

Changing our Churches in a 21st century Pandemic World



Figure 1 (Left): Midstocket Anglican Parish Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, Set out for a Socially distanced service in August 2020 (Source: Midstocket Parish Church)

Figure 2 (Right): Changing Practices, Hand Sanitising Station in place of a Holy Water Stoup, where Catholics traditionally bless themselves by making the sign of the cross with water on entering the sacred space. (the bracket for the holy water stoup can be seen on the wall behind), Welsh Martyrs Roman Catholic Church, Penparcau, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales (Photograph taken by Kevin McMulkin and used with his permission)

The pandemic of 2020-21 has presented one of the greatest challenges our society has faced for generations. This has had a direct impact on faith communities, both from a practical point of view and from a variety of theological aspects. Among the Christian denominations, for example, there has been debate regarding how and whether to receive confession and communion during the pandemic. Many Christian institutions have survived for centuries if not millennia but 2020 and the start of 2021 are presenting unique and unprecedented challenges for churches, local, national and international.

The speed and nature that church buildings, historic or otherwise, have had to adapt has simply never been seen before. The changes in expected seating arrangements appear to have been especially complex in churches with fixed pew seating. Further to this some communities have had to move entirely online. This has led to questions regarding the significance of the church or chapel as a structure and whether it has a relevance to our current society.

The Church of England however reported early in the pandemic that they had 'attracted its largest 'congregation' ever ... in spite of the suspension of public worship in its churches'. This was when Justin Welby led a service from Lambeth Palace broadcast via the BBC and social media platforms. It is said that around 5 million people were engaged with this service, compared to an 'average of 871,000 people attending services and acts of worship each week in 2018'. These statistics say nothing of the thousands engaging in Anglican services via local cathedrals and churches across the country in the same week.

Statistics of course are not straight forward. For some churches the current style of worship has simply led to the same people attending church in different ways. In 2020 the Vatican warned 'that the historical Parish institution must not remain a prisoner of immobility or of

a worrisome pastoral repetition, but rather, it should put into action that “outgoing dynamism” ...through collaboration among different Parish communities’. Pre-Pandemic there was decreasing parish loyalty, for example within the Catholic community there are some who travelled to great distances to attend Sunday mass following the traditional Pre-Vatican 2 liturgy, as well as those who travel across counties to attend services in the Polish language.

Where does this leave our smaller churches, some of which have not opened to their congregation for nearly 11 months. The current situation highlights what has been an ongoing issue in church and chapel communities across the UK if not the world. What relevance do Christian communities have in today’s society? American writer Myers highlights that for many people if their local church closed it would have ‘little noticeable difference on their lives’ and that ‘tragically the only people who would notice that your church closed are the people who attend there’. To truly renew these structures, they need to be places that the whole community feel at home within, to do this there will be need for changes to the historic structures to safeguard their future.

Allowing renewal within the old stone is not a simple solution. Individual communities will facilitate these changes in different ways for different reasons, depended to theology, denomination and community need. St Albans on the Moors, RC church in Cardiff facilitated change for their traditional catholic community by restoration of the interior whereas Christchurch Anglican Church in Bala, North Wales did the exact opposite, simplifying their church space, to better facilitate a more liberal style of church worship and to open up the space to the wider community.



Figure 2: Christ Church – Anglican Church in Bala, 19th century church with modern Liturgical configuration including a ‘Nave Altar’ opened in 2007 after a major renovation. (Source: Churches in Britain and Ireland)

Anglican Cleric Richard Giles claims there has been a ‘fossilisation of worship spaces’ and goes further saying that this is often justified by communities as ‘creating an oasis of stability in a changing world’ although he is sure ‘the last dodo said much the same thing’. A balance must be found, we also need to show churches the respect they deserve as museums of our communities’ history. Change needs to fit within the parameters of heritage legislation, but also respect our forbears efforts. In Becky Payne’s Oxfordshire study she comments that ‘making changes to a worship space is a delicate matter’ and yet it is vital. The Rt. Rev Richard Chartres highlights that there need to be ‘checks and balances to

architectural fashion and liturgical whim' to protect the very things that make these buildings special but it is also important 'that we do not allow misguided preservationism to silence our own contributions to the future historic, cultural and spiritual value of church buildings'. A dialogue is required between these different perspectives.

There will be a need for collaboration between faith communities as well as with secular groups, and the role of institutions like LCI in this renewal will be important in bringing people together for dialogue. It is important more than ever in our divided and suffering society that religious groups look beyond their congregations and are as LCI aim to be 'an active and progressive agent in city life for the benefit of all'. During the pandemic, churches have been building on their mission to the wider community with everything from food banks and homeless shelters to vaccine centres facilitated within sacred sites.

Collaborations with wider secular and religious communities both provide a valuable community service and give a viable future to the church. These different uses can ensure the long-term sustainability of a building. As we move towards this "New Normal" it is now more than ever important that faith communities ensure they look outward and this stereotype of a 'beleaguered fortress of the increasingly elderly faithful, terrified of the outside world' is consigned firmly to the past. Change within historic buildings can actually help preserve them, as allowing carefully managed change enables use, and when buildings have a future they have a past as well.