



Newsletter November 2021: **The Future for Church Buildings**



Over the last few months SCT has been assisting our partners, the National Churches Trust, with a major essay project exploring views from a number of contributors from varied angles, and our combined nations, entitled "The Future of the UK's Church Buildings". A number of SCT supporters contributed greatly to our piece: "Scotland's Churches: from surfeit to shortage?" We are most grateful to those who assisted in producing this outstanding and inciteful example of creative writing. The SCT essay is published below and the full NCT publication is available for online viewing or download [here](#). Please contribute to the important national debate by completing the related NCT survey that can be accessed [here](#).

Scotland's churches: from surfeit to shortage?

Scotland's Churches Trust aims to advance the preservation, promotion and understanding of Scotland's churches and places of worship of all denominations. The challenges facing Scotland's places of worship in the post Covid world are similar to those being faced in the rest of the United Kingdom. Yet Scotland's religious history and its geography pose some unique challenges. Director, Stuart Beattie, is pictured above.

We were pleased to be asked our view as to the future of church buildings and as a member organisation we canvassed opinions and below share a small number of these.

Kenneth McLean a heritage professional, and a Church of Scotland Session Clerk, made the clear point that "a perfect way to 'save' churches is their continued use by healthy worshipping communities". Ann Urwin, Session Clerk for the parish of Kilchrenan and Dalavich in Argyll, and typical of Scotland's rural churches, wanted to stress that the fellowship that is engendered at services makes churches very special places for local people. As she put it, they are "havens of peace and tranquillity and at the same time a source of inspiration" and that would, of course, be lost should churches have to close. David D Scot, a former Minister at Prestonkirk, East Linton, urged greater community use. He drew our attention to the way "some communities have been imaginative in buying church buildings and enhancing them for community use – worship, concerts, educational, conference and social space." These include Kirkcaldy Old Kirk, which is now run by the local community and which Rosemary Potter from the Old Kirk Trust told us "has survived plague, fire and wars, and ...will adapt to meet the new situation as it has in each generation through its thousand years of Christian worship and community service in the town."

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A case for greater support by Government

Funding to keep places of worship open and in good repair remains a major challenge in Scotland, and Tom Ogilvie, a Church in Falkirk, made a very pertinent point that "given that a substantial part of the desire to protect our heritage comes from the local community, it seems vital that they should assist with the financial resources required to maintain the buildings. The support of the community at large is currently generously provided by charitable trusts but there is a case for greater support by Government, whether at local or national levels."

I am appreciative of the time taken by members of Scotland's Churches Trust to share their views with us. The contribution of R D Kernohan, who has served as Church of Scotland elder in Glasgow's East End and at Cramond, Edinburgh, provided both a short history of Scotland's churches, useful for those who may be unfamiliar with it, and some possible solutions to the current impasse, directed primarily to the Church of Scotland, but more widely applicable. I reproduce a lightly edited version of his contribution below and hope that it stimulates thinking as to how best to sustain Scotland's places of worship.

"Scotland, for good historical reasons, had too many churches. It now risks having too few. It may also fail to ensure that they are in the best places for effective evangelism or to include all those of most historic or artistic importance. Such national landmarks as Glasgow Cathedral and St Giles' in Edinburgh may be safe but there is much more to our inheritance.

Duplication and triplication of buildings

"The patterns and the problems of Scotland's heritage of church buildings are very different from England's. Many of them still stem from the past divisions and subsequent reunions of Scottish Presbyterianism, which led to the duplication and often triplication of provision for buildings in the original parish system, and what now seems lavish over-provision in the Victorian age of urban expansion, some of it of an artistic merit only recently rediscovered.

"The situation was compounded by the prosperous enthusiasm of the Episcopalians to create a national network of churches – from tiny chapels to the grandeur of St Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh's West End. There were more haphazard achievements of other denominations, such as the once-great Baptist temple of the Coats Memorial in Paisley, now an "events venue", though a sale to modern Baptists has saved St George's West and its Victorian-Venetian campanile in Edinburgh.

"Roman Catholics were less ambitious and prolific in church architecture, except for a spell in the mid-twentieth century, and their problems with surplus buildings probably count for less than a shortage of priests to serve them.

"As a result, Scotland's Churches, and especially the Kirk, have struggled over the past century to adjust an over-supply of buildings to a gradually decreasing demand and at the same time to provide churches in newly created or vastly changed areas of housing development. In the inter-war and post-war periods they succeeded fairly well. More recently it has perhaps been evident that their strength, and perhaps their confidence, are unequal to their task. Developments which would once have merited new buildings are left unchurched, although existing parishes struggle to serve them.

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An anti-building complex

"In this situation it may not be surprising that there are signs in the Church, more evident among ministers than congregations, of an anti-building complex. Ministers, who are local chief executives as well as chief pastors and teaching elders, often growl at the time, effort, and money that goes to maintaining venerable buildings and patching up more modern ones. Church leaders have insisted that "the church is not a curator of historic buildings.

"The Church is never its buildings and must never worship them, but most of its people and its congregations feel the need for a hub that becomes a holy place. We need the spiritual dimension that comes from gathering to share our faith and sometimes to sustain our faith. We need a base for our activities and good works and where we can invite others to join in them. And though we live in the present and for the future we are the better for being reminded of those who passed before us and whom we sometimes feel around us.

"Unfortunately there is a real risk now in Scotland that reduction in the number of ministers and churches will create parishes so large that they are increasingly divorced from local communities, whether in scattered rural settings or the "urban villages" still often discernible in big cities. But risks are more obvious than answers and even mitigations can be difficult.

A spiritual, historic and artistic inheritance

"Two changes of emphasis in current thinking would help. One is to separate as far as possible decisions on the number of church buildings and "worship stations" from the question of how many full-time ministers can be recruited and afforded. That depends on a readiness in all denominations to rediscover in a contemporary form (involving, for example, the Kirk's elders) the impetus that Methodism once gained from its local preachers.

"Another is for there to be more devolution to local congregations of decisions about buildings, qualified by a stronger national and denominational acceptance that a curacy of spiritual, historic, and artistic inheritance should be a duty and delight as well as a burden. There is room in the Church for gathered congregations as well as parish ones, and there is also a need for churches to relate consciously to the needs and daily life of a community, in most cases a territorial one.

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"Members of the Church should not feel guilty when they take pleasure in her stones and favour the dust thereof' and the humblest and most disposable of church properties have hallowed human associations and are remembered in the listed buildings of Heaven. Nor should they feel guilty when they ensure that they allow for flexible forms of worship and provide a focus for the social and cultural life of all ages in the communities they serve."

Stuart Beattie is the Director of Scotland's Churches Trust

Other news!

A Christmas Carol, A Cappella – Venue Sought!



A theatre group (previous productions such as "Sunshine on Leith") that was all set to give us some festive cheer with an A Cappella musical version of Dickens' Christmas Carol has suddenly found themselves homeless by the closure of their intended venue. If your church or hall, preferably in Edinburgh or the surrounding area, has some space to accommodate them, they would greatly appreciate it. Click the logo for their website or details below.

<https://scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk/news/an-a-cappella-christmas-carol/>

Churches in the snow



Our Christmas newsletter, which will be published in the first or second week of December, will have a slightly lighter theme. We are seeking some photos of some member churches in the snow. If you could email your contribution (with up to 50 words) to us, that would be greatly appreciated. We are also sure that this would provide some additional publicity for your church. In the picture, our offices can be seen (just), at the top of the Mound in Edinburgh on the extreme left. office@scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk

Membership of SCT gives many benefits, at £50 for 12 months, such as:

- Free advertising: <https://scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk/church/st-athernase-parish-church-leuchars/>

is an example. Often members appear on the first page of Google results!

- Potential funding of building repairs and preventative maintenance via grants
- Advice on building care. Our experts are renowned as some of the best in Scotland
- Regular newsletters – such as this one
- Free invitations to prestigious events when possible such as "The Gathering" and seminars
- Grants for organ tuition and concerts

Sign up with our direct debit mandate: [SCT Annual Church Membership Link to Mandate](#)

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