

People Fully Alive: Ely 2025

– a strategy for growth

*A study course based on the “five levers”
devised for the South Leightonstone Group of Churches
Lent 2017*

Lever 4: **RE-IMAGINE** our buildings

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.’

JACOB IS ON the road. Stopping for the night he sets up camp and after a while he falls asleep. God meets him in a dream. In the morning Jacob wakes and realises that the place he chose to rest was a special place, a place where the Lord became real to him in a way that he hadn't known before. He says, 'Surely the Lord is in this place. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'. It's a wonderful, vivid picture. Gates always lead somewhere. This gate led into the very presence of God. Our church buildings can be gateways into God's presence. Celtic Christians talked about 'thin places' – places where heaven and earth seem very close. Many of our church buildings have this numinous quality. But, as the story of Jacob reminds us, the experience of God's nearer presence isn't limited to houses made with human hands. God is free to reveal himself to anyone, anywhere.

Our strategy recognises that church buildings continue to draw and inspire people, even those of little or no explicit religious faith. It also recognises that some of our buildings are an insupportable burden to the 'church' in the proper sense of the word – the Body of Christ. There is often a tension between the desire to maintain a building, the needs and limitations of the church community, and ambitions for wider mission and ministry. There is no one-size fits-all answer to this dilemma; but it cannot be ignored. What we need is greater clarity about the current options and resources available to us; and perhaps we need to create some new ones. By 2025 our church buildings must be more than monuments to our Christian heritage; they must serve the needs of the church today. We cannot afford to let them become 'toxic assets', draining the church of badly needed time, energy and resources.

DEVELOPMENT AND MODERNISATION

Over the years church buildings have been extended, adapted, reshaped and re-imagined. This process continues today with the introduction of kitchens, toilets and other facilities designed to make them suitable for contemporary use, as well as internal reordering to give greater flexibility. Projects like these are not only about opening up our buildings for greater use, they are also about maintaining them as 'thin places' – places of encounter, with one another and with the divine. Our strategy recognises the importance of helping parishes to develop and modernise their buildings, working in partnership with ecumenical friends and other community bodies.

SUSTAINABILITY AND CHANGING USE

The future of many of our buildings depends on finding new ways to fund maintenance and development. Our strategy is to help parishes explore new

partnerships, set up ‘Friends Schemes’, etc., and to engage fully and robustly with national initiatives concerning the future of church buildings. We will also ask deaneries and parishes to conduct an audit of all their buildings and to adopt a planned approach to their future (taking account of facilities provided elsewhere in the community too). The audit may confirm the need to sustain some churches in their current use, and indicate ways of making this happen over the medium to-long-term. It should also help congregations and deaneries to identify those churches whose current level and type of use is unsustainable. Some churches may become ‘hubs’, centres of activity and focus, surrounded by a number of ‘festival churches’ or ‘chapels of ease’, where worship and fellowship is still supported, but on a less frequent basis. It is possible that some buildings may be given over entirely to other uses, or closed, while their church communities move to other venues, such as homes, schools or village halls. This would be a last resort, of course, and needs to be managed in a careful and planned way, with local consultation – there is no diocesan ‘hit list’

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Part of the Church of England’s mission is to be ‘a presence in every community’. The new housing developments springing up all over the diocese pose a sharp challenge to this core aim. It is unlikely that we will afford many new church buildings, so the strategy must consider other ways to maintain a ‘presence’ and create ‘thin places’. Talking to developers and other partners will be important, as will partnership between old and new church communities. Insights and initiatives from new communities may provide inspiration for older ones too, as they consider what a sustainable future might look like.

In what ways does our church / do our churches already address the issues raised?

What could / should we do better?

What would be hoping to achieve?

How much needs to be thought about and instigated as an individual; at a parish level; at a group level; at a deanery level; at a diocesan level...

Who has the expertise to guide these ideas?

What resources do we have, and how could we use them?

PERSONAL RESPONSE SHEET:

Are there comments you wish to make or suggestions you want to put forward in response to any of the issues raised in this session?

- *To what extent do our current buildings serve as “thin places”?*
- *What sorts of ‘other’ uses do we see for our buildings?*
- *How do we see the building being used in ten or twenty years time; and what changes will be necessary?*
- *How, in practical terms, do we balance heritage and mission?*
- *In an increasingly un-churched world, how do we make our buildings suitable centres for outreach?*
- *and...!*