Austerity, Atheists and Angst: What Future for Church Buildings

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For HRBA Big Update, 6 December 2017

[SLIDE] Good morning. It is a privilege to have been asked to address you today. I have been working for the Church of England for nearly five years now, and started my current job in January. I know that in this room we have representatives of many faith groups, as well as those representing organisations that deal with historic religious buildings from a non-faith perspective. Fairly obviously my perspective during this talk will be that of the Church of England, although as a Baptist myself I hope to bring a little non-conformist sparkle to it. However I do believe that the issues I am talking about have some applicability across the board. [SLIDE] We are all concerned, fundamentally, with ensuring a secure and sustainable future for the historic religious buildings in our care.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a church in possession of a building must be in want of a grant. [SLIDE] Fundraising, and the future sources of revenue and capital funding, are a major preoccupation for many of us. This year has been a shocker. Not only did HLF cancel GPOW without consultation, HLF revenues dropped overall, leading to in-year budget cuts for the funds that remain, a situation likely to carry on for the foreseeable future. In 2019 there will be no grants of over £5m and a moratorium on grants over £100k for the first quarter. All of this has been announced before HLF starts consultation on its new strategic framework. We always knew that reliance on a single funder was dangerous, and must ultimately look to government to have a belated but very necessary conversation about additionality – who should be funding what. The largesse of the government through the Roof Repairs Fund and the Cathedral Repairs Fund has all been allocated and at this point no more is forthcoming. Happily we did secure confirmation that LPOW will continue until at least 2020, but given that this is only money we have to spend because of an unintended consequence to a change in the VAT regime it's hard to feel that makes up for all the rest.

It gets worse. In times of reducing grant income from central sources we might turn to our local supporters. But more than half the UK population told a survey this year that they had

no religion at all. In 2016 Church of England Sunday attendance dropped below one million people for the first time since records began. The Archbishop of Canterbury summed the situation up in a talk to the Anglican Primates in January 2016: *"In England our numbers have been falling at about 1% every year since world war two ... The culture [is] becoming anti-Christian, whether it is on matters of sexual morality, or the care for people at the beginning or the end of life. It is easy to paint a very gloomy picture."*

The world beyond religion is struggling too. You only have to watch the news to know that individuals, families, charities and organisations such as councils, all over the UK, are feeling the squeeze of austerity and changing economic conditions. The Brexit vote has brought instability, and also given rise to the most hideous expressions of human bigotry and hatred. [SLIDE] The murder of MP Jo Cox assassinated, as this plaque in France tells, for her convictions, was a despicable nadir. The handling of Universal Credit has been widely denounced as leaving some of the most vulnerable in society in desperate straits. Austerity policies, although largely discredited by the International Monetary Fund, continue to be the approach of government to managing national debt and productivity issues. Tax evasion loopholes have not been closed and if overall unemployment is said to have dropped, closer analysis shows that this is actually due to a re-definition of 'employed' to include zero hours contracts. The Archbishop of Canterbury recently recounted his experience that many people using food banks are in work, but unable to cope with rising costs. Work is no longer lifting people out of poverty.

What does this mean for us? [SLIDE] Fire and brimstone were a cornerstone of many Christian traditions in England for hundreds of years. But now people sneer at the idea of hell and are not held spellbound by threats from the pulpit. Instead we face a world that is full of brokenness. The very concept of 'mindfulness' – the simple act of being aware of your own existence – has been commodified with apps, bullet journals and beauty treatments. Because we're worth it. To exist is to yearn, but that yearning is now simply an opportunity for clever marketers.

[SLIDE] As someone who is technically a millennial I am part of this broken generation. Along with most of my friends I am not considering having children – why would we bring more

people into a world that is so messed up? What about the environmental impact of more people being born? How can I have a child when I cannot afford a decent house? What is the point? This angst has been mocked in the media – a generation of 'snowflakes', each yearning to be unique yet melting into nothingness the moment it faces any adverse conditions. But it is not just the under-35s. Mental health issues have become more acceptable to discuss, but suicide remains the biggest killer of men under 50 in the UK. Loneliness has been shown to be as detrimental to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, yet four million elderly people in the UK say that the television is their main company. Issues of angst are not marginal and privileged. This is probing at questions of what it means to be human, to live in a civilised society, to hope and plan for a future.

[SLIDE] This is an incredibly bleak picture. I am sorry. I did not want to depress you all, especially so early in the day. But the uncertainty of austerity, the rise of a sense of brokenness and lack of meaning to life, and the place of significant existential anxiety are the wider context. Not all of it, but a big part. No part of the heritage sector can escape this entirely, but as custodians of historic *religious* buildings I say we need to be hyper aware of it. And there are unique things that we can do to help.

[SLIDE] In American Gods, Neil Gaiman's brilliant fantasy-horror exploration of the nature of gods in the USA, the character of Odin describes what we find in our churches, our temples, our sacred places: "people feel themselves being pulled to places where… they would recognize that part of themselves that is truly transcendent." Whether your perspective in looking after historic religious buildings is from a position of faith or not, we can all recognise the possibility within them of inspiration, peace, and a sense of something beyond our individual selves.

[SLIDE] Some faith groups and denominations are experiencing growth, have invested hugely in that, and are seeing rewards. Christian Orthodox and Pentecostal churches have growing congregations overall. Anglican cathedrals have seen an increase of 37% in attendance at worship over the last 10 years. If all forms are taken together then Islam is the fastest growing religion in the UK and its adherents have the lowest average age out of all the major religious groups. There is still an appetite for formal religious worship – and for

most of us here continuing use of religious buildings as places of active worship is important for their conservation.

[SLIDE] Robert Louis Stevenson said "I never weary of great churches. It is my favourite kind of mountain scenery. Mankind was never so happily inspired as when it made a cathedral." This is a sentiment that has been repeated by many. Religious buildings offer solace to millions a year, both through services and worship but also through their beauty and welcome. I argue strongly that increasing atheism does not spell irrelevance for the buildings we help to look after, but rather the opposite. [SLIDE] Churches, like many other faith buildings, are physical representations of faith. Implicit in that is hope and inspiration. For the Church of England, with its mission to be a Christian presence in every community, this is key. Every community is exactly right – wherever you live in England you are part of a parish, and whether you choose to avail yourself of them or not, you have rights related to your parish church; within certain limites and with the agreement of the incumbent you have the right to marry there, to have children christened, to hold a funeral. The momentous events of a life can still be measured out in the parish records. Openness is at the heart of this. More and more churches are open every day, rather than just for worship. The main insurers of church buildings affirm that, with sensible precautions in place, this does not lead to an increased risk of theft or vandalism, and can in some cases decrease the risk, because an open church can welcome visitors at any moment.

In the Church of England we have been thinking a lot about the ministry of welcome. We want to be a church for all people, and the way people are invited in to the church building is a big part of that. I know that concepts of sacred space are very varied across different denominations and faith groups, so this is very much an Anglican approach. [SLIDE] For example, signs like this (Caution: worship in progress) *could* be considered counter-productive if you are trying to encourage people to consider joining a service. Similarly this [SLIDE] (This Chapel is Reserved for Private Prayer) is not easy to understand unless you've been raised in church-talk. If a seat is reserved then you don't sit there. A sign that said 'please feel free to use this chapel for quiet prayer and reflection' would not change the use, but might change the users. Christianity, and Anglicanism in particular should be the complete opposite of a club that only a few can join.

[SLIDE] How can we make this principle a reality? Those of us who work under the Ecclesiastical Exemption are working to uphold heritage protection for our historic buildings, in a way that appreciates and enhances their original use – as places of worship. In the Church of England this is by 'having due regard to churches as centres of Christian worship and mission'. Now the Exemption is not without its detractors, but I say that in a time where local authority resources are suffering cut after cut, the systems of the exempt denominations form some of the most highly expert and well-resourced advice on heritage protection in the country. We in the CofE apply a test that balances harm and public benefit. This is framed in the Duffield Questions, which ask first 'will there be harm to the significance of the church? If the answer is 'yes', then how clear and convincing is the justification for carrying out the proposals? Bearing in mind that there is a strong presumption against proposals which will adversely affect the special character of a listed building, will any resulting public benefit (including matters such as liturgical freedom, pastoral well-being, opportunities for mission, and putting the church to viable uses that are consistent with its role as a place of worship and mission) outweigh the harm? This balancing act has allowed some wonderful things to happen.

[SLIDE] In Petersfield, in the Diocese of Hereford, the church has become a centre of community life by first providing the venue for a Sure Start children's centre, then after that closed opening a café and food market. It addresses issues of social poverty, the need for public services, and the desire of the people who live there to keep the church open. In St James, West Hampstead, in the Diocese of London, the chancel remains a sacred space for worship and prayer. The nave holds the local post office, a café and children's play area. I could cite hundreds more examples of innovative extended use that, rather than compromising the sacred, enhances its relevance to those who walk past the church every day.

Church buildings are often a focus for identity and place-making. But they are not passive in this. What happens in a church, what is allowed, both conceptually and in reality, can make or break a place. I am working with several partners, and most especially the dioceses, to map out what training, resourcing and support is needed so that every parish in the country

is aware that it is national policy for churches to be open for complementary uses. We put these things in three categories: community, cultural and commercial. Sometimes all three combine. At cathedrals and some larger churches there is a fourth: civic. The uses are multi-valent and do not preclude one another. Sometimes they can happen all at once. There is a useful concept arising from work at the Centre for Christianity and Culture in York – that of adjacency. You don't have to be in Evensong to hear it happening from a quiet seat in the nave. You can be aware of people who are praying, even if you yourself are there because of a love of history. I am not suggesting that there needs to be an 'active' religious element to every visit to an historic religious building, but being consciously aware of the possibilities of encounter is something I would like to see more of.

[SLIDE] I want the Church of England to get to a point where every parish, every diocese, every bishop and dean, can jointly say that churches are at their heart places of community. This means that there should be an assumption that the things a community needs – a place of gathering, services such as post offices, local shops, citizens advice, and child care, the opportunity to get to know one another – should rightly take place in the church. In the words of Ian Stainburn, Diocesan Advisory Committee chairman in Worcester Diocese, this is the way it always was. In the middle ages we have records of everything from livestock markets to ale festivals taking place in churches. They weren't a remote intellectual or philosophical heart of their place, they were quite literally at the centre of life.

I believe that you can preserve the sacred whist welcoming the secular. Again I say, I know that views on this differ widely across different faith communities. But for my work this has come to be a central tenant. I want to resource the Church of England's 16,000 churches so that they can put together new proposals to place themselves at the centre of life once again. I want the coherence and rightness of their community and civic role to be the reason the government re-assesses its position on funding. [SLIDE] It can be seen in the light of individual tragedies: St Clement's after the Grenfell Tower fire, Manchester Cathedral after the Manchester Arena bombing. I want the contribution of religious buildings in bringing people together out of a fractured society to be fully recognised outside of these extraordinary and awful events.

[SLIDE] We cannot rely on awareness of religious stories, or on fond childhood memories of attending Sunday School. We must create awareness of our contributions anew. History is a big part of this. You cannot tell the history of England without its religious buildings and the often extraordinary figures they produced. The *historic* in the HRBA's name is key: old places, still in use for their original purpose, very often listed – the Church of England has 45% of all England's Grade I listed buildings, and we're extremely proud of them. [SLIDE] The continuity is key to their interest. Look at Rochester Cathedral, lit up and alive, next door to poor old ruined Rochester Castle. We help to care for the history of the country, good and bad. The buildings can, with our help, tell a complete story. That means not shying away from the distressing, or the politically sensitive. We need to have a collective narrative that tells people, succinctly and without embarrassment, why supporting their local place of worship, including through government funding, is a Good Thing, even if they themselves last sang a hymn in primary school, or never at all. I want us to use the HRBA as a collation point for those discussions, drawing together different perspectives and sifting through for those things we all agree on, and wish to be known for. I am certain they are there. The Government's Cathedral and Churches Sustainability Review is an excellent moment to present this narrative to those in a position to help sustain it. I am less interested in the exact words of the Review than I am in the opportunity it presents to get our collective contributions recognised.

Business analysts Ford and Ford define change as "A phenomenon of time" involving two elements: identity and the process of transformation. In other words, who are you, and where do you want to be? So here's the challenge. What do we want our historic religious buildings to be in the future? I believe continuing change to public attitudes, and in some cases our own, is essential if we are not just to deal with the problems arising from austerity, atheism and angst, but to be part of a long-term solution. We need to talk about the history, the magnificence, the significance, in the context of what that means for our society today. We can pay a living wage, work with and welcome the marginalised, open our doors when other doors are being slammed shut. [SLIDE] Jalaluddin Mavlana Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet and Islamic scholar, spoke with great wisdom when he said "The wound is the place where the Light enters you." We are down but not out, and there is enormous potential in becoming more than we are already: [SLIDE] in a time of uncertainty

and fear, religious buildings can be places of inspiration, unity, and hope. I would ask everyone here to consider how the buildings they work with can be part of a vision of the future that embodies those things.