

Finding friends, making friends

Setting up a Friends group for the local church

'The Church (of England) is fulfilling a national role through supporting thousands of magnificent historic buildings and providing facilities for education, tourism, social and community work.' But with many heritage churches in isolated rural or poor urban communities and with falling, ageing congregations how can we balance heritage and hope, maintenance and mission? ⁱ



Churches are places of worship and prayer, sacred spaces in which faith is shared and learned. They are also a significant part of our cultural heritage. Ministry, mission and maintenance is a balancing act, especially when over 12,000 Anglican churches are listed (82% of listed churches) and 4,200 are Grade 1 listed, 45% of all Grade 1 buildings in England. ⁱⁱ

Money for God's sake

Guarding this cultural heritage costs money. In 2010 English Heritage estimated £925 million of church repairs by 2015. ⁱⁱⁱ Essential and welcome big money comes from the Heritage Lottery Fund and other generous, supportive trusts but around 85% of urgent repairs and two thirds of urgent repairs over £50,000 are funded by local congregations. ^{iv}

More than money, 32,000 churchwardens giving one hour a week means 1.5 million volunteer hours a year. Wardens and many others on fabric committees and church councils give more than an hour and what they do is valued. We Brits enjoy our religious heritage with 84% thinking that our places of worship are an important part of the UK's heritage and history. ^v

Building social capital

The same survey also found that 83% thought that church buildings serve society by offering space for community activities as well as worship. They are right! Faith communities in the north west alone oversee over 5,000 projects addressing issues like homelessness, racism, skills development and art for people of all age groups, and involving over 45,500 volunteers. ^{vi}

Making friends

Churches need financial support and beyond the congregation there are friends who don't attend but love their local church. A Friends group can be a way forward for some churches with maybe a thousand church Friends groups registered with the Charity Commission and many more, hard to count, informal Friends groups. Many are in rural communities but they are also in towns and cities and the number is growing.

Friends groups provide an additional income stream for the church. Income of £1,000-£2,000 a year is not unusual; a reasonable median figure for an active Friends group is between £4,000 and £5,000 pa. But this is not easy money. Friends groups are all different but share some common characteristics:

- the centre of gravity is outside of the church congregation and with the wider community; the congregation are, should be, already giving
- they tend to focus on the church fabric and whilst some support security or insurance they don't support day to day operational costs
- they need an active chair and committee and a good working arrangement with the church council.

Chapter three of *Beyond the Collection Plate* describes two Friends groups and suggests things to consider if your church wants to make Friends.

Notes and Resources

- ⁱ Building Faith in our Future (2004) p9.
ⁱⁱ Four times those cared for by the National Trust and English Heritage combined. *How do we keep our Parish Churches?* by Trevor Cooper (2004) p16.
ⁱⁱⁱ Caring for Places of Worship (June 2010) p6. Building Faith in our Future p11.
^{iv} The National Churches Trust (NCT) Survey report March 2011 p6.
^v NCT survey January 2016
^{vi} On this theme see Building Faith in our Future p21-23.