
Making the most of your church building

Introduction

People often ask whether our church buildings are a burden or a blessing. In many cases they are buildings of quality, requiring continuing efforts of time and fundraising to maintain their fabric, yet standing as witnesses to the life of the church in each locality. This leaflet is intended to guide parishes wanting to have a fresh look at their buildings, in order to shift the balance from burden to blessing.

1. Look at what you have got

Review the present uses of the church building:

- Sunday services
- weekday services and private prayer
- weddings, funerals, special services
- people visiting a Book of Remembrance
- bell ringing
- school visits or services
- concerts or other performances
- flower festivals
- other organisations or groups using the church building or part of it

2. See how you might improve or build on what is already happening

Sunday and weekday worship

When the church is open for services:

- Is it clean and tidy?
- Is the church signposted from the nearest main road?
- Is it warm and well-lit?
- Is information available about service times (e.g. noticeboards, leaflets)?
- Is the building capable of being used in a flexible manner e.g. for a variety of types of service?
- Is help offered to visitors to guide them through a service (this may be a service sheet, a leaflet or a person)?
- Is provision available for children (e.g. crèche, soft toys)?
- Is there provision for people with limited mobility, hearing or sight?

During the week

Is the church open outside the times of services? (If not, or if only for very limited periods, see below)

When the church is open:

- Is it clean and tidy?
- Is it warm and well-lit?
- Is it clear where people can sit quietly?
- Are visitors welcomed and given information about the church and its life (leaflets, guide books, photos, etc)?
- Could provision be made for visitors to... make a cup of coffee, give a child or a dog a drink, let a child play for a few minutes, find the nearest toilet?

- Are school and other visitors helped to learn about the building's significance and about the life of faith?

3. Look at ways in which the existing use of the building might be developed

- (a) If the church is normally kept shut, consider leaving it open during daylight hours as a place for private prayer and for visitors – the Ecclesiastical Insurance Group (EIG) produces guidance notes on church security which recognise the benefits of allowing legitimate visitors to go into churches, while also suggesting ways of preventing problems
- (b) Develop the church's contact with people using the churchyard (perhaps by providing a Book of Remembrance or special services for the recently-departed, like an annual service of remembrance on All Souls Day)
- (c) Liaise with local schools to encourage the use of the church and churchyard for curriculum-related activities (a good job for a retired teacher from your congregation)
- (d) Welcome existing visitors in the ways mentioned above and, where possible, by having someone on hand at certain times (e.g. weekend afternoons in summer)
- (e) Encourage new visitors by thinking of the reasons someone might visit your church (beautiful building or special feature; near other historic churches; near tourist attraction, canal, historic house, motorway services, etc.; in town centre or near railway station where there are passers-by...) and promoting the church in general leaflets, a deanery-wide trail, publicity in tourist offices or local attractions

4. Look at what local needs there might be which could be met by using the church building

This might include concerts, school events, meetings of local organisations, a hall space, playgroup, local information point or advice centre, shop, library or internet access point, day centre for the elderly or asylum seekers...)

5. Identify what prevents such uses of the church building

- Maintaining the use of the church for daily worship and private prayer
- Difficulty of keeping church open or issuing keys
- Lack of heating
- Lack of toilets or kitchen facilities
- Problems with accessibility of the building
- Restrictive interior layout – pews, wall monuments, etc
- Concerns about legislation e.g. health and safety, child protection

6. Look creatively at how the problems might be overcome

- Balance the needs of worshippers and others (e.g. by setting aside an area for private prayer and weekday services)
- Take advice on how the church can safely be kept open
- Consider whether the more regular use of the church building might make other heating options more feasible
- Try and make partnerships with other local organisations that can access different funding e.g. contribution towards heating installation via playgroup that will use building, cost of installing extra lighting from local choral society. Be prepared to challenge funding bodies that refuse applications from religious bodies

- For more major changes to the building's layout or structure, consult early and widely within the local community, with the local authority, DAC and, if it is a Grade I or II* listed building, Historic England
- Think what the overall aim is for using the building and then consider the implications e.g. on access, security, use of heating and lighting, layout of the building
- Find ways of reducing the carbon being produced and increasing green energy and encouraging wildlife. Work with local schools, businesses and your community to improve the environment.

Additional information and advice is available from:

The DAC team at dac@stalbans.anglican.org.

The Ecclesiastical Insurance Company <https://www.ecclesiastical.com/church/>

Churches Visitor & Tourism Association <http://cvta.org.uk/>

Issued July 2005
Revised April 2016; Updated August 2021
Reviewed Jan 2023