



July 2021

Dear Friends,

This month I would like to reflect on a different but very important aspect of our Church life ...

**Appreciate what you have before you realise it's what you had!
Don't take your village church for granted...**

The church you take for granted someone else is paying for, praying for and keeping open. Be aware that the building and facility you take for granted may not always be there! How would you feel if the **church closed permanently**? We don't realise what we have until we lose it! Don't presume the church building will always be open and there for you. To coin a phrase... *'the writing is on the wall... it's days are numbered'*. You've heard the saying *'Use it or lose it'*, well that also includes support it or it will close! Read on...

There are about 9,000 rural churches in England, of which about 8,200 are listed. A key finding of the church buildings report is that more than 2,000 of these rural churches have congregations of fewer than ten people.¹ Statistics published elsewhere show that in rural dioceses some 75 to 90 per cent of worshippers are over the age of 70. Thus attendance will inevitably decline through natural causes, even if in future more young people join the church.

What are the consequences of having declining and ageing rural congregations? The obvious worry is how to fund the upkeep of the buildings. Contrary to what many people still believe, the responsibility for maintaining church buildings and keeping them in repair lies with each individual church: the incumbent and the parochial church council. There is no state funding for churches' care or maintenance nor does the Church itself have central funds to put towards these buildings.

But the shortage of people has practical consequences too. The routine care of rural church buildings, their graveyards and worship and community activities is done by volunteers from the congregation and a few in the community and it is becoming harder to find people to do these jobs. In addition, the shortage of people makes it difficult to do *new* things – to set up new church community activities and services, to fundraise for and carry out a large building projects or to find other community uses for the church.

Small congregations also have quite subtle implications. If the building is only used for one service each Sunday, or less often than that, with small numbers present, then in the eyes of those who do not attend it may be seen as a private club and the sense of public purpose of the building may be weakened. Furthermore, many church leaders at regional and national level are thinking of concentrating rural resources on fewer church buildings, so an increasing number of churches may no longer be required for regular worship. In other words *they lose their local Vicar - you lose your local Vicar to engage with the community and work with the children in the local school*. The risk is that then such buildings almost entirely lose their sense of purpose. And a building without purpose is potentially at risk - at risk of closure. This means *that the doors will be locked permanently* and will no longer be available for Rites of Passage (Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals) or any other church service.

¹ Church of England *Report of the Church Buildings Review Group* Sept. 2015



So the problem is not just financial. Money matters, of course, but so does access to willing and capable people, and so does a sense of purpose for the building. These three are interdependent and interlinked: pounds, people and purpose. All are important.

Rural church buildings need pounds, people and purpose if they are to survive as public places of worship for the benefit of all. Shrinking congregations are putting them under pressure.

Village	Sunday Congregation	Average age	Basic regular maintenance	Utilities & Insurance	Contribution required to central funds to have a Vicar
Burton Dassett	13	70	£4185	£3989	£8248
Farnborough	8	76	£1070	£2818	£6096
Fenny Compton	13	65	£5434	£3491	£11782
Gaydon	10	65	£1016	£1861	£7740

This is the money they managed to raise and pay in 2019. It doesn't mention the huge repair bills in the tens of thousands of pounds that each church is facing. Building projects they are unable to do because of lack of money and grants available. Grants exist for toilets and kitchens but fabric and maintenance grants are rare.

Those in positions of responsibility for the local church communities listed above are having to look to the future of the church – and of course this is **your church**. They are having to make *a plan for the sustainable future of these church communities*. This is not a 5 year plan but a plan looking towards the next 15 to 20 years. You may not know that I will only be in post for another 2 years. After this there will be no new Vicar to replace me. This is because the churches in the Dassett Magna group only raise just over 50% of the full cost to have a Vicar. The difference has previously been made up by other churches in the immediate vicinity (referred to as a Deanery); they are of course now facing the same problems, and are particularly unable to raise the excesses they used to make up our shortfalls.

I was put into post with an Interim License which ran out on 31st May 2021. My license has now been extended until May 2023 to work with the church and wider community to formulate a plan. This will mean *'looking outside the box'*. Some in our congregations may not like what this means but simply continuing as we are **will** result in the closure of the church in the next few years not the next 10 to 15 years. I have to ask: is that what you would want? We made fundamental changes to our church worship during Lockdown by starting our zoom services - an idea previously unimaginable and unheard of. If we therefore want the church in your village to remain open things have to change and soon. The unimaginable must be considered. Please come forward and contact me with ideas to give **your** church a sustainable future. Help us to run the church and to raise the necessary money. The old adage is true: if you don't get involved then you cannot complain if it closes. You could be the difference and help keep your church open for you and for future generations!

Rev'd Nicki