

Launch of the National Churches Trust

Statement from Dr Richard Chartres, Bishop of London

Chairman of the Church Buildings Division of the Church of England

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Four years ago, I spoke at the Historic Churches Preservation Trust's 50th Jubilee celebrations. I reflected then on the invaluable contribution made by the Trust in its first 50 years, raising and distributing millions of pounds for essential repairs to historic and inspirational places of worship. Today, while I am sorry I cannot be with you in person, I am particularly delighted to be celebrating the landmark evolution of the organisation into the National Churches Trust, a body which will not only champion the importance of preserving and restoring Britain's ecclesiastical heritage but, crucially, one which will support and enhance the fundamental role that churches play at the heart of communities up and down the country.

Too often the question of historic churches is simply seen as a heritage issue. It is, of course, that but so much more than that. Churches were originally built for the whole community and the Church regards this wider role as more crucial than ever before in 21st century Britain. There are churches running crèches for young mothers, operating drop-in centres for the homeless, providing facilities for local schools, attracting income from tourism - some are even running rural post offices. These are vital public services which serve the entire local community without exception.

Ultimately, however, these churches need financial recognition for the contribution they make, as well as investment to maintain their upkeep and to help them realise their full potential. Regular giving by congregations has increased by 8% a year over the past four years. Local churchgoers and their communities contribute some 70% of what is currently being spent on repairs - but this leaves a significant shortfall to make up. When you realise that the Church of England alone is responsible for 13,000 listed buildings nationwide, you begin to understand the scale - and of course the cost - of the task in hand. And of course the scope of the Trust is even wider than Church of England buildings.

This is why today's announcement bears so much significance. Our churches are evolving, and must continue to adapt fully to meet the needs of our 21st century communities. In turn, the evolution of the National Churches Trust brings renewed hope that Britain's churches will continue to thrive, prosper and in turn bring added strength to the communities they were founded to serve.

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