

Lord Mawson to ask Her Majesty's Government whether they have considered co-locating public services in under-used church buildings.

My Lords there are nearly fifty thousand church buildings in England; 16,200 of these belong to the Church of England. The rest are mostly owned by the Catholic Church, the free churches and other denominations. Many sit on prime sites at the centre of their communities yet they are often large and under-used.

My Lords there is a growing trend to return church buildings to their original function not just as places of worship but also places of assembly, service and celebration for the whole of their community. This ancient tradition, as the Bishop of London reminds us in the Report "Churches and Faith Buildings: Realising the Potential", has in more recent times been overlaid by distaste for mixing sacred and secular but this dichotomy is increasingly being challenged. This under-used asset base is considerable but because of shortness of time I want to focus my words today on church buildings and not on properties owned by other faith communities. As socio-economic conditions get tough and public finances are inevitably reduced, we need to relook at this property portfolio.

My Lords, I know from many years of experience working with churches across the country, and as a now non-stipendiary minister in the United Reformed Church, that the users of these buildings are often small elderly congregations who find it very difficult to maintain or use effectively the asset that history has bequeathed to them.

As many of you will know, the Bromley by Bow Centre, which I founded in East London began in such unpromising circumstances. Twenty six years ago I arrived as the Minister to be greeted by twelve elderly people all over seventy who were sitting in a 200 seater church, sitting where they had always sat and it looked as though the dead had been carried out with no one noticing.

By applying more entrepreneurial business principles and developing partnerships with the business, public and voluntary sectors, today we own a three acre site which is run by 177 staff. The Centre manages over 125 different activities each week and on site there is a poly clinic, which brings together not just the bio-medical model of health care but also a wider range of other public services through an integrated approach. Two thousand people each week pass through the site, and with our partners, housing company Poplar Harca and Leaside Regeneration Ltd., we are putting together a £1 billion regeneration programme on an area of land the same size as the Olympic site on the other side of the road.

My Lords today this church based project has demonstrated new ways of delivering public services which are breaking ground and challenging the traditional silos of government: silos whose old fashioned bureaucratic approaches have so often failed to engage effectively with local residents and raise their quality of life.

My Lords, three years ago I was approached by the then General Secretary of my small denomination the United Reformed Church. The church was becoming increasingly concerned about the scale of the problems it was facing with the condition and efficient use of its 1700 buildings. I was told that many of these were listed and were a drain on limited resources. A serious problem which called for a new solution.

Three and a half years later my colleagues and I have created a new property agency for the URC called One Church 100 Uses, and here I must declare an interest as a director of the company. This Community Interest Company is now actively involved in the redevelopment of over thirty church sites across England. Working with the Church of Scotland, as well, we find that they too share similar problems. Yet underneath the apparent difficulties, we are discovering opportunities.

What we have discovered are the rich rewards that appear when local communities begin to provide services for themselves. Not only does it save money, it creates healthier more responsible people, stimulates an enterprise economy which in turn encourages social cohesion. Not a bad win-win scenario.

The Church is fundamental to this outcome. Indeed, the Church has always played a central role in the care and service of local communities. The idea of the servant church goes back 2000 years. Those successful recent amendments to the Equality Bill illustrate that there is still a stomach in the Christian churches for us to play this important role. In past times, the Church was coming to this caring/provider agenda from a position of authority and power – today it comes to it from a position of weakness and vulnerability and maybe this in itself is an opportunity.

If the Church stops hiding behind committees and Archdeacons and instead shows strong business-like leadership, it can play an important neutral role in bringing the partners to the table. Opening up conversations with the health provider, the local authority, the school, the housing provider and the shop. We are doing just this on a number of sites across the country.

My Lords, the church, the local school and the health centre are often the only long term stable players in a local community as governments change and countless new policies pass our door. Successive new policies can further fragment local partnerships and can prevent positive action but few Ministers stay around long enough to observe the practical consequences of all this activity.

Politicians on all sides have been talking the language of joined up thinking but often it is not happening where it is most needed. Building partnerships is a complicated business especially given the contradictory and disconnected commissioning processes that are in place. The connections and partnerships that could bring these buildings to life, deepen community cohesion and use limited funds far more efficiently is just not happening. I could illustrate this in

Glasgow, Bradford, Oldham, Gainsborough and Poole in Dorset, but there isn't time. Believe me My Lords it is a serious issue.

After sixty years of the State promising and failing to provide, let us encourage choice and diversity – let's not assume that the public sector are going to deliver it **all**, they are not. In hard economic times people have to huddle together for warmth. In rural communities, the pub, the church, the post office and the village hall are often not sustainable on their own. That is why there are now 12 Post Offices in Anglican church buildings and in one of our developments we are looking at a police base within the church.

My Lords let me describe just one example of a working partnership on the ground where we hope to develop some of these themes:

Harmans Water, Bracknell: The community centre across the square from the church closed due to health and safety concerns. There is a small library next to the church that is only open 16 hours a week. A new housing development brings some section 106 funding and a whole new community. The church, which is home to both URC and Anglican congregations already hosts a range of community services and has insufficient space.

With the support of the local authority and Bracknell Forest Homes (the local housing association) our plan is to build a new centre for community with a wide range of community facilities, services and a new library. There will still only probably be a librarian for 16 hours a week, but it is hoped that the library, perhaps next to a new café, will be accessible for more hours with self-service and will be joined by many other information providers. The police want a help point and the local children's centre, the primary school and college need a kitchen where families can learn about healthy living etc.

So what my Lords are the key messages I would like the Minister to take away from this debate.

Firstly, the credit crunch has caused many large scale regeneration projects to stall. I am involved in a few of them. However, often smaller scale local developments involving church buildings and the clusters of buildings around them are being missed. Developments like this are less risky and can provide a real opportunity to lift the local quality of an area. But they can only happen if everyone huddles together and pools their budgets.

My Lords to grasp these kinds of local opportunities we require focused leadership both in the public sector and the churches, these projects do not happen by chance. We need practical politicians experienced in the workings of the world. Church based redevelopments can provide them with an opportunity to redefine the role of the politician as the practical person and the bringer of partners to the table. This is where our politics will be renewed; not here in Westminster.

My Lords New Labour say they believe in community. But often what this government has done is produce lots of strategies, policies, committees and

legislation rather than get involved in the practical realities of a local neighbourhood. I see little evidence that any future government has woken up to this opportunity either. Politicians need to be grounded in real projects: the micro and the macro are connected as any business person knows.

My Lords I am seeking to present today to Your Lordships House an opportunity, which can enable us to get more efficient use out of limited public funds, bring life to under-used assets and create social cohesion and a spirit of enterprise in some of our most vulnerable communities.

Finally My Lords, I would like to offer the Minister a 'learning by doing' opportunity. Would he and his department be interested in working with us on some local pathfinder projects so that we learn the lessons together, which can then be shared with the churches and public sector? To HM opposition I would say, isn't it developments like this that provide a practical opportunity in communities to explore what statements about a post-bureaucratic world might actually mean in practice?

My Lords I thank the Minister for taking part in this debate and for my helpful discussion with the noble Earl Lord Cathcart. I look forward to hearing what they both have to say.