

**WHCT Friends of Wiltshire Churches Evensong
On 16th July 2023 at St Nicholas Church, Bromham
Psalm 122; I Kings 8.22-30; Ephesians 2.19-22**

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Why and how should we care for church buildings? These questions are implicit in our gathering tonight as Friends of Wiltshire Churches. And they are also questions probed by the nuanced approach towards places of worship taken in tonight's readings.

The first text was an extract from the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon nearly three thousand years ago. Solomon knew that, until his day, God had been consulted in a tent, a mobile sanctuary which moved with the people during their wandering in the wilderness. Solomon also knew that God is far greater than any space made by human hands. 'Will God indeed dwell on the earth?', he asked. 'Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!' And yet, build Solomon did, mindful that his Temple would be a focus for intercession and a bridge between earth and heaven. Thus he prayed, 'Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards *this* place; O hear in heaven *your* dwelling-place; heed and forgive.'

Early Christians faced a variant of this tension. The polytheistic Roman Empire tolerated monotheistic Judaism as a slightly eccentric anomaly. However, once Christianity separated from its parent tradition, it was entitled to no equivalent protection. It became an illicit religion. Given this, the earliest 'churches' were not buildings but communities. Nonetheless, St Paul used the *imagery* of construction in his description of these congregations. We heard an example from his letter to Christians in Ephesus. 'You are no longer strangers and aliens but... members of the *household* of God, *built upon the foundation* of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the *cornerstone*.'

Christianity across the Empire would remain underground for the next 250 years. However, as soon as the Emperor Constantine revoked the prohibitions of his predecessors and gave the green light for Christians to meet in public, they started building. They knew from St Paul that they were a *spiritual* edifice and worshippers of an *omnipresent* God - but they also valued buildings in which they could gather to praise and proclaim the almighty.

A remarkable example of this first generation of Christian architecture has recently been excavated 120 miles up the Meander River from Ephesus in the city of Laodicea. The fourth century church *building* of the Laodicean *congregation* exudes confidence: it was a robust, large, three-aisled basilica, with an apse at the east and a narthex at the west, redolent of so many subsequent eastern churches. Quite deliberately, it was provocatively sited in the centre of the city, adjacent to what had once been the city's greatest pagan temple.

And yet... there have been precisely zero Christians in Laodicea since the Middle Ages. For centuries their church was lost under Turkish sand and grass.

Earthquakes and marauders did for the prosperity of Laodicea. In their hour of need, there were no Friends of Anatolian Churches to support the fabric of this once glorious edifice.

Unlike Laodicea, the churches of Wiltshire are not beset by tectonic tremors or Ottoman armies. But we do live in an age of rapidly changing expectations. Congregations and church buildings must adapt if they are to effectively serve the needs of their local communities. This is where WHCT comes in. Funding is vital and, having been a Vicar who until year ago oversaw two historic churches in Hertfordshire, I want to say a big thank you on behalf of my clergy colleagues in this county for the amazing support which you have provided over the last seventy years.

In addition, I'd like to commend the *other ways* in which organisations like WHCT can help churches *to help themselves*. You have been funding dozens of projects of excellence in building adaptation and heritage conservation. Can you share that expertise more widely with churches which are not so far advanced in the process?

Moreover, after conversation with your esteemed Chair, I'd also ask whether there are ways in which WHCT can foster a culture of greater openness among the churches of this county. I know from first-hand experience that, in many contexts, getting churches open can be a crucial step to transforming their fortunes and sense of purpose. Did you know that Ecclesiastical Insurance Group will not charge a penny more on the premiums of churches than are open *and unstaffed* during daylight hours, assuming the obligatory risk assessment has been completed?

When I arrived as Vicar of [St Michael St Albans and St Mary's Childwick Green](#) in 2012, both churches were locked outside the hours of public worship. However, opening the churches to visitors and locals became a paramount concern for my parish leadership team.

We used an acute pastoral need in 2015 as an excuse for a trial of unstaffed opening at the parish church, St Michael's. It was not without trepidation that we left the building unguarded for the first time. But within a month we knew from the comments in the visitor book – not to mention the dosh in the donations box - that we would *never* go back. Thus, when a year or two later that donation box was smashed by a burglar, the formerly-sceptical churchwarden did not insist on locking the doors again. Instead he advocated for CCTV so that we could keep the church open. He did this because he could see that the church was now engaging with many more people. We reckoned on a footfall of five to ten thousand visitors a year. That may seem a lot, but remember, when broken down, that's just 15-30 people a day.

Over the years which followed, a small team worked on simple ways to improve the engagement of our open church with weekday visitors¹: removing clutter; introducing an area where prayers can be written and candles lit [yes, lit candles in an unstaffed church, with the right precautions and approval of the insurers]; producing a simple visitor guide which explains not the dry history of the building but the living role that the artefacts and architecture play in sharing the Christian story; translating that guide into a dozen languages by the congregation as a 'Pentecost challenge';

¹ Cf. Paul Bond, *Open for You: The Church, The Visitor and the Gospel* (2006).

creating a carefully curated children's area that offers a friendly space for families during the week as well as on Sundays; installing a movement sensor on the lights so that they illuminate the interior when a visitor crosses the threshold; purchasing a card reader to sit alongside the cash donations box – a device which works even without wifi and which raised £2,000 in its first year, despite the disruptions of coronavirus restrictions.

When my more cautious daughter church got wind of these changes at St Michael's, eyebrows started to rise. St Mary's also voted to open their church and make adaptations to become more welcoming. However, because most of that congregation lived at a distance, they could only find volunteers for opening on Saturdays and Sundays. To circumvent this problem, we devised an electronic door opener. This pings the door open at 9am and locks it again at 5pm. A green door-release button ensures that nobody gets stuck overnight if they unwittingly enter at 4.59. The essential components to make this device are a self-closer on the door, an electromagnetic lock, a timer, and a decent locksmith. Installation cost a little more than £1000, a sum which was paid within a year by new donations from visitors who were delighted to find the village church open at last.

Electronic door openers like this strike me as a no-brainer for many smaller churches, and yet St Mary's Childwick Green is - to the best of my knowledge – still the only example in the Diocese of St Albans. Are there any similar devices in churches around here? Could WHCT develop a programme to fund such devices that might help churches to help themselves in the years ahead?

Two footnotes to the foregoing:

- Firstly, my examples from St Albans are illustrative, not prescriptive: each church will have its own unique needs, opportunities and challenges.
- But, secondly, I do not think it chance that the newfound openness of my former parish coincided with a reversal of declining attendance at worship. Services grew and levels of regular congregational giving went up too.

So as we give thanks tonight to the God whom even the highest heaven cannot contain, let us commit afresh to discerning, funding, and fostering ways in which our extraordinary ecclesiastical heritage can thrive in the years ahead.