

## English Parish Churches and Sustainability

Nigel Walter\*

England's 16,000 parish churches represent an outstanding body of living heritage. Typically, they have experienced multiple episodes of change, which has both enabled them to survive and given them their outstanding character. Growing awareness of the climate crisis – and the Church of England's own recognition of this crisis – is leading to further change, including, for example, the upgrading of fabrics and the installation of photovoltaic panels, where appropriate. This paper describes two aspects of the Church's response, a 'Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon' document aimed at parish communities, and a set of Best Practice Guidance for architects and surveyors. Responding to the climate crisis will necessarily result in changes to these buildings. The paper argues that such change need not be seen as a threat, but rather anticipated as normal to the lives of living heritage. But in order for these changes to be successfully integrated, they must be made in continuity with the tradition that formed these buildings, being framed as a theological question, as a 'mark of mission'. Such change should strengthen the connections between people and heritage places, to the benefit of both.

Keywords: sustainability, living heritage, Church of England, change, tradition

### Églises Paroissiales Anglaises et Durabilité

Les 16 000 églises paroissiales d'Angleterre représentent un patrimoine vivant exceptionnel. En règle générale, elles ont connu plusieurs épisodes de changement, ce qui leur a à la fois permis de survivre et leur a donné leur caractère hors du commun. La prise de conscience croissante de la crise climatique – et la reconnaissance de cette crise par l'Église d'Angleterre elle-même – conduit à d'autres changements, y compris, par exemple, la mise à niveau des matériaux et l'installation de panneaux photovoltaïques, s'il y a lieu. Cet article décrit deux aspects de la réponse de l'Église, un document « Chemin pratique vers un bilan carbone net » destiné aux communautés paroissiales, et un ensemble de conseils sur les meilleures pratiques pour les architectes et les géomètres. Répondre à la crise climatique entraînera nécessairement une modification de ces bâtiments. Le document soutient qu'un tel changement ne doit pas être considéré comme une menace, mais plutôt anticipée comme fait normal de la vie du patrimoine vivant. Mais pour que ces changements soient intégrés avec succès, ils doivent être réalisés dans la continuité de la tradition qui a formé ces bâtiments, formulés comme une question théologique, comme une « marque de la mission ». Un tel changement devrait renforcer les liens des personnes avec les lieux patrimoniaux, au profit des deux.

Mots-clés: durabilité, patrimoine vivant, Église d'Angleterre, changement, tradition

### Iglesias Parroquiales Inglesas y Sostenibilidad

Las 16.000 parroquias de Inglaterra representan un patrimonio vivo excepcional. Por lo general, han experimentado múltiples episodios de cambio, lo que les ha permitido sobrevivir y les ha dado su carácter sobresaliente. La creciente conciencia sobre la crisis climática - y el propio reconocimiento de la Iglesia de Inglaterra de esta crisis - está dando lugar a más cambios que incluyen, por ejemplo, el acondicionamiento de materiales y la instalación de paneles fotovoltaicos, en su caso. Este artículo describe dos aspectos de la respuesta de la Iglesia, un documento "Camino práctico hacia el carbono neto cero" dirigido a las comunidades parroquiales, y un conjunto de guías de mejores prácticas para arquitectos y topógrafos. Responder a la crisis climática necesariamente resultará en cambios en estos edificios. El documento argumenta que tal cambio no necesita ser visto como una amenaza, sino más bien anticipada como normal a la vida del patrimonio vivo. Pero para que estos cambios se integren con éxito, deben realizarse en continuidad con la tradición que formó estos edificios, siendo enmarcado como una cuestión teológica, como una "marca de la misión". Dicho cambio debería fortalecer las conexiones de las personas con los lugares patrimoniales, en beneficio de ambos.

Palabras clave: Sostenibilidad, patrimonio vivo, Iglesias de Inglaterra, cambio, tradición

---

\* contact: [nw@archangelic.com](mailto:nw@archangelic.com)

Available in the ICOMOS Open Archive at <https://openarchive.icomos.org/id/eprint/2918>

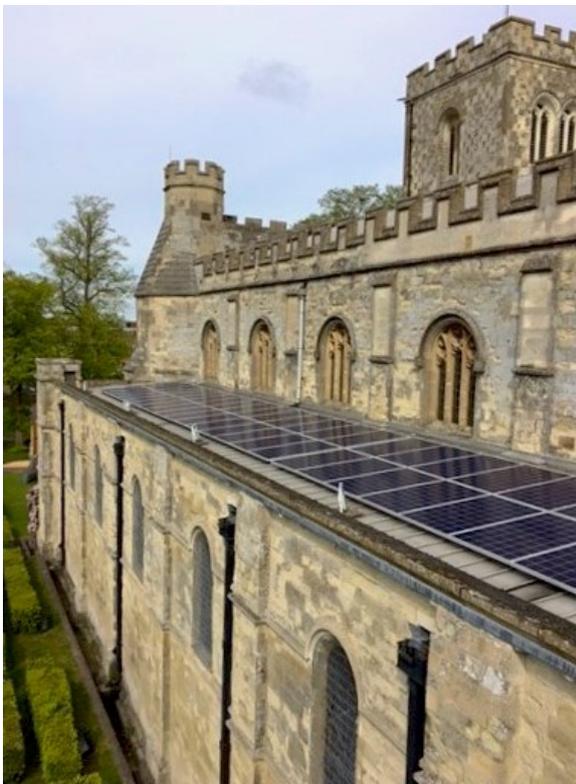


N. Walter  
"English Parish Churches and Sustainability"

England has some 16,000 parish churches, which collectively form an outstanding body of living heritage. 78% are listed, and half are medieval – and of all the highest grade I listed buildings, fully 45% are churches and cathedrals. Through the parish system, all churches are ‘owned’ by their local community – by whoever happens to live in that parish, not just those who choose to be involved with the church – and are still in use for the purpose for which they were built. Moreover, while there are a few that stand unchanged from when they were first built, those are very much the exception; more typically, these buildings are the product of multiple episodes of change, often over many centuries, and at the hands of multiple designers and craftsmen. It is this ability to alter and adapt to changing needs through time that has enabled them to survive and now gives them their complex biographical character.

Demand for change in these multi-authored buildings continues. While permission to alter protected buildings (listed building consent) is generally granted as part of the secular planning system, six recognised denominations, including the Church of England, enjoy 'ecclesiastical exemption' from secular listed building control, precisely in recognition of living heritage status of these important buildings. Under this exemption, each denomination operates its own system for the granting listed building consent; in the case of the Church of England, which has by far the largest number of listed churches, this is known as the Faculty Jurisdiction (Mynors, 2016; Walter, 2020a, pp. 110–123). (Any external changes to churches still require planning approval in the normal way.) The faculty system is

administered at the diocesan level, with each diocese having a Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) of conservation professionals, heritage experts, and clergy who vet applications and provide a recommendation of approval or refusal to the ultimate decision-maker, the diocesan chancellor.



*Figure 1. Photovoltaic panels on south aisle of Dunstable Priory © Diocese of St Albans and Dunstable PCC*

Of late – and arguably rather too late – we have all become increasingly aware of the climate crisis and the urgent need to reduce our carbon footprint. In February 2020, the Church of England officially recognised this crisis and called on all parts of the Church – including the parishes – to plan towards the highly ambitious target of “net zero carbon” by 2030. If this is to be achieved, it will clearly require a change to many historic buildings – including, for example, the addition of air source heat pumps or photovoltaic panels (e.g., Figure 1), where appropriate. In response to the 2030 commitment, work has been ongoing to make revisions to the Faculty Jurisdiction system in order to reduce the

N. Walter  
"English Parish Churches and Sustainability"

barriers to church communities wishing to install sustainability measures and to make those measures that incur harm to the environment – such as replacing an oil-fired boiler like for like – more difficult (Humphreys, 2021). Furthermore, the Church of England's Church Buildings Council (CBC) has been busy developing a range of resources to aid progress towards the 2030 target; I will discuss two of these in this paper.

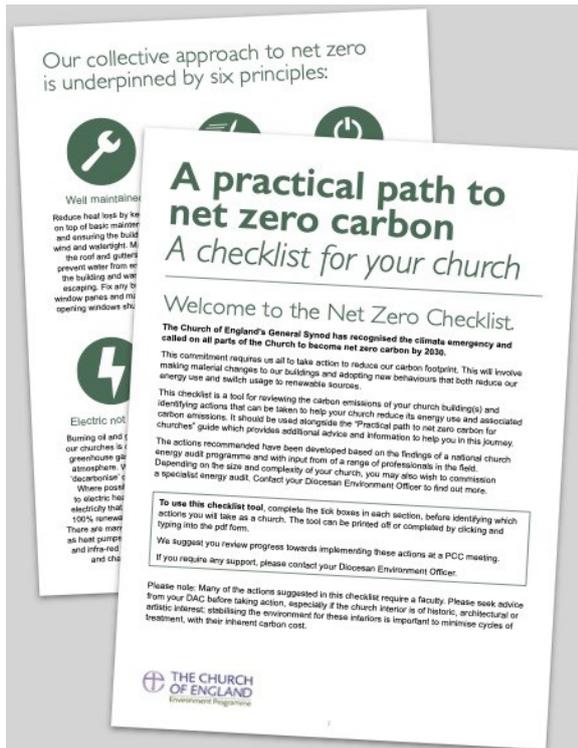


Figure 2. The Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon  
© CBC

## The Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon

The first of these resources is the 'Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon', a document created by Catherine Ross, the Church of England's Open and Sustainable Churches Officer (Church of England, 2021). Building on the findings of a church energy audit programme, this provides graded recommendations to help church communities reduce their energy use and associated carbon emissions.

The 'Practical Path' document packs a great deal into just two sides of A4. Importantly, the document starts by pointing out that many of the suggested items require faculty permission and constantly stresses the need to seek professional and DAC advice before making any changes. Some 50 suggested actions are graded into the following categories:

- **A. Where do we start?** – These are simple actions that nearly all churches can benefit from, whatever their intensity of use. They are relatively easy, have relatively fast payback, and include such simple things as basic maintenance of the building itself, fitting LED lamps, and switching to renewable energy sources.
- **B. Where do we go next?** – These actions are more aimed at churches with medium energy usage that are used more than once a week; perhaps half of the churches are encouraged to consider them. The actions typically cost more than in 'A' above, and/or require more time and thought; some require some specialist advice and/or installers. Examples include considering alterations such as insulation in existing roof voids, creating a draught lobby, and creating separately heatable smaller spaces, all where the building lends itself to these solutions.
- **C. Getting to zero** – These are bigger and more complex projects, which only busy churches with high energy use are likely to consider. While they offer substantial reductions in energy use, they also require substantial work and have both a longer payback and a greater carbon cost. These include further insulation of the fabric, new LED lighting systems, and installing photovoltaic panels, again where appropriate.

N. Walter  
"English Parish Churches and Sustainability"

- **D. "Only if..."** – These are actions undertaken at specific times (such as part of a reordering) or in very specific circumstances and typically require professional advice and DAC input. Examples include adding insulation during a reroofing project, changing the heat source, and installing electric vehicle charging points where there is parking on church land.
- **E. By exception** – Finally, the document does not stop at recommendations, but also lists a handful of frequently discussed actions that are typically not recommended because of the risk of irreversible harm to historic fabric, etc.

English parish churches come in all shapes and sizes and, crucially, vary significantly in intensity of use. This calls for quite different measures in different places, and the document succeeds in addressing a wide variety of such situations. The beauty of this graded structure is that it allows churches to start with the 'A' items and, over time to progress through the list, selecting only those actions that are appropriate to their particular building and situation. Clearly this short document can never hope to be the last word on sustainability in historic churches; rather, its role is to encourage churches to make a start, and then to provide a framework for ongoing discussion and the raising of ambition.

The 'Practical Path' is targeted specifically at parishes. Alongside the original two-page document, there is an expanded self-audit checklist version, and it is anticipated that church communities will begin to initiate discussions using that as a basis. Further, because it is user-friendly, the 'Practical Path' also offers an excellent tool for use by conservation professionals seeking to encourage their churches to engage with sustainability issues in a responsible manner, while avoiding harm to their historic buildings.

### Best Practice Notes

A second resource, developed within the last year, is a set of Best Practice guidance specifically aimed at church architects and surveyors, which aims to capture and share sustainability best practices. This was developed jointly by the CBC and the committee of the Ecclesiastical Architects & Surveyors Association (EASA), a professional body founded in 1872 to promote good standards of design and repair for those working with church buildings across all denominations. This initiative flowed from a recognition that, since part of their role is to carry out the regular quinquennial (five-yearly) inspections each church is required to have, church architects and surveyors already have both knowledge of these buildings and a strategic relationship with their church communities. This makes them uniquely well-positioned to help parishes engage with sustainability issues and to advise on the practicalities of possible sustainability measures.



Figure 3. Best Practice Notes © CBC

Two Best Practice Notes have been developed under this initiative, one addressing project work and the other quinquennial inspections (EASA, 2021), in recognition that the two types of work are approached in quite different ways and typically raise distinct sets of issues. Both notes aim to embed sustainability as part of the professional's regular duties, rather than as a separate function or service. The approach taken is to provide a frame of reference for the professional, first to spot appropriate opportunities for sustainability improvements, and second to guide churches that have this ambition, but typically do not know where to start.

### **Project Works**

Project works, of course, take a wide variety of forms, from significant reorderings and extensions through substantial programmes of repair. Such projects often present opportunities for improving sustainability, and the Project Works Best Practice Note offers a framework to ensure that such opportunities that do naturally arise are not missed. Beyond that, it aims to encourage proposals that are well thought through, to assist applicants in creating supporting documentation that is well argued and appropriately presented, and thus to improve the quality of applications passing through the permissions process.

To that end, the recommendation is that the case for any sustainability measures should be integrated into the Statement of Needs, one of the two key documents needed for any proposed change, rather than being presented as an additional separate document. (The other required document for all applications is the Statement of Significance, the purpose of which is to record what is important about the existing building and why (Church of England, 2020; Walter, 2015). It is recommended that the Statement of Needs makes explicit reference to the sustainability principles behind proposals, anchoring them in government and specific diocesan policy. Given the living heritage status of these church buildings, this rationale will naturally and necessarily include explicit theological justification. In the specific case of sustainability proposals, this will involve an articulation of the fifth 'mark of mission' – 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth' (Anglican Communion, 2020) – as a 'public benefit' to be balanced against any 'harm' to the significance of the building.

The Project Works document starts with seven principles that apply to any project before considering others that would apply to specific types of project, such as roof replacement, solar panels, reorderings, etc. The renewal of heating systems is a classic area of intervention: changing from an oil or gas heat source to electricity, combined with moving to a 100% renewable supply, typically offers a very substantial carbon saving, and should be high on the agenda for any alteration project. The Note ends with recommendations on monitoring and data gathering to help inform design work and a selection of useful links and resources.

### **Quinquennial Inspections (QIs)**

These inspections, carried out by a conservation professional every five years, look at the condition of the fabric and systems of the church, including the churchyard and any associated buildings, and result in an illustrated report with a prioritised list of maintenance actions and an indication of possible costs. Because of their regularity, QIs

present another key opportunity to support churches in reducing their carbon footprint, and one that applies to every church building, not just those planning project works. Again, the focus of the Note is on considering questions of sustainability during the normal course of the inspecting architect's or surveyor's duties, rather than presenting a further, potentially onerous layer of complexity.

Just as much as with project work, the 'Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon' document offers a valuable aid, and the Note recommends that this is sent to churches in advance of the survey visit, discussed on site, and included as an appendix in the report. The QI Note also provides two sections of recommended standard text for inclusion in the report: one to introduce sustainability issues for inclusion in the preamble and the other for a suggested 'Countdown to 2030' section to summarise the sustainability-related recommendations.

### **Change as Threat and Opportunity**

The above examples of documentation entail an explicit acknowledgement that responding to the climate crisis will result in changes to England's historic parish churches. For those conservation professionals who focus primarily on material authenticity and its preservation, such change can only be seen as harmful to the significance of these buildings. However, I would argue that such change need not be seen as a threat. The significance of these buildings lies not only in their physical fabric, nor indeed only in their social and communal value, but in the nexus – literally the binding together – of those two, of people and place. Continuity of change (within tradition) is one of four forms of continuity that are characteristic of living heritage (Poulios, 2014, pp. 115–119; Wijesuriya, 2015). Precisely because these are living buildings, they can therefore be expected to change (Walter, 2020b).

The key issue in deciding whether change is destructive to or constructive of the heritage is the extent to which that change belongs within the continuity of the tradition that formed the building and of which it is a direct expression (Walter, 2020a, pp. 124–148); hence the importance, in the case of protected churches, of engaging with the theological culture undergirding them, as with the fifth 'mark of mission' discussed above. Constructive change of the sort described can be expected to strengthen the connections of people with their physical heritage – to the benefit of both – and this is a key determinant in the survival and flourishing of living heritage. But this is also of relevance beyond the confines of any one tradition, having the potential to place the Church in a position of cultural leadership, particularly with younger demographics, and with the promotion of intercultural dialogue. The key is that any implemented measures take their place within that living tradition, in this case, on the basis that care of creation is understood as a legitimate and essential part of the mission of the Church.

### **References**

Anglican Communion (2020) 'The Anglican Communion's Five Marks of Mission: An Introduction', *Anglican Communion News Service*, 4 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.anglicannews.org/features/2020/02/the-anglican-communions-five-marks-of-mission-an-introduction.aspx> (Accessed: 22 April 2023).

N. Walter  
"English Parish Churches and Sustainability"

- Church of England (2020) *Statements of Significance and Needs*. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/statements-significance-and-needs> (Accessed: 22 April 2023).
- Church of England (2021) *The Practical Path to Net Zero Carbon for Churches*. Archbishops Council. Available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/net-zero-carbon-church/practical-path-net-zero-carbon-churches> (Accessed: 22 April 2023).
- EASA (2021) *EASA - Sustainability & Net-Zero Carbon*. Available at: <https://www.easanet.co.uk/index.php/resources/sustainability-net-zero-carbon> (Accessed: 22 April 2023).
- Humphreys, J. (2021) 'The Role of the Faculty System in Achieving Net-Zero Carbon Emissions by 2030', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 23 (1), pp. 50–66. doi:10.1017/S0956618X20000642.
- Mynors, C. (2016) *Changing Churches: A Practical Guide to the Faculty System*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Poulios, I. (2014) *The Past in the Present: Living Heritage Approach - Meteora, Greece*. London: Ubiquity Press.
- Walter, N. (2015) 'On Statements of Significance', *EASA Transactions*, 8, pp. 1–10.
- Walter, N. (2020a) *Narrative Theory in Conservation: Change and Living Buildings*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Walter, N. (2020b) 'The Narrative Approach to Living Heritage', *Protection of Cultural Heritage*, 10: pp. 126–138. doi:10.35784/odk.2443.
- Wijesuriya, G. (2015) *Annexe 1: Living Heritage: A Summary*. Available at: [http://www.iccrom.org/wp-content/uploads/PCA\\_Annexe-1.pdf](http://www.iccrom.org/wp-content/uploads/PCA_Annexe-1.pdf) (Accessed: 22 April 2023).