

SACRED SPACE AND COMMUNITY

Friday 26th October 2018. Blanchland.

Report of a *contextual practice workshop* from the Rural Strand of Newcastle Diocesan Strategy Growing Church Bringing Hope Rural Strand.

The day workshop aimed to explore how the church might use its remarkable legacy of buildings to breathe new life into rural communities and better share the Christian story.

The participants were overwhelmingly people active in ministry in the Church of England in rural Northumberland, priests, lay ministers, churchwardens, members of congregations and church workers with a broader remit.



The programme intermixed the general and the particular, often with a particular focus on Blanchland:

A keynote speech by the Very Revd Michael Sadgrove mapped out the concept of sacred space, through the lens of Blanchland.

We then went to Blanchland Abbey to experience sacred space in action, as Martin Hughes and David Murray played Vaughan-Williams' *The Lark Ascending* for us.

Ian Bapty, Project Manager of Inspired North East, gave a presentation on the development of use of rural church buildings, reflecting on practicalities and opportunities.

Revd Helen Savage of the Moorland Group of Parishes, which includes Blanchland, and Toni Bush, who is working with Blanchland Abbey on its heritage-led regeneration project, presented the project.

Helen gave us a tour of the village, pointing out layers of history visible in the layout and structures, and opportunities.

Working in small groups, the participants shared their own experience and reflections around the key questions of the Rural Contextual Practice Workshops Programme.

Keynote Speech: the Very Revd Michael Sadgrove

Sacred Space – What is it?

Michael began with the poet W H Auden, an example of someone for whom some places (and the North Pennines in particular for Auden) have a sacred quality. For Auden, this made such places like Eden, because somehow ‘no contradiction has yet arisen between the demands of Pleasure and the demands of Duty,’ an idea that resonates with many today. This is not a chocolate-box idealisation of the countryside, for Auden recognises history and darkness in the landscape; it is more about places that enable you to cross a threshold into a deeper experience of meaning.

For space to be ‘sacred’, Michael suggests, it’s not just (or even) that people have come to worship in it over time, but it is a place where deep meaning may be found. That requires the place to have experienced time and change, and to be able to engage with people both intellectually and viscerally.

Michael outlined three theses about sacred space – with particular reference to Blanchland, because every sacred space is specific as well as sharing general characteristics.

Sacred Space is an Aspect of Landscape

Michael argued that ‘sacred geography’ is about landscapes before it is about humans inhabiting them. From the awe-inspiring vista speaking of the sheer enormity of God to the more gentle valley offering to hold us as we live, space shapes how we behave and think, as much as we shape space by what we do in it. Our physical environment is somewhere where we may, like Jacob at Bethel, encounter God, for God made it. Sometimes this must be unexpected and unsettling. ‘God has many mansions. Most of them are not churches,’ said Michael.

Sacred Space Tells Stories

Awe-inspiring as landscapes – including built environments – may be, they are not unchanging and the stories of how they grew and changed are complicated and fraught. Spaces need to be thought about and interpreted. Our Northern Borderlands landscape is not a land of ‘unspoiled beauty’ but bears evidence of violence and conflict, not least at Blanchland where the village is built of stones that used to form most of the Abbey, only a stump of which (remodelled in the eighteenth century) remains. It may feel ancient, even timeless, but it bears time in its lines and stones (as we were to see on our walk in the afternoon).

Sacred Space Must Be Inhabited and Reimagined.

If sacred space’s great gift to us is the opportunity for encounter (see Michael’s first thesis) then how we live in it – and living in it will always mean changing it – matters. The heritage industry is about the past, but it should not be about sanitising the past, or anaesthetising it into a fantasy land of make-believe for tourists (more on this term below). Michael brought into play the Christian concept of *anamnesis*, a kind of remembering that brings the past alive into the present and aids those in the present in transforming the future. He also suggested, especially for great Christian sacred spaces, using the monastic term ‘guests’ for visitors, rather than ‘tourists’. As custodians of sacred space, we invite and welcome guests – people who have the potential to become pilgrims, people who, perhaps very temporarily but nonetheless really join the community of the space itself.

It also needs to be recognised that inhabiting and reimagining sacred space is not the work of the church alone. Church has always intertwined with community and needs to continue to do so, because our heritage, and future, are shared. 'Sacred space is public space that belongs to all and is open to all because it is God's space, and God offers hospitality and welcome to all humanity.'

Performance in the Abbey of Vaughan-Williams' *The Lark Ascending* by Martin Hughes and David Murray.

One of Michael's key points was to do with not over-controlling sacred space, but allowing it to be a place where direct encounter may happen between a person and what the space has to offer. In that spirit, we experienced – together and individually - the performance.

It is impossible to mention without sounding twee the birds (tits, we think) who played at the windows behind the performers as they played – however many of those who read this who were present at the day would feel something was missing if I didn't include them.

After the performance, Martin and David spoke about performing in such a space. They eschewed ideas that such a place required different preparation from any other (apart from wearing extra layers). Every space has its own acoustics and so you prepare for every performance specifically, in the same way. But what they did say was that when you play, it is never the same, in large part because of the audience. The way the audience listens affects the performance, and no live performance is the same as another – you let it take its course. What came over in their talk was that in the particular performance is a lifetime of work and relationships, to practice, to teachers and pupils, to the piece and what you know of it. Martin gave a fascinating insight into how *The Lark Ascending* gained a wide audience, the result, apparently, of accidents of recording and broadcasting more than anything else. Live performance lives in its own history just as do buildings and landscape.



Ian Bapty: The Future of Rural Church Buildings in Newcastle Diocese – A strategy for Future Care and Development

Ian mapped the current status for rural church buildings:

The National Picture

- 16,000 C of E churches in England, congregations declining and older
- Over 50% of those churches are rural (9000) and 2000 rural churches have congregations of fewer than 10 people
- 40% of rural church worshippers are over the age of 70
- In 2013, the outstanding repair estimate for all churches nationally was £45,522, probably an underestimate for rural churches
- Hard pressed Clergy, Churchwardens and PCCs haven't normally 'signed up' to be building managers and fundraisers, nor do they necessarily have experience, skills and training in this area.....
- The future of rural churches has been flagged up in recent documents including the Taylor Report (2017) and the C of E's Report of the Church Buildings Review Group (2015) – to some extent an uncritical narrative of presumed inevitable decline
- Closures are part of the picture nationally (e.g. Carlisle Diocese)

In Newcastle Diocese, over 50% of church buildings are rural, and our rural is particularly sparsely populated. We share the national challenges.

Ian outlined the opportunities that come alongside the challenges:

- Church buildings are in almost every rural community – part of rural life
- Parish churches are by definition for everyone in the parish
- Often prominent and impressive historic places which people connect to whatever their relationship to faith (life journey - hatch, match, despatch....)
- Heritage of churches (building, people, churchyard/wildlife etc.) is a great hook to draw in new audiences
- The literal embodiment of the church – for most people 'the church' actually means the church building itself
- Offer great spaces which can fulfil a very wide range of community functions which are often not possible elsewhere
- The combination of historic buildings, community activities and religious mission is a strong and broad based funding 'sell'
- A great potential resource supporting partnership and innovative change

Ian suggested what a rural church building strategy must do

- Not just about the buildings – needs to embrace the use of the buildings, and reflect the needs of communities and people
- Be realistic in terms of resources and capacity
- Deliver the practical support churches need
- Involve partnership and co-working between and beyond churches
- Engage with the specific community and socio-economic circumstances in rural areas in the diocese
- Recognise that there needs to be change and development in the way we look after and develop rural churches in the diocese

- Create a context for collective and informed decision making about the future of rural church buildings in the diocese
- Support the mission and growth of the church in the diocese, and be an integral part of the Growing Church Bringing Hope agenda

Key elements of a Rural Church Building Strategy:

- Utilise and develop skills of church members and wider community
- Capitalise on the potential of our rural church buildings to support modern community life
- Develop heritage, landscape and green agendas linked to churches
- Develop new partnerships
- Connect churches via complementary roles across project clusters
- Develop coordinated processes and planning for the practical management, development and care of rural church buildings in the diocese
- Access new resources to support the care and development of rural churches in the diocese

Ian concluded by introducing the *Rural Churches for Everyone* project, which the diocese is applying for funding for from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This project, running over two years from summer 2019, would see around 40 rural churches working in four clusters and with a range of key partners. They would be supported to create project teams to plan and deliver development projects, including professional support with planning and management, training key members and volunteers (and ensuring the training is rolled out further), and support four churches, one in each cluster, to develop and implement change models as practical examples of how church buildings can be adapted to serve specific local community purposes in rural Northumberland – and, of course, share that learning with rural churches throughout the diocese and beyond.

Toni Bush and Helen Savage: *The Blanchland Abbey Project : Heritage-led Regeneration?*

Toni began by outlining her involvement. Having spent many years working on church heritage projects including the Hexham Abbey project, with a particular focus on engagement and education, Toni has been working in a voluntary capacity with Helen, Ian and key church members to explore what kind of project would work for Blanchland. She shared with us some reflections on this kind of work, based on her own experience.

Toni's faith background has been nurtured both in beautiful rural church buildings and in a more free evangelical theological context in which beautiful buildings are seen as a distraction, and the critical question this raises for her is: how can heritage church buildings contribute to the regeneration of faith *and* community?

Toni's experience working in education shows her the power that sacred buildings can have to connect directly with people spiritually, raising the question whether any 'interference' beyond restoration should be attempted. Using the example of church pews, Toni showed how this is a theological issue as well as an aesthetic and heritage one. Pews represent an important part of a building's spiritual history, but the step of removing them (as at Alnham) may actually reveal the space literally in a new light that resonates more strongly with contemporary ideas about how worshipping communities work, as well as giving a more direct aesthetic experience of the numinous.

Drawing on Elaine Heath's *The Mystic Way*, Toni suggested that this is an age when it is very hard to speak intelligibly of the Christian faith in wider, secular Western society, and that it is therefore all

the more vital that our buildings are enabled to speak spiritually, without words. ‘How we use our building is important in speaking of God.’

This led to Toni’s final question, one that the Blanchland group has been considering in detail: ‘how can our sacred space share the Christian good news in this community?’ – and where? What does a sacred space have to offer to the needs of a community? This becomes particularly relevant when communities are looking at spiritual issues including mental health and community cohesion. We live in an era when fewer and fewer people identify as ‘Christian’ while more and more go on pilgrimages and light candles in churches. How can our sacred spaces help people on their spiritual journeys? Toni gave the example of Hexham Abbey’s engagement with the town’s Hallowe’en activities, which felt initially uncomfortable but led to deep engagement both with the Christian history of the festival and with those taking part in the activities offered by the Abbey.

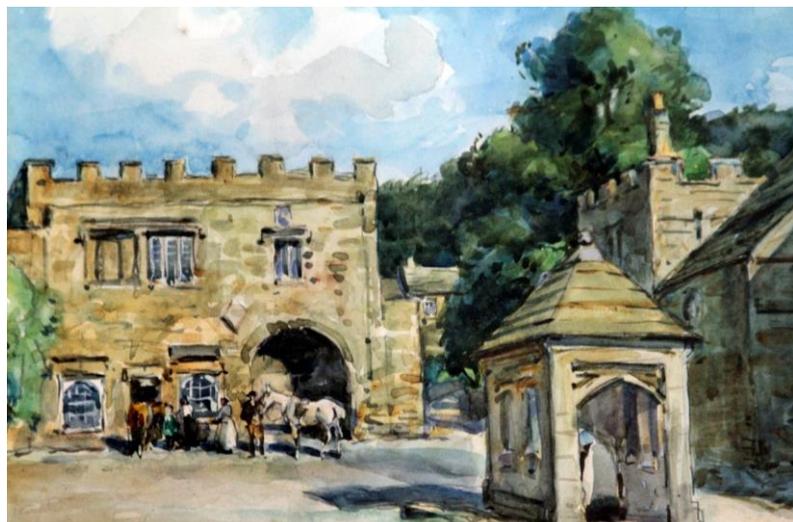
There are huge challenges of sustainability and feasibility in such projects, underpinned by shrinking and ageing congregations – interestingly these are the same challenges of connection and involvement faced by rural communities more generally. Can rural churches be part of the solution for rural communities in becoming more self-sustaining and connected?

Helen introduced the Blanchland Abbey Project, which brings together the Blanchland Community Development Organisation and Blanchland PCC to seek a sustainable future for Blanchland Abbey. Blanchland is remarkable first in how rare the church is as an example of a Premonstratensian church in England and second in how the whole village is physically and visibly shaped by that history. The village faces challenges of lessening community spirit as an ageing population is replaced by newer people with different lifestyles, and the church, while extraordinarily valuable from a heritage perspective, is not very usable due to cold, damp, poor flooring, lack of access or facilities and lack of interpretation.

The project should benefit local people, tourists, those visiting the Abbey specifically as a sacred space, those visiting for arts and cultural events and those wanting to learn about the history and heritage. The project seeks also to bring together major stakeholders, who will also benefit from working together to achieve a better result. To enable this work to be effective they are planning to introduce innovative governance structures for the care of the church shared between the Blanchland Community Development Organisation and the Parochial Church Council and by training a team of volunteers from the local community.

A Walk around Blanchland

Helen led us around the village, showing how its geography and architecture reveals its history and also signs of the current challenges it faces, including lack of affordable housing. The sheer size of the Abbey in relation to its community shows the challenge the community faces in nurturing its major building, while the number of houses available for rent, and the rents themselves, suggest the challenge such a place has in achieving a sustainable working community.



Group Work

Groups of workshop participants considered the key questions at the heart of the series of contextual practice workshops:

Responses:

- Can we see God doing anything here?
- What kind of faith is formed here?
- What are the possibilities for transformation?

Plenary

A lively – and inconclusive, but thought provoking – discussion followed as groups shared their thinking.

Some key points, often expressed as tensions:

- How can we maintain awe but allow people to come in as themselves?
- Is there a difference between a sense of place and a sense of community?
- How do you know what to 'keep' because in future it will become an attraction?
- Strong sense that in small rural churches it's easy to be consumed by keeping the show on the road (even if the show's not very good!) and should we perhaps drop it and do something more exciting?
- We should build on what is praised in visitors' books.
- Toilets – there should be a national toilet fund.
- The kind of faith depends on the particular church and location – part of the journey of life.
- Transformation – build on memories and experiences of occasional visitors. Idea of stations on the way of a personal and spiritual journey – from one church to another – pilgrimage?
- The burdens we put on ourselves – actually our buildings are never better but we burden ourselves and go straight to the function, not thinking about what the church is or could be? What is the gift of this space? Might be a useful question.
- The mechanical way we record building use (Sunday worship numbers) is an issue. But how people connect to our buildings in ways that matter to them isn't captured by that.
- Do we revere the past too much? The impetus to preserve makes us scared of seeing the space as it could be – we make an idiot of the past.
- Some unease about the danger of turning buildings into more beautiful buildings so art and music can happen – and losing the primary purpose (i.e. evangelism) But is it more how and why you do things than what you do? E.g. a concert as a gift of love to the community is spreading God's love?
- Welcoming – the church must be a welcoming space because many are afraid to enter.
- We need to socialise the unchurched into church.
- What difference does it make doing something in a church rather than somewhere else? People responsible for stewardship of sacred space need to ask specifically what has God given us here and what is of value and what would (and wouldn't) be appropriate use of that space. Benedict's advice – don't do anything in the oratory that would stop someone from praying there.
- We are talking about *offence* and barriers.
- The question of charging admission to cathedrals.

The workshop stimulated much thought, brought many ideas and in particular helped participants to think through issues that are both practical and theological in a joined-up way.

