

Can I begin by saying that this is a version of a lecture I have been giving all over the place in the last year or so on the future of the rural church in England. Its genesis goes back about five years when, realising the impending crisis, I decided to write a small book for everyman entitled *A Little History of the English Country Church*. That appeared in September 2007 and went into paperback in 2008. Over 30,000 copies have been sold, so I suppose in terms of that kind of book it's been a bestseller. Its theme was a very simple one, the topic that none of the endless church guides ever cover – what actually happened in a rural church over the centuries – it pointed out sharply that it had always changed until, that is, the last century when with the rise of preservation and conservation churches the clock was stopped. The central thesis was that if you don't allow a building to change and develop you have in effect killed it off.

So you must take what follows from your own perspective. This was written for an audience the other side of the Black Mountains. Some but not all of it will be applicable to you.

In 1977 the Victoria & Albert Museum staged an exhibition entitled *Change and Decay. The Future of Our Churches*. It was the second in a series of exhibitions on the plight of the historic environment, staged during my directorship of the museum in the 1970s; the two others covered the country house and the garden. The latter are still regarded as landmarks changing both the public and government's perception by creating a shocked awareness of the enormity of the losses that were threatening our architectural and horticultural heritage. Consequently their causes no longer need to be pleaded. Indeed, the country house has become a popular attraction, and every kind of garden – from great palace gardens to municipal parks – has been restored over the last decades.

The exhibition on the future of our churches had to compete with one on Faberge, and as a rather doom-laden topic it seemed ill-chosen for the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Yet although it attracted only about 20,000 visitors – many a time I strolled through the exhibition alone, for it was empty – within three weeks of opening, the government, pledged money for restoration projects. But in the long run churches never gained the support enjoyed by country houses and gardens, and as a result, the future of the thousands of country churches remained uncertain. After thirty years, I have returned to the subject out of a sense of urgency: I believe strongly that we have reached a crisis point that calls for immediate action if we want to save our country churches. If, in terms of our heritage, the twentieth century was about saving the country house, the twenty-first will be about saving our great historic churches.

The money from government to restore historic churches was administered firstly via the Historic Buildings Council and latterly, since 1996, through English Heritage. In all some £200 million has

been given to maintain and restore historic churches. Perhaps it is the moment to remind you of the present position in which English Heritage money makes up 6% and the Heritage Lottery Fund only 8% of the total repair bill. The remaining about 80% heroically comes from the congregations and the supporters within the local community. In Wales I am told that the figures are 9% from Cadw and the Heritage Lottery Fund the remaining 91% from charitable trusts and the parishes. 1977 in England prompted more counties to form trusts dedicated to church preservation resulting in splendid on-going activities like the annual sponsored bike ride and walk events which began in 1982 with Suffolk and now take place in thirty one counties. I understand that that initiative has not been taken up in Wales. To that I can add that during the run of the exhibition NADFAS came to me with the idea of recording church artefacts, an excellent, and I believe, continuing project.

It was a great tragedy that the torch lit by the 1977 exhibition wasn't seized as avidly and borne forwards as it was in the case of houses and gardens. The sad thing is the climate is more inimical now than it would have been in the last quarter of the previous century, the heyday of heritage. Indeed heritage has almost become a dirty word and we are faced with an attitude widely prevalent in the present government's thinking that the trouble with Britain is that it is dragged down by the weight of its own past. Witness the dreadful Dome. That also can be evidenced in the fact that, although anything historical is hugely popular on television, history as I knew it is no longer taught in the schools. The time structure which my generation took for granted in the case of any educated person has already largely gone.

And to add to our woes the majority of the population has no idea what goes on in a church or even more what used to go on in a church in other centuries. Those of you who have been present at a service of thanksgiving where the service sheet has failed to print the words of the Lord's Prayer will know exactly what I mean. Through inertia through the eighties and nineties a generation which still had some tenuous links with what went on in churches and upon whom much could have been built has died off. So as the first decade of the twenty first century draws to its close any links with the wider public are far fewer. According to Christian Research by 1998 just 7.5% of the population attended services on an average Sunday. The figures for 2006 – the last I have – record a fall to 6.8 per cent. Statistics are always open to challenge and the Church of England's own figures, not the result of polling, show that attendances are in fact holding up. More interestingly the pattern of attendance has changed, not being entirely Sunday-based any longer but spreading into the week which, for the future of church buildings, is good news. And perhaps I should temper my hostility to government by saying that although at times it comes across as being almost anti-Christian there are more practising Christians in it than at any other period I can recall. To that I think that I should add that at last someone of the stature of Archbishop Sentamu has broken cover and articulated a real

concern that Christians are increasingly being discriminated against. That may seem irrelevant to the fate of rural churches but I don't think – it is contributing to a climate hostile to the Faith.

I can offset that doom and gloom by the fact that 16,000 English historic parish churches in town and country are still in use, although what form that use takes is at times exiguous to say the least. That is something of a miracle but little can conceal the fact that we now have a population of over 52 million in England and they, in the main, are urban based and that the crisis over historic churches is less urban than rural. The urban churches represent a far different problem. My preoccupation is with the fate of rural churches, some 10,000 of them scattered through the countryside and, as I shall demonstrate, they present a multi-faceted dilemma.

We need to look at them first in the context of the history of the village. In 1801 about twenty per cent of the population lived in cities or towns. A century later 75% of the population was urban. The figure is probably even higher now. Few people seem to grasp that the country church which we cherish was already in many ways redundant by 1900. The irony of the Victorian age is that the mass restoration and rebuilding of country churches, in the main by estate owners, was for congregations which were no longer there. That was particularly so in the aftermath of the great agricultural depression from the 1870s onwards. Add to that the sad fact that the Victorian episcopate was obsessed with coping with faith in the city by building new churches so that it never turned its mind to the consequences in church building terms of the mass depopulation of the countryside. New churches should have been balanced by withdrawal from or adaptation of old ones but that never happened. That urban preoccupation by the episcopate continued to run through the twentieth century and into this one which accounts for a situation which, in employment terms alone, can only be described as mass mismanagement of personnel on a gigantic scale. What rural clergy are asked to do no other profession would put up with.

During the last ten years we have also witnessed an ever widening gulf between town and country. The dominance of the urban interest was vividly reflected in the Countryside Alliance demonstration in London, one on a scale only matched by the Chartists in the 1840s. It received scant coverage and its petitions were ignored by government. You can't also divorce the fate of the country church from the fate of the village and no one seems able to face up to that fact. The village as a social unit within an agricultural society had died before 1900. Today's village is made up of second home owners, commuters and the retired. The modern village is a construct which has no roots in economic reality and that is reflected in the fact the village shop, garage, bakery, post office, doctor, school and, in some cases, even the pub have already gone and public transport virtually evaporated. Look at in this light the rural parish church stands as some kind of weird aberration.

Village halls oddly attracted grants on a substantial scale as part of the millennium celebrations. I am one of those who bitterly regret that that was ever done. In times past the church was the village hall and the hall only emerged due to misplaced notions of the use of sacred space in the Victorian era. So these rural churches remain in most cases as buildings which, if they had to respond to normal commercial pressures, would have been abandoned years ago as unviable. That they are still there we know is due largely to voluntary local effort drawing on what is often no more than nostalgic folk memory. I am rash enough to say how long will that last? Inevitably one moves in circles which love old churches which they enjoy visiting and in which they might even from time to time worship. But we delude ourselves when we think that we are more than a tiny minority and that the attitudes that surround the country church with sentimental tinsel won't fade. It is one thing for the wider public to see these churches through a haze of crinoline ladies making their way to them on a Christmas card and quite another to ask people to put their hands in their pockets to repair and maintain them.

And another fact which cannot be ignored, churches, if they are ever full, are full for events which have nothing whatsoever to do with the Christian year: Harvest Festival – mid-Victorian, Remembrance Sunday – post-1918, Mothering Sunday – largely an American importation post 1945, blessing the animals – I wonder who started that one – and the endless carol services – often now more a folk memory than evidence of Christian commitment.

So we start with a massive failure in terms of public relations. For the majority of the population the crisis of the thousands of country churches hasn't impinged on their consciousness. Houses and gardens are always in the public eye, but not churches. Churches shouldn't present that problem for they are truly democratic buildings, the meeting place of ordinary people in times past. Parish churches are buildings for the community and should be used for every kind of activity. That should be built upon for their survival along with the fact that a great number are major architectural masterpieces. What militates against them in the present politically correct and multicultural era is that within their walls the Christian faith was and still is taught and practised. The country house and the garden never had that ideological problem, nor would that have been one twenty or thirty years ago since when the ground has dramatically shifted. That is why it so tragic that the initiative of 1977 wasn't acted upon while the climate over matters of belief was more benign.

The perception of the village church for most of the population is rooted in the picture postcard picturesque, a pretty piece of stage scenery for a wedding or, in another guise, for a funeral or service of thanksgiving. For the educated the dominant forces which have taught us how to view these

churches are two late twentieth century icons, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Sir John Betjeman. I think that the time has come to query their contribution instead of adding to the incense on those particular altars. Was how they taught the educated to view churches a help to our present plight or not?

As we know they loathed each other. Pevsner was a German Jew who early on had converted to Lutheranism. *The Buildings of England* was an inspired creation begun in the immediate aftermath of World War II in 1945 and completed in forty six volumes in 1974. This achievement cannot be denigrated for it taught the English to look at their own buildings and it has to be remembered that he would cover up to ten or more churches a day. These volumes are of course irreplaceable but they remain still essentially children of their time, Germanic and art historical. Each entry works to a formula focussed on the building, the dates of its various parts, applauding here a Norman arch or there a Perpendicular window. He goes on to list what he regards as interesting contents: pulpits, stained glass, fonts, tombs and such like including, more surprisingly, the church plate. What is completely missing is virtually anything about the church's social or cultural history in terms of who built it, the nature and extent of the parish, its incumbents, its place in the religious history of the area. What he delineates for us is not a living but a dead entity. Pevsner describes a church like a scientist dissecting a specimen.

Pevsner I suppose can be said to speak to the intellect, whereas Betjeman appeals to the imagination and the heart. Poet, writer and broadcaster, Betjeman became a national icon. Never far away from him was the notion that what right had this German academic to pontificate on things essentially English. And Betjeman could write in a manner which was both easy and attractive to a vast audience familiar to him through radio and television. We all know the cadences – here, for instance, is his opening to a series of talks on West Country churches in 1948

“Down what lanes, across how many farmyards, nesting in how many valleys, topping what hills and suddenly appearing round the corners of what ancient city streets are the churches of England? The many pinnacles of Somerset, of rough granite from the moors in Devon and Cornwall, of slate by the sea coats, brushed with lichen, spotted with saffron, their rings of five and six bells pouring music among the windy elm trees as they have poured their sound for centuries, still they stand, the towers and spires of the West.”

Betjeman was to condition two generations, including my own, to look with heady nostalgia and romance at the country church.

Collins Guide to Parish Churches, which he edited, appeared in 1958. It opens with his criteria of being concerned with “judging the buildings by their atmosphere and aesthetic merit.” The book

boldly also set out to embrace those of the Victorian age and the early twentieth century which was a welcome innovation. To it he added a wonderful introduction, a *tour de force* of what one might describe as the Betjeman-esque with his predilections and prejudices writ large. Although Pevsner never describes what a church was for Betjeman is unequivocal in the last sentence of his introduction "... the purpose of the church remains the same as it was at the beginning of this book, to be a place where the Faith is taught and the Sacraments administered."

What is important to grasp is that the work of these two icons is now virtually half a century and two generations old. There has been no lack of books since about churches but the only one to challenge these two founts has been Sir Simon Jenkins' *England's Thousand Best Churches* published in 1999. A prolific journalist and columnist by profession Jenkins takes a very different line from either Pevsner or Betjeman casting churches in a manner acceptable to the prevailing secularism of the last years of the previous century and the opening ones of the present. He is categorical in stating that to him "a church is not a place of revealed truth" but, in the words of the poet, Thomas Gray, "the short and simple annals of the poor" and also "a dispersed gallery of vernacular art" and, finally "a museum". Unfortunately he does not actually flesh out any of these statements but it does remain the book most likely to be popped in the back of the car by the casual tourist. Much as I respect his work it does not move the perception on of the average church visitor. Indeed it seemingly denies to the church building its role as a testament to faith.

We have a real communications problem here for no guides exist which present our churches through the centuries as the hub of a community, peopled and bustling with life. This can be laid to some extent at the door of the failure of academe to respond to the 1977 exhibition which, in the case of both country houses and historic gardens, precipitated a major research renaissance changing our knowledge and perception of their purpose and use in the past. In the case of churches that response did not really come much before the final decade of the last century when church history began to be examined less from top down than from the bottom up, an approach epitomised above all by the work of Eamon Duffy in two splendid books *The Stripping of the Altars* in 1992 and *Voices of Morebath* in 2001. In both he spells out parish life as it was lived in the local church through a revolutionary era when the place was torn apart. But it would be true to say that this way of looking at church buildings has yet to filter through to the average guidebook. Who were the incumbents, what happened at the Reformation and during the civil war, who were the great families who had the right of appropriation and whose tombs fill the place, what were the charities so often recorded on some wooden plaque on the wall, who made up the congregation, what was the music like, indeed what type of Christianity took place within its walls – puritan, evangelical, Anglo-Catholic – it all ebbed and flowed through the centuries and affected the visual appearance of the building.

This bottom up approach also rams home another truth that these buildings always changed every so often as a result of government intervention or religious revival. Not to allow it to change is in fact to kill it off, to drive out the community for which it was intended. It's an eye-opener to learn what used to go on in churches other than the liturgy, because for centuries it was the one really strong building arising amidst the hovels of the peasantry and the only one large enough for any kind of community gathering whether for business or play. In it took place meetings, debates, elections, legal proceedings, teaching as well as festivities, happenings which were only gradually eroded by the ecclesiastical authorities. We've forgotten that the major source for keeping the building in good order was church ales. A church had a brewhouse and once a year there was an enormous knees-up which raised enough to keep the show on the road until the puritan stopped it. Equally the church generally housed any fire-fighting equipment, acted as the local armoury and afforded storage space for the scold's ducking stool and the stocks. It was also an arm of local government from the Reformation onwards – for the officers of the vestry administered the poor law and workhouse, supervised the local police and saw, for example, that roads and bridges were kept in repair. They also imposed a church rate until it was abolished in the nineteenth century and remained a lively prop of local government until 1894. If multiple use had not been eroded church halls would not need to have been built. The church was the village hall and, as I've already said, the restoration of the village halls for community purposes has weakened the case where there is one for the historic church now fulfilling that role. So much concerning the problem of churches could be solved by giving the building back to the community as its meeting place with adequate safeguards for worship.

My own personal experience of church-going for over thirty years in the rural county of Herefordshire reinforces that view and probably echoes some of those experienced by many in the audience. I live in Much Birch, one of the seven parishes of the so-called Wormelow Hundred. There are a priest and an assistant priest in charge to run this empire – reminiscent of the pluralism of the Georgian period but minus the financial incentives. In the church newsletter, on the page labelled 'Services this Month', there is a bewildering list of Holy Communion, Morning Worship, Family Communion, Matins and Family Worship taking place at each of these churches at what can only be described as a kalaidoscope of times. For the two clerics each Sunday is a marathon race as they tear from one service to the next, making one ask the very pertinent question who would want such a job? But the fact that this kind of thing goes on all over England is a reflection not only of how little thought is given to what is demanded of the clerics involved but also of the hold which the parish church has on those around it, even if there is only a handful of worshippers in the pews. The building is clung to like those drowning cling to the mast of a sinking ship which is often the

case. As during the Victorian period, the churches, apart from Christmas, are now mostly visited for what in essence are gatherings unrelated to the Christian calendar – Harvest Festival and Remembrance Sunday. Out of those seven churches, three perhaps might merit preservation as historic monuments, but it would be difficult to defend the continued existence of the others. And yet to propose shutting them down would let loose untold passions.

The first church my wife and I went to was Much Birch, rebuilt in the year of Victoria's accession, 1837, a building totally devoid of any distinction. We started going there in the early 1970s, a period of experimentation with new forms of service. The 'thees' and 'thous' were still firmly in place from the Prayer Book, the choir remained in the choir stalls, but the priest now faced the congregation over the altar. When the Peace was given, my wife found her hand seized in a way that dismayed her, having been nourished on girls' public school religion.

Up the road we then went to a tiny tea-cosy of a church at Llandinabo, with a unique dedication to St Junabius and a screen rightly designated by Pevsner as "an extremely pretty piece". This was a journey back in time, for it was firmly Morning Prayer each Sunday and communion once a month. But even that was regarded as too frequent by the owner of the large house nearby who ran the church as his private chapel. Here we caught the tail end of what religion must have been like in the Victorian rural parish. The owner of the big house was the churchwarden and rang the bell. Once to his consternation a woman arrived to take the service. That never happened again. On another occasion a priest took the candlesticks from the east window sill and placed them on the altar, from which they were seized and placed back on the altar with the comment that he wasn't going to have any popery in this church. A farmer and his wife came once and were promptly shown to a pew at the back. They never returned. I need hardly add that only the Authorized Version of the Bible was used and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. And that's how it was for several years until we couldn't stand it anymore.

So off we went to Christchurch, Llanwarne, a large church built in 1864 in anticipation of a congregation that never came. It replaced the medieval which now lies below as a picturesque ruin. Constructed in the aftermath of the ecclesiological movement it was inevitably built in the Decorated style with a proper sanctuary, altar with steps, choir stalls and an organ. The average Sunday attendance, for what bravely attempted to be a sung Eucharist with a choir of two elderly ladies, was between twelve and twenty. I did occasionally suggest that logic would indicate that this was replaced with a spoken communion service with us gathered in the chancel or the north transept but I got nowhere. At sixty I was a youthful member of the congregation.

Things surely cannot go on through the twenty-first century like this. So what are we going to do? I would make it mandatory on every rural church to draw up a twenty year strategy for the adaptation of the building for wider community use or to face up to the implications of closure in which case there may be a future in conversion to a dwelling or to becoming a picturesque ruin. And it is no use producing a strategy minus one also for its funding. It is no use either pretending that somehow Government will provide. It won't beyond grants to those of serious architectural merit. I am also increasingly concerned about what government would nowadays extract from churches as a quid pro quo. The strategy must involve everyone in the surrounding community and must move beyond yet another appeal or jumble sale. It will almost certainly involve forming some kind of trust. If this is not done all I foresee is incumbents and congregations sleepwalking off the cliff edge. You can't keep a rural church going devoid of a function, a use, except that is if the congregations are large and there is no lack of money. Everyone has to face up to that fact.

And that means change, this time radical change. That has happened twice before in the history of the country church, once at the Reformation when the churches were stripped bare and the focus was shifted from the altar to the pulpit and again in the Victorian age when the process was reversed. Both were dramatic changes to the interior in response to shifts in patterns of worship. The twenty-first century will call for changes at least and perhaps more dramatic than either of those and people inevitably will be upset by it. The options are black and white ones, change or founder. The congregations of the past if they could come back would be horrified at the present all too frequent stagnation.

I have already suggested that heritage has almost becoming a dirty word but wading through the morass of stuff available on the state of parish churches made me also begin to think that the two words 'preservation' and 'conservation' might also be shortly joining it. That does not mean that I have no respect for them, rather that we need a shift in emphasis away from them as they can be classed in one sense as negative and not dynamic words. They are not pro-active. At best they static, at their worst they can be reactionary. They don't move the life of church buildings on.

It is easy to forget that change has always been the life-blood of our churches. If you walked into almost any of them over the centuries you would have found them altered, either totally or partially rebuilt, the interiors rearranged, some things kept, others discarded. Much of what we now freeze in aspic for eternity as art would never have happened at all if today's preservation societies had existed in the Middle Ages. When the history of preservation and conservation during the last century comes to be written there will be much of course to thank all those societies and pressure groups for but also, I think, there might be some things for which they must take the blame. If you freeze a

building it cannot move on to respond to changing needs and, in effect, you've killed it off. The key word for the twenty-first century is surely adaptability. What needs to happen, as I've said, is for churches to be given back to their local communities in the fullest sense. Such an approach would certainly be viewed by government with favour. But you won't be able to successfully give that space back to a community if it is jammed full of untouchable Victorian choir stalls and pews. In some ways we are more in need of societies for sensibly changing and altering churches – adapting them as I've said – than ones for conserving and preserving them.

It is also too often forgotten that parish churches might be old but they're not that old, the present parish system being largely twelfth century. The Christian community got along for centuries without them. Perhaps, as I've already suggested, that's what's going to happen to them in the twenty first century. Cathedrals in sharp contrast have undergone a renaissance. I now worship in the cathedral which attracts a large congregation, has fine liturgy and music and a warm ministry of welcome. Historically that in some ways is a return to the age before parish churches which the Christian faith operated via minsters, large churches which sent out priests to the localities. Now, in the age of the car, we go to it. We must remember too that not all Christians are interested in saving church buildings. In the case of the evangelicals, the building is no importance and an old cinema or sports stadium would do just as well.

As I said churches began as buildings which embraced the whole community within a given urban or rural area. For about four centuries – from the twelfth to the sixteenth – that remained true. We should not delude ourselves that the parish church was always a uniting force within rural communities. It was to become a divisive one. If you asked me when the parish church as the whole community died I would answer with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642. It had already lost rich Catholics as recusants from the 1580s and, after the Restoration, when dissenters, who were officially recognised, were able to have their own places of worship after the 1689 Act of Toleration. Those losses continued through the eighteenth century with Methodism and then, in the Victorian period, came more evangelical losses. In the last century followed the general decline in belief and the demise of the necessity of attending church as an index of social respectability and standing. After 1945 came a massive fall-off. Indeed the history of church attendance is one long litany of congregational loss down to the era when the motor car can take you to the church of your choice in the consumerist age. And in any case you can in a sense attend church listening to the radio or looking at television. But we can't get away from the fact that these rural churches have an hypnotic hold over even the surrounding unbelieving laity in an era now labelled as post-Christian.

So what are we going to do with all these thousands of old buildings? Let me begin by saying that as you know a great deal has been done and even more is being done. Even a government which seems hostile has been reasonably generous introducing tax rebates on gift aid and exception from VAT for church repairs. Add to that the excellent initiatives of the present Bishop of London and of English Heritage with its document *Inspired!* In addition the implementation of the Toyne Report opens the door to some radical reorganisation of the diocesan and parochial systems which are still, even in 2006, in the main medieval. But on the whole the Church of England is a monument to the application of sticking plaster. There's a gutlessness which won't face up to the brutal truth.

In 1977 the means whereby churches were preserved, changed, declared redundant or whatever was a hydra-headed tangle. It still is. The future of our churches is a pie into which so many fingers are now plunged that it's a wonder the contents aren't all over the floor. I couldn't get over the utter morass of institutions, public bodies and trusts involved in anything to do with the maintenance, alteration and preservation of church buildings. In the case of country houses and gardens for the most part it is literally the Historic House Owners Association, the National Trust and English Heritage, government coming in through various agencies and then the various societies like the SPAB, Georgians and Victorians on the sideline. And that's it. The general public can grasp this not altogether complex structure. The image is coherent and the administrative and management structure easy to follow.

But you turn to anything to do with churches. It is a nightmare even to list a few of those who are involved in historic churches, The Churches Conservation Trust, The Council for the Care of Churches, the Ecclesiological Society, The Friends of Friendless Churches, English Heritage, Heritage Link, the Archbishop's Council, the Church Heritage Forum, the Historic Churches Preservation Trust now relabelled the National Churches Trust, the Ancient Monuments Society, the Historic Churches Liaison Group, the Historic Chapels Trust and the Churches Open Trust to mention but a few. Add to them all the Diocesan Advisory Councils and the local planning authorities. What sort of coherent image do you think this ghastly hydra projects to the average punter on holiday who likes visiting old churches and wouldn't mind trying to help propping a few up. One can at least be thankful that Lord Lloyd Webbers Open Churches Trust wound itself up in December 2006 so at least there'll be one less finger in the proverbial pie.

The public are presented with the Tower of Babel, a babble of conflicting interests and voices. I spent thirty years in the museum world and I know too much about the internecine warfare that goes on between even the most seemingly well-intentioned bodies which occupy the same territory. The general public will never be harnessed to the cause without some kind of coming together.

Virtually every major body connected with saving and preserving churches is post-war. The Ancient Monuments Society admittedly goes back to 1924 but the National Churches Trust is 1953, the Friends of Friendless Churches 1957 and the Churches Conservation Trust 1969. Their very names are antiquated and, if I had my way, I would junk them. They belong to an era that's gone. Their success or rather failure can be measured by the fact that the National Churches Trust, for instance, has a membership only of some 1400 people. The National Trust I need hardly remind you has some three million. In my dealings with these various bodies in the preparation of this paper I was struck less by the camaraderie which existed between these various societies than a kind of edginess among people who are trying to occupy the same territory. The existence of all these different societies in fact muddles the issue. As far as the public is concerned ideally what is called for is one organisation which they can equate with for both visiting and maintaining beautiful old churches. I know the answer to this will be Oh, we'll have another liaison committee but it won't do. We need one organisation only with a new name, a revised series of community based objectives in tune with where we are now and a radical recruiting drive for members with keen thoughts as to what can be offered because there must be things to offer. But the likelihood of this happening is remote as there are too many entrenched interests for keeping the status quo.

Also it would help the cause if the Church of England came clean and told us which churches were in a serious condition. It is no use going on about a crisis when there seems an inability to spell out precisely where it is biting. The impact in 1977 of hundreds of photographs of demolished or wrecked country houses had an electrifying impact on the public. Gardens equally affected people.

What we need in the case of rural churches is role models of adaptability bringing life and a new role to the village church, one which in twenty first century terms is much like the part it played in the life of the community in the late medieval period. All over the country the future use of these buildings should be placed as I said squarely for consideration to those in the surrounding community firmly in terms of change and adaptability and less in those of propping up in perpetuity a relic from an age long gone.

All of this requires leadership from the top which so far seems to be singularly lacking or, if it is there, the message hasn't reached the majority of the rural population. Those in whose hands the future of our beautiful historic rural churches resides should be thinking about this now. Little can be made in the twenty-first century for an expensive building to exist for a service once a week or month lasting an hour. Not every building without a purpose has a right to live on. The challenge resides in giving them a reason to continue to exist, for there is no way all of these buildings can survive to the end of this century. Sadly the disappearance of a church is seen as yet a further nail in

the Church of England's coffin. It shouldn't be. It's just that patterns of worship have changed. Populations have shifted. The reason for the building of a parish church nine or so centuries ago has gone.

Can I add some facts that have emerged from being on the road for a over a year on this topic. Top of the list was the crying need for a radical overhaul of the faculty system. The bureaucratic processes whereby change can be achieved are a major contribution to mummification. To that can be added the need for an arguable divide between mission and the church building. A lot people of people love the building but don't want the mission. They would willingly give money to the building. This, I know, may present problems but the survival of these building is going to depend on money from non-believers. What also struck me is that although the Church of England's bureaucracy grows inversely to the decline in its congregations one vital organisation is missing, one in which churchwardens meet and share ideas and solutions. What is happening at one of the country is wholly unknown at the other and there is no way of them finding out. Finally I would add that we lack publications which give alternative role models for adaptation.

But I'm going to end on a different and perhaps surprising note. What I haven't touched upon is the notion of sacred space. It is a concept shared by many faiths and one not to be lost in the hurly burly of finding a solution for the village church. Both have an immediate effect on virtually anyone who crosses into the space they occupy. Philip Larkin's poem 'Church Going' speaks for so many:

(11)

Once I am sure there's nothing going on

I step inside, letting the door thud shut. (12)

Another church: matting, seats and stone,

And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut

For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff

Up at the holy end; the small neat organ; (13)

And a tense, musty, unignorable silence

Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence.

Notice that the reverence is still there even though belief has gone. Later he muses:

Yet stop I did: in fact, I often do, (14)

And always end much at a loss like this,

Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,

When churches fall completely out of use

What we shall turn them into ... (15)

... For, though I've no idea

What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,

It pleases me to stand in silence here ... (16)

In the revolution of adaptation that inevitably must come in the interests of survival may that intangible quality of separateness from the everyday world not be lost. Let that patch of God's earth and the building within it retain that sense of holy space, of memory and reflection, attributes which are perhaps needed more than at any other time in their tumultuous history.

ROY STRONG