

'I Will Build My Church': Buildings as Mission Opportunities

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'Buildings must be separated from mission' – such was the controversial message of Sir Roy Strong in his keynote address to the Ecclesiastical Law Society's residential conference in Cardiff, following the Chairman's welcome. Perhaps not quite what we were expecting, considering the title of the conference weekend – 'Buildings as mission opportunities' – but at least it made us think, and certainly gave us something to talk about later. Sir Roy is very much in favour of the flexible use of church buildings for the community at large, as well as the worshipping community. When church members are enthusiastically collecting in the village from people who never set foot over the church threshold, the last thing those people want is Christianity thrust at them . . . Is that really true? If it is, then it should not put us off. The Church of England and other denominations have a glut of parish churches, from magnificent medieval and gloriously gothic to Victorian vanities. Through the centuries, social and ritual changes have had their effect on the architectural styles and uses of the buildings. Now is the time when churches in hamlet, village, town and city should become purpose-driven buildings in the same communal spirit as existed when they were first built.

The first session on the Saturday morning was entitled 'Buildings: liturgy and law'. Chancellor Charles Mynors addressed us in some detail on the constraints and possibilities. The Church will always have buildings: they exist for a spiritual reason and are a basis for mission. We must be perceptive to the needs and wishes of the people using the buildings but also to the needs and wishes of the community. Planning and faculty jurisdiction constraints were discussed, which led to some lively discussion in the legal group that afternoon.

The Very Reverend Richard Giles (formerly Parish Development Officer in the Diocese of Wakefield, recently retired Dean of Philadelphia and author of *Re-pitching the Tent*) spoke on 'Purpose-driven buildings', with an effective visual presentation. An alternative title could have been the question posed to us by Richard: 'Do we want a future?' Change is the lifeblood of the Church. Our church buildings should not be cosy clubhouses for a few likeminded people with exclusive membership rules. We should have an open-door, 'come and see' policy. We need reform, but with a sense of quality and creation of

spaciousness that yet retain some atmosphere. Any change must be corporate rather than clerical or individual and we were reminded that such work was of God – demanding but glorious.

The second session was entitled ‘Mission-shaped buildings’. Andrew Mottram of Ecclesiastical Property Solutions spoke on the regeneration of buildings. He believes that buildings are mission opportunities and that courage and determination are needed to ensure that people have church buildings for the twenty-first century – warm and comfortable, well equipped, with ample storage and straightforward to look after, with minimum maintenance and repair costs – in fact, buildings with a sustainable future. We must have vision to look at ourselves and the local community and identify the needs of that community. We need to look at the four Ws – What? Where? Why? When? The lawyers’ task was to find a way.

Canon Paul Bayes (National Mission and Evangelism Advisor) spoke about fresh expressions for buildings. Church buildings are a priceless opportunity for evangelism. ‘Place’ is important, but the understanding of place is changing. Networks are replacing neighbours. Christendom is fading from the West and our buildings must be a gateway of openness. This is the future towards which we must look.

All the speakers gave us much food for thought, and many pertinent questions were brought before the Sunday morning plenary session, chaired by Chancellor Peter Collier, Vicar-General of the Province of York, when members of the panel attempted to address them more fully. Saturday’s formal dinner concluded with a speech by Lord Justice Mummery, President of the Clergy Discipline Tribunal, who gave us an amusing insight into the workings of the new system.

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