



May there be a Church free and open to the challenges of the present, never on the defensive for fear of losing something. And, meeting people along the way, may it adopt the proposal of St Paul: 'To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.' (1 Cor 9:22).

Pope Francis
addressing the 5th National
Conference of the Italian Church,
Florence, Nov 2015



Inspired by our past to face the challenge of the future

The history of the church in Wigan is long. The first rector of Wigan parish church was installed in 1199, and what became St Aidan's Billinge and All Saints Hindley were originally built in 1539 and 1641.

The history of the church in Wigan is also great. Most of our current centres of worship have their origin in the church building boom of the late Victorian era. However, before the churches were built, there were often worshipping communities based in schools and mission halls who planted the new local parish church. The Church in Wigan has a dynamic history: starting new churches, sharing the gospel door to door, feeding the hungry, and bringing their communities together in faith, fellowship and fun.

We need this enterprising spirit of old, so faithfully embodied by our forebears, for today we face a grave new challenge.

In 2015 Pope Francis explained that we are living not in an era of change, but a change of era. The values and certainties we relied on even 30 years ago no longer apply, affecting every area of society. We see this manifest in different ways: growing distrust in old institutions, a revision of morals and ethics, and – pertinent to us – disinterest in traditional organised religion. This, largely, is the root of the decline we see on a Sunday morning.

The church of Wigan is still called by Jesus 'to declare the the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter 2.9). Today we embrace the creative spirit of our forebears in the 50 emerging new worshipping communities and mission initiatives that engage 1,000 people who otherwise wouldn't go to church.

Yet we also need to embrace their old spirit of courage, especially as we confront the painful question of which church buildings we can keep, and which we cannot.

All our church buildings are precious. Some are iconic landmarks, some are tucked away in the middle of an estate; but all have played an important role in the lives of countless people over the years. Even those who never take part in worship or contribute to its upkeep feel a connection to 'their church.' We recognise this and tread with reverence and humility in reviewing them.

Nevertheless we cannot afford to keep all of them anymore. The Joint Council of Wigan and the seven parochial church councils (PCCs) agreed that a fair and robust review of all our buildings, and not just the obviously vulnerable ones, was necessary. Here's why:

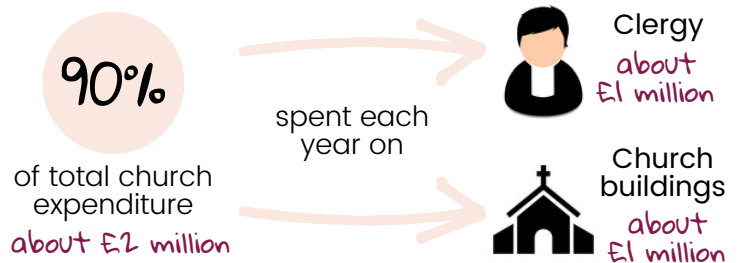
Changing needs of mission



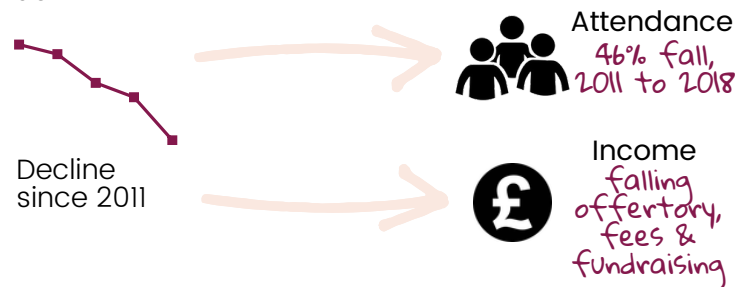
All our churches were built in an age where the priority was maximising seating for traditional forms of public worship. Church Wigan can seat 8,500 people for worship at any one time, yet on Sunday normally hosts less than 1,500.

On the other hand, new faith communities and mission projects are growing (already 50 in number). They often require tables and chairs, kitchens to prepare food, parking, good access and baby changing facilities. The investment required will be considerable, and without the mill and mine owning benefactors of yester-year, we cannot afford to do this everywhere. Rather, we need a smaller number of wisely sited church buildings which can fulfil both the ongoing needs of traditional worship and today's mission.

Changing financial reality



In the past, the money collected from offerings paid for clergy (well, almost), and fees from funerals, weddings and income from fundraising paid for the building and grounds. Any Shortfall was made up by paying from historic 'rainy day' reserves. But this time-honoured model is breaking down.



Result: Reserves under pressure or exhausted
Parishes no longer financially viable

Rebalancing clergy and buildings

Up to now, we've saved by reducing clergy: in 2013 there were 24 stipendiary clergy; today only 15 – and four of those are half time, and two paid by the national church. However, in the time when clergy numbers have fallen steeply, and key volunteers and attendance have reduced, the number of church buildings has remained relatively static (33 in 2013, 31 today). Largely, this is what is behind the 'pastoral pinch' many of us feel and lament. Our available resources, people as well as money, are stretched out unsustainably over too many church buildings. We need to take action now to be able to provide better pastoral care to church members, maintain our commitment to mission and save those who serve us from burning out.

We've dealt with this new financial reality in the only way we can: we've 'cut the coat according to our cloth.'

CAN WE TRUST IT?

RIGHT BUILDINGS REVIEW CHURCH WIGAN

A fair and thorough process

'I pray... that all of them may be one.' This was Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17. In Church Wigan we are richer in every way when we stand together through thick and thin.

Accordingly, all the church buildings were reviewed together – the big and the small, the rich and the poor. The aim is to provide a network of well-equipped buildings that enable mission to all the deanery, especially in its areas where churches often struggle. It's not about simply closing the 'weakest' churches.

The Right Buildings Team. 13 people – all local, all lay except one retired priest – worked with a professional surveyor who is independent of Wigan. They drafted recommendations to be offered to the PCCs for consideration.

The process. Each building received two visits, one 'technical' looking at the state and layout of the building, and one 'community', assessing missional capacity. During these visits, the team assessed the strengths and weaknesses of each building as objectively as possible using a common set of questions.

The assessment assigned a colour to each building:

GREEN

'is fit for mission, likely to be able to sustain mission, and should be **RETAINED**.'

RED

'is unlikely to be able to sustain mission without considerable investment and should be **RELEASED**.'

Unsurprisingly, many were mixed, with both advantages and drawbacks for mission. These were assigned:

AMBER GREEN

'has potential to sustain mission with some intervention, so may be **RETAINED** with a development plan.'

AMBER RED

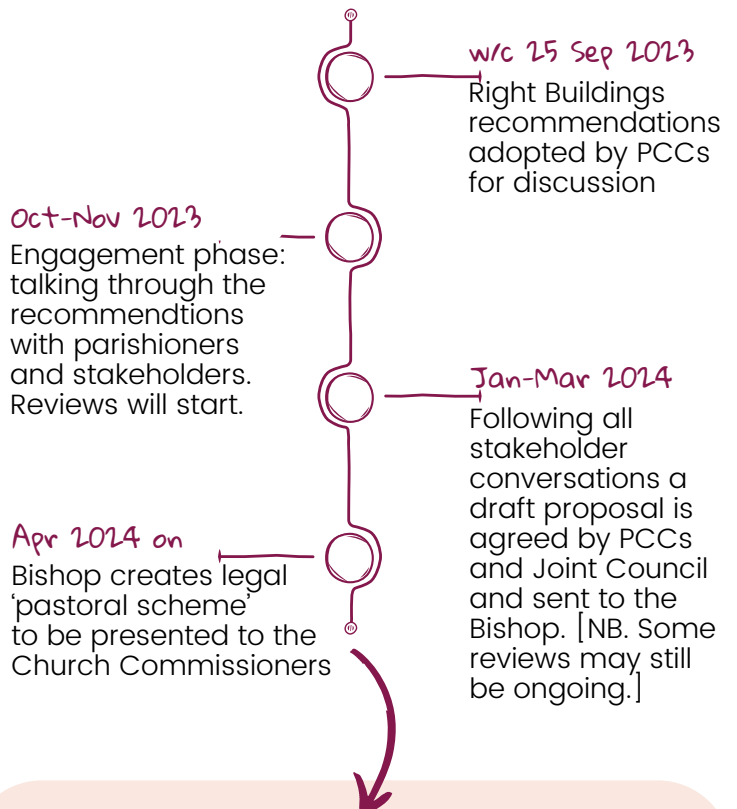
'has both significant potential and challenges requiring urgent review & development; otherwise **RELEASE**.'

The map + mission exercise

Once buildings were assigned a colour, they were reviewed again relative to each other on a map of the deanery. In some cases, it became apparent that a hard choice must be made between neighbouring church buildings.

Reviewing all the buildings at the same time enabled the team to draft recommendations which, taken together, provide bases for worship and mission that are, as much as possible, wisely and fairly distributed across Church Wigan.

Process timeline



Ultimately, consecrated church buildings can only be closed by the national Church Commissioners in accordance with the Missional and Pastoral Measure 2011 (amended 2018), which will include a formal consultation. Non-consecrated church buildings belong to the Diocesan Board of Finance which alone has power to close them.

The seven PCCs considered the recommendations of the Right Buildings Team and will proceed on the basis outlined below. In some cases PCCs chose to amend the draft recommendation to allow a further review to discern whether to retain or release.

NOTE. Buildings are listed by parish number, NOT by any form of ranking

861 Christ Church Ince	867 St James w St Thomas Poolstock	866 St Mark Newtown
862 St Nathaniel Platt Bridge	<p>RETAIN</p> <p>These buildings currently offer a base for sustainable ministry for the future, without requiring a large investment of resources.</p>	866 St Michael Swinley
862 St John Hindley Green		865 St Andrew Garswood
863 St Elizabeth Aspull		865 St Aidan Billinge
863 St Stephen Whelley	864 St Francis Kitt Green	865 St Thomas Ashton
861 St Andrew Springfield	867 St Paul Goose Green	867 St Matthew Highfield
862 All Saints Hindley	<p>REVIEW</p> <p>These buildings have missional value as well as real challenges; sustainability is at risk without significant investment in adaptation or development. PCCs should urgently review them and assess options whether to retain or release. We will not be able to afford to retain all.</p>	866 All Saints Wigan (Wigan Parish Church)
862 St John Abram		866 St George Wigan
862 St Peter Hindley		865 Holy Trinity Downall Green
862 St James w St Elizabeth Bickershaw		865 St Luke Stubshaw Cross
863 St David Haigh	864 St Luke Orrell	864 St John Pemberton
861 St Anne Beech Hill	<p>RELEASE</p> <p>These buildings cannot easily support growth of mission without large investments to develop or relocate them. In some cases, the associated hall might be more readily used for mission.</p>	863 St John New Springs
861 St Catharine Scholes		862 Good Shepherd Bamfurlong