and belonging. They are 'the place where it happened', whether that thing is personal like a wedding, local like an act of remembrance, or of national historical importance. Maintaining a church as a Festival Church can be an alternative to closure and the risk of losing all of that.

Kate's research has thrown up words that are used by people when talking about churches they know; the people asked are not necessarily Christians.



Maintaining these values and acknowledging these deep connections can be key to motivating a community to come together and take care of their church.

Kate's research has identified the most common additional uses church buildings are put to:

- Post Office
- Shop
- Café
- Exercise classes
- Parent and toddler group
- Soft play area
- Food bank

There are also a series of regular barriers to putting such uses alongside worship, including:

- Physical layout
- Capital funding
- Lack of ability to generate income
- People who do not want churches used in this way

There are not easy answers to any of these, but good communication is part of breaking some of them down. In setting up Festival Churches it is important to manage expectations. Funding can be hard to come by, community may expect more than can be delivered, becoming a 'venue' might mean people expect facilities and staff that simply aren't available. Be realistic and honest.

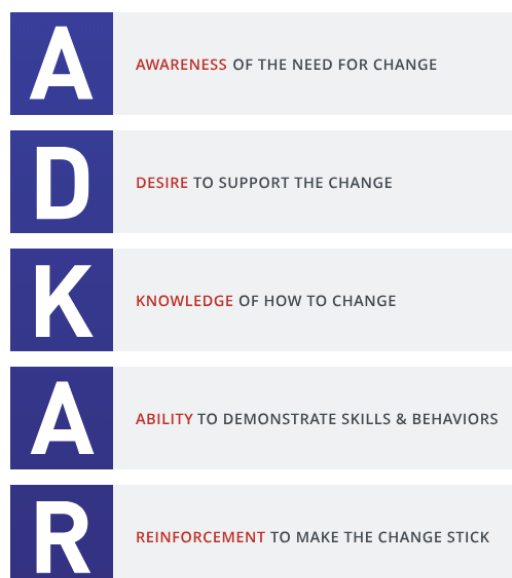
Festival Churches do not have to stick to traditional Christian festivals, but have the chance to define their own significant times and events. These might include remembrance events, harvest, local saints days, weddings, christenings, anniversaries, music festivals around St Cecilia's Day, the Marian feasts, St Valentine's Day; the list goes on. What is key is establishing what the people round and about a particular church feel an affinity for, what those who might be arranging or running worship feel comfortable with, and how different events can be used to welcome people in.

Festival Churches: change management and the liturgical perspective

The Very Reverend Peter Bradley DL, Dean of Sheffield

Change management

Peter started by talking about his experience of change management, and approaches that can help using Jeff Hiatt's ADKAR approach:



Managing change in the Church of England can feel like building the Tower of Babel; it is not always clear who's leading, we lose momentum or interest, and are not certain exactly what difference we expect to make. Undertaking change is a risky business. In his experience of leading the regeneration of Sheffield Cathedral Peter found that a long period of genuine engagement, understanding the different needs and pressures people had, and recognising the fear of disruptive change were key to success. Listen, and help people to articulate their concerns. One issue is that the Church is often seen as a secure place in a changing world; how do we make changes that respects that? Experience shows that it is mainly about communication, starting with an awareness of the need for change. Only by listening, developing ideas with those who hold different views, and asking what they want and how they want to be involved, can we genuinely work in community.

Festival liturgy

Peter then moved on to a “brief and practical liturgy” for festivals. Festival liturgy is about showing people that there is more to the Christian faith than they knew, more options, and more variety. It needs to engage with a broad public who are not currently engaged with the Church. We must be a broad movement, not a niche movement. Festival Churches are about more than a series of directly evangelistic moments; they are about meeting those who are disassociated from God and offering chances to learn and discover. So for example a simple engagement could be the act of lighting hundreds of candles in the church building on Halloween. There does not need to be a formal service, just an act of beauty and openness, connecting with Christian themes of light and hope in a way that draws people in.

How can a small team (or an individual) develop events at Festival Churches? The key is not to think in terms of events or services, but experiences. It doesn't have to be complex or expensive. Allow the community to determine the agenda. It feels frightening and vulnerable. It might go wrong from time to time. But it shows you are their church, and there for them. Peter advocates "thoughtful vulgarity" which doesn't place our buildings too snobbily above what people want to engage with, whilst preserving the sanctity of the place.

Festival Churches are a chance to leverage the power of beauty to engage people with God. Festival liturgy is a place of discovery; beautiful; open: a giving space.

Sharing churchyard heritage: exploiting the potential of your churchyard

Tim Viney, Atlantic Geomatics

Tim's work on surveying and understanding burial grounds comes from an understanding of their potential as a tool of engagement. Churchyards and burial grounds are a key part of people's connection to churches. Having a good understanding of them helps give different ways in to appreciate what the church has to offer. Atlantic Geomatics have pioneered the use of technology to scan, measure, photograph and digitise burials, church records, and buildings. The community benefits of churchyard projects can include education, and bringing new groups in to church. Both through formal curriculum links, such as GCSE geography students learning how to survey, through to community work such as retired volunteers entering and cleaning data of burial records, a fresh look at a burial ground can give an entire community a way to connect to their church.

Atlantic Geomatics are wanting to adopt a diocesan-driven approach so that they can carry out large area surveys of churchyards and other burial grounds, potentially linking in with local authorities and other faith groups as well. There is the potential to work with genealogy sources to generate income from these records. When considering Festival Church status it is important to think about the churchyard, as well as the building.

Churches for everyone: the potential of Festival Churches to revitalise community life

Wendy Coombe MBE, Community Partnership and Fundraising Officer, the Diocese of Hereford

Wendy has been in post for 18 years helping church communities learn to approach projects in a way to encourage partnership and attract funding, to build mission. She is currently leading on how church buildings and communities can support diocesan strategic priorities and mission planning: growth, common good and new patterns of ministry. Key to this is how Festival Churches fit within other types of church offering. Without having a diocesan/deanery level plan to support people in caring for and using church buildings, other strategic priorities will struggle.

Her main advice for churches considering Festival Church Status is:

1. Work with other churches in the benefice and deanery; avoid clashes, competition and duplication – and gain mutual support.
2. Engage with Parish Giving Advisers, ensuring your ideas can generate regular income, including from the wider community.
3. Participate in training – at benefice and deanery level where needed. Remain part of the diocese and engage throughout.

Experience of working with small church congregations shows that there is often fear or reluctance to make changes, as well as a lack of people to do the work. Having a vision is therefore a big part of generating support. "It's not about who we're trying to keep out, it's about who we're trying to welcome in."

The Norwich Diocesan Churches Trust: reflections on the first three years

The Venerable Steven Betts, Archdeacon of Norfolk

Steven shared his experience of the setting up of one of the earliest diocesan trusts, the Norwich Diocesan Churches Trust. Norwich is one of the oldest dioceses in England, covers 1,804 square miles (the same size as Sheffield, Derby and Manchester combined), has a population of around 900,000 (11th smallest), with 577 parishes and 642 buildings (second only to Oxford). It has the greatest concentration of medieval church buildings this side of the Alps.

The Trust was set up on a model where church buildings were leased to the Trust but still subject to faculty jurisdiction & QI requirements. The Trust is separate from Diocesan Board of Finance, but DAC staff run it. Initially 20 churches were selected to join, with a clearly missional focus; it was designed to remove burdens and release energy locally. It enabled

some churches to carry on, but was often seen as one of the places of 'last resort' for churches considering closure.

Steven summarised ten things they have learned:

1. Insurance is ridiculously complicated. Talk to experts before deciding what you need.
2. A small trustee body works best. Too many cooks spoils the broth.
3. QIs are subjective; make sure you regularly review appointments and double-check before specifying for works.
4. Built heritage is both part of the appeal and part of the problem in managing churches.
5. It can take up a lot of time!
6. Locals want someone else to take responsibility for the burdens of the building
7. At the same time, they are often reluctant to give up 'their' church.
8. A diocesan trust is not the answer to everything
9. Village halls are 'the enemy' as they often have better facilities than churches and can be more easily used for income generating and community activities.
10. It's getting worse not better; more churches are going to need help in the future.

The Norwich model took on churches often when they were in a crisis. It did not look to bring together strong churches to build each other up, but to provide a solution to a serious problem by centralising some elements of control and management. This aim is different from the locally-focused and proactive model of Festival Churches being scoped elsewhere, but there is much to be learned from the experiences at Norwich. The diocese is involved in a strategic plan for church buildings which will help inform future decision-making.

Conclusions

Becky Clark, Director of Churches and Cathedrals at the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England

The conference has had two big themes:

- Tension
- Communication

Tension is held between the desire to keep churches open and the realities of resource and energy that limit those possibilities. It is also held between the experience at national, diocesan and parish level, all of which can be very different. Tension can also emerge locally between people who value and understand their church in different ways. Acknowledging these tensions is crucial; they cannot always be resolved, but ignoring them would be fatal to any strategic approach to buildings.

Communication is the single biggest indicator of future success, whether the project is to regenerate a cathedral or establish a Festival Church. Establishing a genuine and open dialogue with a wide variety of groups is the first step to seeing if Festival Church status is right. At diocesan and deanery level this should ideally be done as part of a strategic plan which can feed into missional and ministry planning; fitting the buildings we have to the needs we want to meet, and making informed choices. At local level it is about being genuinely open to others in the community taking a role, getting rid of 'gatekeeper syndrome', and having the courage to try new things.

Resources are a huge issue, at diocesan and national level. The Association of Festival Churches will be a place where ideas and experiences can be shared, and ideas for what else is needed can be generated and fed back to the Church Buildings Council and DACs. It became clear through the conference that the involvement of Archdeacons is also crucial, and more work needs to be done to support them to understand and work with these new models, whether for individual churches or via a multi-church trust.

Festival Churches are not the right answer for every church that wants to vary its service pattern, or do more with its community. They are one option in a toolbox, which includes Resource Churches, Major Churches, and traditional options such as becoming chapels of ease, and closure where that is missionally the right thing to do. Dioceses and churches considering their future need to know that this option exists, and is a positive choice towards remaining an open and sustainable church.

Background Information

- The conference was organised by The Cathedrals and Church Buildings Division of the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England, working with the Diocese of Sheffield.
- Around 40 delegates and speakers attended, including Diocesan Advisory Committee chairs and secretaries, archdeacons, and specialists in rural ministry.
- Support for the running of the conference was generously given by the staff and clergy of Sheffield Cathedral and the Diocese of Sheffield.
- Check the hashtag for a record of the conference: [#FestivalChurches](#)
- Resources and conference presentations will be available from <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/diocesan-resources/strategic-planning-church-buildings/association-festival-churches>