

The Future of Religious Heritage

by Caroline Donald

Crispin Truman is a busy man. Not only is he chief executive of the [Churches Conservation Trust](#), which has so far saved nearly 350 historic churches in England, he is chairman of the Heritage Open Days committee and a governor of a large East London comprehensive. Since 2009, his diary has been even fuller, as he was one of the founders of and chairs the Future for Religious Heritage. This is a network of organisations in more than 30 countries across Europe and beyond, set up to find ways to keep churches, synagogues and mosques from dereliction. It started informally in 2009, with a conference of like-minded organisations in Canterbury in 2010 and launched officially in 2011, with bases in London and Brussels.

The aims are strictly secular though. “The FRH is pan-religious, not faith based,” says Truman, when I meet him at the CCT’s blandly modern offices in Kings Cross, central London (I had rather hoped it might be a converted church). Financing comes from several sources, including private donations, grants from bodies such as the Headley Trust and participation in schemes such as the Leonardo programme. “We cut across governments, civil society and the church. We don’t want to belong to any institution.”

Although religious organisations are among its members, the aim of the network is provide information and support in order to help save the buildings that have been at the heart of their respective communities and could continue to be so, even in an age of dwindling congregations. So, members may be architects, historians, representatives of religious bodies, academics or policy makers. Whether it is a programme concentrating on their historic contents, or an internet app bringing together all of Europe’s religious heritage into one site for visitors to use, it is about conserving the buildings and keeping them used as a social hub.

There are many examples of buildings being used for the arts or even to house a business centre, as long as the activities are appropriate to a space that was, and in some cases, still is consecrated – “benign secular use,” as Truman puts it. There is, for example, even a Grade I listed church in Bristol that is home to a circus school.

Tourism can be another key factor in the buildings’ survival, as the buildings are often as impressive, beautiful and of historic significance as, say, a castle or stately home – and, as Truman points out, built for the community as a whole, rather than a privileged elite. Think of all those lovely churches in Florence, Venice and Rome, for example, once packed with worshippers from all walks of life and now thronging with visitors who have more often come to admire the frescoes and cupolas than to say a prayer. But the fact that they are there, making donations or sometimes paying for entry, helps to keep the buildings going for the community in which they are situated and have been so for hundreds of years.



There are many reasons why a religious building might be endangered. Increasing secularism is the most obvious, but perhaps government funding may have shrunk, or the population that used it has moved away. In Sweden, for example, the separation of church and state has led to a decline in church funds, while in Germany, young people are opting out of paying the church tax towards which their parents would have contributed. When the vast majority of the German-speaking population of Transylvania in Romania were allowed to return to Germany in the 1980s, they left their beautiful fortified Lutheran churches deserted. Or, paradoxically, in Eastern Europe, it might actually be the revival of a robust orthodoxy, as huge, spanky new churches are built, while the old ones are often left to rot.

It is also not so much about people not going to pray, but about not going out at all. As they communicate more and more electronically, they stay by their computers or televisions, cosy and warm in their own house. “Public participation is in decline, not just for religion,” says Truman. “I think there is a very clear case for religious heritage in Europe. The buildings have housed generations of community activity: the local ID is embodied in them. If looked after, you will have a stronger community in the widest sense. I am optimistic, though there are a lot of threats.” Once gone, these buildings are lost for ever to the landscape and the community. Imagine a landscape without the spires, domes or towers that have stood there for hundreds of years.

There is also the sustainable case that surely it is better to use an existing building than build something new, although people have to get over the religious barriers. The Church of England, for example, has long been open to sharing the space with secular concerns, keeping in the artifacts of religion, while the Catholic Church, on the other hand, is less keen. In Belgium and the Netherlands, hundreds of Catholic churches are closing, their altars and rood screens removed. “It tends to be more dramatic there, as they don’t have a tradition of mixed use.”

The FRH has held three conferences addressing various issues, the latest in Halle, Germany, in October 2014, which looked at sustaining rural religious heritage in particular.



“The church is often the last ‘civil society’ building left; that’s why we need to save them. They are not always anachronistic buildings from the past; it is where everyone can come together,” says Truman. The conferences don’t come up with a proscriptive plan; they provide a meeting place of minds to share ideas and learn from each other. “The solutions are mixed and there is no one answer. FRH isn’t in a position to tell anyone what to do. It is about enabling, steering and strengthening. It gives you strength, confidence and ideas.”

For more information on the Future for Religious Heritage, visit frh-europe.org

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