

Buildings and money are big issues

Q: WHAT are we doing about buildings? Can we just walk away from our building?

A: Church buildings can be a great blessing to us and provide us with a fantastic base from which to offer ministry and mission. But, of course, ageing and crumbling buildings can also become a real problem.

If much of your congregation's time, resources and money are being poured into keeping your church building maintained, it's easy to end up with little energy or motivation to do anything else.

It might surprise you to know that Church of England buildings around the country are actually in the best shape they have ever been in. Years of careful conservation, sacrificial giving and ambitious redevelopment projects mean that our stock of church buildings are mostly maintained and repaired well. But that's scant consolation if yours is falling down and you have no money to repair it.

There are other challenges too: 57 per cent of our churches are in rural areas, but only 17 per cent of the population live there.

frequently asked questions

Our Archdeaconry consultations gave you a chance to ask staff from our four central diocesan sections questions about their work. Those questions were noted down and are the basis of this Pompey Chimes feature – in which we try to answer questions you're asking.

Typically, rural areas also have smaller congregations, each with a heavier burden of maintaining their church building. It might seem sensible to reorganise our buildings to alleviate this burden.

Yet in many rural areas, the church is the only public building left, and closing it could leave a village with no facilities at all.

Around 78 per cent of the country's 15,700 churches are listed, which also makes it harder to walk away from them. If an organisation has to repair and retain the exterior of the church building because of its heritage value, there are few other uses it can put that building to.

It's tempting to think we could close the church building

and hand over the keys to local or central government. But this is not usually an option.

If we no longer need a church, we have a responsibility to find another use for it. In a few cases in our diocese – St Peter's, Somers Town; St Faith's, Cowes; and St Peter's, West Liss – we've sold or leased the building to another denomination, whose congregation may have more resources to look after it. This means a church created for Christian worship can still be used in this way.

One of the issues being explored as part of the national Church's Reform and Renewal agenda is some kind of simplification of procedures.

Making it easier to close a church building, or find an alternative use for it, might give a diocese more flexibility when it looks at a group of church buildings all serving one town or city.

There are also a range of initiatives, in our diocese and beyond, to make more use of our church buildings during the week, hosting post offices, village shops or Foodbanks. Allowing part of the church or hall to be used by community groups or initiatives can breathe new life into it, restoring it to the centre of your community. This may mean closure becomes less attractive.

Q: How can I find advice about the best way to invest our parishes' resources?

A: Most of us would prefer to concentrate on what the Church can offer to people in terms of the gospel message and our involvement with the local community.

Unfortunately, sooner or later our discussions return to the issue of money, as the state of our finances often dictates what kind of activities and events we offer.

Few of our parishes operate

with a budget surplus. Most will operate at about break-even point or by dipping into historic reserves. That's not sustainable in the long-term, as those reserves won't last forever.

In many cases, parishes are holding their long-term investments in deposit accounts with banks or building societies. These, of course, have been paying tiny amounts of interest for several years now. What might be a more effective way of investing the resources we have?

Our diocese has an Investment Advisory Group, which has advised the diocese for a number of years about where to invest money to yield the best returns. This group is now making its expertise available to parishes.

This year's Archdeacons' Visitations identified parishes that may be in need of help in this area. Members of the group have now visited more than 20 parishes to advise them on investments.

They are available to help your parish too – contact the group's chairman, Michael Oakley, from St Mary's Church, Liss on 01730-892165 or vandmoakley@btinternet.com.



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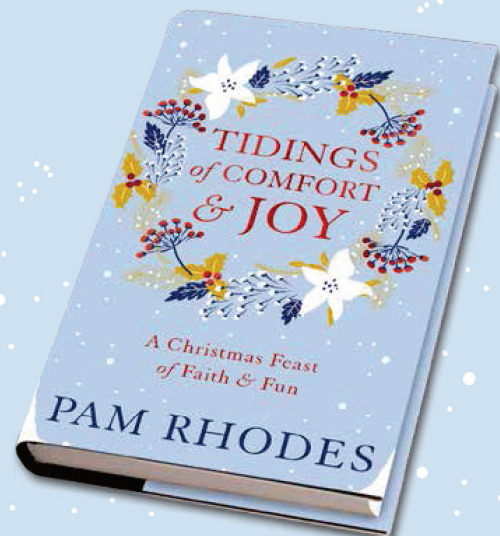
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