

What can the Twenty-First Century Church Learn from the Victorians?

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The legacy of the Victorian church is literally all around us. In Exeter and Plymouth – in common with other substantial English cities – the townscape is punctuated by prominent churches built or rebuilt during the Victorian era, for example St David's, St Leonard's and St Michael's in Exeter; St Jude's, St Matthias and St Peter's in Plymouth. At the same period many medieval churches were restored or reordered, for example having box pews replaced by benches or organs installed. Alongside such physical legacies is the organizational legacy of new parishes and dioceses, most notably here in the south-west, the creation of the Diocese of Truro in 1876. Moreover the internal diversities of the Church of England, the distinctions of High and Low, Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical and Liberal assumed something close to their present form during the Victorian years. Our worship too owes much to the Victorians, in the creation of cathedral choirs in their present form, in the music of composers such as S.S. Wesley, John Stainer and Charles Stanford, and the hymn texts of writers such as John Henry Newman, Henry Francis Lyte and Francis Ridley Havergal. Significant features of the liturgical calendar such as carol services at Christmas, and harvest festivals are traditions largely invented by the Victorians. The wider social and cultural mission of the church also continues to be shaped by the Victorians, through their foundation of numerous church schools and mission and welfare organizations.

On the other hand there are also significant ways in which the twentieth and twenty-first century church has emphatically rejected the legacy of the Victorians. As a child growing up in Exeter in the 1960s I recall being very conscious of the looming physical presence of St Mary Major church crowding the western side of the Cathedral Green, and its demolition in 1971 appeared a welcome opening up of the space, especially with the excitement of the discovery of the Roman bath house in its foundations. Viewed in a longer perspective however, the destruction of St Mary Major barely a century after it was entirely rebuilt and reconsecrated in 1867 looks perplexing. If additional church accommodation was needed in the 1860s, surely it was needed even more in the 1960s when the population of the city has doubled over the intervening century? And when like the nearby cathedral, St Mary Major defiantly and almost miraculously survived the onslaught of Nazi bombs in 1942, there is a somewhat bitter irony in its succumbing a mere generation later to the Church of England's own decision that it was now surplus to requirements. Should the fate of St Mary Major be regarded as a judgement on the misplaced optimism of the Victorians, or as a testimony to loss of nerve and faith in the mid-twentieth-century church?

There is thus a tension implicit in the title I have chosen for this lecture. Quite obviously the present-day church was fundamentally shaped by the Victorians in a wide variety of different ways. For some indeed the Victorian era still seems something of a golden age, and the subsequent perceived problems of the church in the twentieth century was the consequence of a failure to maintain its vision and standards. For others though, the suggestion that we might actually have something to learn from the Victorians is liable to appear surprising and retrogressive. Surely, it may be objected, circumstances have changed so much in the 110 years since Queen Victoria died, that the real need for the contemporary church is to move on from outdated approaches and attitudes and respond to the realities of the twenty-first century? Not only should we be prepared to demolish and sell, or at least drastically remodel Victorian churches that have now served their purpose, but we should also subject inherited patterns of worship and institutional behaviour to radical revision, presupposing that they are a hindrance to effective mission and ministry in the contemporary world.

My intention in this lecture is to advocate a middle course between uncritical enthusiasm for the past, and wholesale rejection of it. I do so from the perspectives both of an academic historian of the Victorian church, and of an active Anglican churchgoer and former churchwarden. My overall argument will be that the twenty-first century church CAN learn from the Victorians, but from their mistakes as well as their successes, and more subtly from setting the current situation in the long-term perspective provided by recent historical research, which offers an improved understanding of nineteenth century contexts and the possibility for informed comparison with the present-day church.

My thinking on these matters has been substantially advanced by my leadership over the last two years of Building on History, a knowledge transfer partnership funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, between the Open University, Kings College London, the Diocese of London and Lambeth Palace Library [www.open.ac.uk/buildingonhistory] . We have been running a succession of seminars and training events for different groups in the diocese, and have developed a web-based resource guide for churches interested in gaining a better understanding of their history to inform current ministry, as well as an enquiry for its own sake. During the current final year of the project we are hoping to share insights from the project with other Anglican dioceses and Christian denominations, so the opportunity to speak on this topic in Devon is an especially welcome one. I shall say more later on about how the experience of this project is showing how history can become a practical resource for church leaders and congregations. It is also appropriate to acknowledge the contribution of other members of the project team and of the various groups in the Diocese of London with whom we have worked to the thinking that has gone into this lecture.

In the main body of the lecture, I should like to approach the Victorian situation from two angles, both of which can usefully inform present-day thinking and action. First I want to explore what we know about nineteenth-century patterns of churchgoing; and secondly to

examine some the strategies adopted by the Victorian Church of England in seeking to respond to massive population growth and widespread religious indifference.

The main source of evidence on Victorian churchgoing is the 1851 Census of Religious Worship. This was a unique survey of attendances at every identified place of worship conducted on 30 March 1851. For some parts of the country its evidence can be supplemented by surveys from later in the century, both by newspapers and in bishop's visitations, but for Devon it appears to be the only surviving document that gives us any systematic idea of how many people went to church. As a survey it was flawed in many ways: there were no legal sanctions to ensure the return of forms and a significant proportion of churches, among them Exeter Cathedral, failed to do so. Where forms were returned they were often incomplete or vague: some respondents omitted to give the key figures on attendance; others offered suspiciously round numbers that were clearly more or less optimistic estimates. Crucially too, even where forms were completed carefully and exact headcounts made, there was no mechanism for identifying individuals who attended twice or even three times on that single Sunday. Accordingly, depending on what assumptions one makes about the proportion of afternoon and evening churchgoers who had already attended in the morning it is possible to argue that the census showed the proportion of the population who went to at least one service was anything between 26% and 61%. Commonsense informed by various hints in the detailed analysis of the returns suggests a figure around the middle of that range, probably about 40%, but that is ultimately no more than an educated guess.

However one of the most interesting features of the census is the opportunity it offers for making comparisons between different regions and localities, and in doing so to gather some clues as to the factors that influenced churchgoing and non-churchgoing. Once one starts to do so, easy generalizations and assumptions rapidly break down. Churchgoing was often higher in towns than in the countryside, and industrial areas sometimes fared better than rural ones: for example the West Riding of Yorkshire was more observant than Herefordshire. It was true though that the highest attendances were found in a group of rural and small-town counties in east central England – Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire – while some of the lowest attendances were in the largest cities, Birmingham, London and Manchester.

The complexities are well illustrated by the case of Devon, which as a whole had attendances somewhat above the national average, slightly higher than in Cornwall and Somerset, and slightly lower than in Dorset. Attendances in Exeter though were well above those in the county as a whole, with the city ranking third nationally out of the 65 large towns for which figures were given in the census report, with only Colchester and Merthyr Tydfil showing higher levels of churchgoing. Plymouth was located around the middle of the table, well below the county average and somewhat below the national average. It was still though much more observant than London or the major northern and midland industrial towns, with attendances comparable to, for example, Bristol and Chester.

The comparison between Devon's two major towns is worth pursuing a bit more. Not only were overall attendances lower in Plymouth, but the proportion of Anglican ones was also significantly smaller, 44.5% compared with 64.7%. In Exeter, the combination of numerous churches and relatively slow population growth meant that the Church of England was much better placed than in rapidly expanding Plymouth, where there were many fewer existing churches. The available churches in Plymouth were well-attended, with for example morning congregations of 1420 at St Andrews and 1036 at Charles Church, but the pressures were well illustrated by the inclusion of a return for a 'Room in the Union Baths licensed by the Bishop of Exeter', which was 'nearly full' with a congregation of 100.

Under such circumstances the expansion of Nonconformity should be seen not so much as conscious dissent from the Church of England but as a demonstration of the capacity of the religious free-market to make a substantial contribution to bridging the gaps in state provision. The 1851 Census provides a snapshot of a period where the Church of England was trying hard to make up lost ground, with three churches in Plymouth - Christ Church, Holy Trinity and St Peter's - opened in the preceding decade. From the point of view of local communities though, Victorian Anglican churches could sometimes look like intruders into a religious landscape in which Nonconformity already had a long-standing presence. This was especially the case in Yorkshire, where W.F. Hook, the great early Victorian vicar of Leeds, wrote in 1837, shortly after his arrival in the town that 'the traditional or established religion in Leeds is Methodism'.

If one looks more closely at the rich local detail provided by the individual returns - which survive in the National Archives, and have now been published for a substantial proportion of counties, including Devon - the contrasts between adjoining and superficially similar parishes are striking. In Yorkshire, which I have studied most closely, and where the evidence of the census can be usefully supplemented by visitation returns from the 1850s and 1860s, it is clear that superficially trivial factors really did make a major difference. Many rural medieval churches were inconveniently situated because settlement patterns had changed over the centuries, and in the squally early spring weather that prevailed on 30 March 1851, it is clear that the prospect of a soaking and the need to negotiate muddy unmade roads on foot in Sunday best were significant disincentives to devotion. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, published forty years later in 1891, Thomas Hardy makes the point well, as he describes the walk of Tess and her friends to Mellstock Church:

The crooked lane leading from their own parish to Mellstock ran along the lowest levels in a portion of its length, and when the girls reached the most depressed spot they found that the result of the rain had been to flood the lane over-shoe to a distance of some fifty yards. This would have been no serious hindrance on a week-day; they would have clicked through it in their high patterns and boots quite unconcerned; but on this day of vanity, this Sun's-day, when flesh went forth to coquet with flesh while hypocritically affecting business with spiritual things; on this occasion for wearing their white

stockings and thin shoes, and their pink, white, and lilac gowns, on which every mud spot would be visible, the pool was an awkward impediment. They could hear the church-bell calling--as yet nearly a mile off.

Moreover rural churches were especially liable to be damp, and cold in winter. A further widespread problem was the system of appropriated pews, which meant that even when there were vacant seats in a church newcomers might not be allowed to use them. For example at Raskelf, in the Vale of York, the incumbent reported:

There is a want of free sittings, which deters many (as they allege) from attending..... The natural claiming of customary seats occasions unpleasant removals or disputes when the free sittings become filled, as is frequently the case at afternoon service.

In towns too, a major problem was the uneven distribution of churches in relation to contemporary needs. On the one hand were expanding suburbs that lacked local provision; on the other over-churched historic centres where resident populations were already declining. In Exeter, despite its overall very high levels of churchgoing, it is evident that some of the city centre churches were already struggling to maintain viable congregations: St Martin's, St Mary Arches, St Pancras, St Olave's, Allhallows and St Mary Steps were all only half full or less. The pastoral consequences of such over-provision were well described in an 1845 rural dean's report on central York, a city even more copiously supplied with medieval churches than Exeter, which condemned 'the habit of wandering from church to church, and in very many instances to the Dissenting Chapels'. A poignant example of the impact of such behaviour on an individual church is provided by the census return for St Helen's York, where the elderly incumbent reported that after he arrived in 1815 he had built the congregation up from a mere seven people, to fill the church, which seated 400. However in the mid-1840s:

My voice ... failed me, and two adjoining Churches, which before then had only afternoon service, being required to have morning service also, about half my congregation consisting of persons belonging to these two parishes gradually left, and took their places in their own Churches. Then my advanced years, the failure of my voice, and several other evening lectures having since been commenced in different parts of the city, and one very near, where there is a popular preacher, were the chief causes why my congregation are now so much reduced.

What implications would I draw from all this for the contemporary church? I should like to make three main points before going on to explore something of the Victorian response to the situation they faced in their own day. First, it is important to challenge the widespread popular myth that there was a Victorian golden age of churchgoing. True, a much higher proportion of the population went to church than do nowadays, but it still seems that rather

more than half did not, at least not every Sunday. Many poorly located pre-Victorian churches were struggling, and it is probable that many churches built in the Victorian era were never full, at least not for normal Sunday worship, a recognition that can be reassuring for present-day congregations, feeling a vague guilt at the expanse of empty pews in the side aisles. This can be especially true of rural churches, where the Victorians often undertook substantial rebuilding or extension projects at just the time that local population was declining as people moved to the towns. It has been argued that in the early twentieth century, a sense of church decline became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: in the present-day if the morale of clergy and congregations is to be sustained it is very helpful to be freed from unrealistic expectations founded in an idealized vision of the past.

Second, the 1851 Census points to the specific and contingent nature of many of the factors leading to growth and decline in individual churches. Such an observation is very consistent with present-day experience where one can similarly observe growing flourishing churches close to struggling and declining ones. In other words the historical perspective reinforces awareness that human agency (or inaction) is a crucial factor. I would not want to appear to deny the influence of wider social and cultural trends on the one hand, or the potential for the working of the Holy Spirit on the other, but a key message from the historical evidence is that the long-term destiny of individual churches and parishes is much more in their own hands than is sometimes acknowledged.

Third, I would suggest that an awareness of historical context and continuities and discontinuities in the local community can be very helpful in informing a church's sense of its role in contemporary society. A consciousness that a church was struggling even a century and a half ago, may make it easier to accept the inevitability of its redundancy, or to spur creative thinking about alternative approaches to ministry and use of the building. Conversely, evidence of past success may well be a useful stimulus to constructive critical reflection on the contemporary situation. Are declining congregations perhaps a consequence of a failure to respond sufficiently flexibly to a changing local community – for example the 'gentrification' of a formerly working-class neighbourhood, or the arrival of substantial ethnic minorities? More subtly, it is worth reflecting on ways in which the continuing ethos of a church may be shaped by its origins and historic role, for example in exploring the enduring differences between an ancient parish church, that has been physically at the centre of its community since the early Middle Ages, and a Victorian daughter church constructed on a side street where a plot of land happened to become available in a district where Nonconformist chapels were already well-established.

So I turn, in the second main section of this lecture, to consider the Victorian church's own response to the evidence of widespread non-attendance. As I have already touched upon, building and rebuilding churches was a central preoccupation. At a national level, the number of Church of England churches and chapels increased from under 12,000 in 1831 to well over 17,000 in 1901, an impressive net increase of nearly 50% over 70 years, especially one remembers that alongside the construction of entirely new churches, there was

extensive rebuilding, extension and restoration of existing structures. This is all the more impressive as it was achieved entirely with private donations supported by the church's inherited endowments: after the 1820s it was no longer practical politics to obtain public funds for churchbuilding. It is true that in money terms, the building cost of a decent Victorian church was about comparable to the purchase price of a small car nowadays, but in real terms one needs to apply a multiplier of around fifty to get a sense of the equivalent in today's money. My rough calculation would be that in early twenty-first century values, the Victorian Church of England raised something between £3 and £5 billion just for building new churches, a striking achievement by any standards. Subscription lists suggests that while wealthy large donors contributed much, there was usually at least in towns also the broad-based middle class support indicated by contributions of a few pounds, or a few hundred pounds in today's values. It is worth noting though that there are indications that newly-built churches could subsequently become victims of what would nowadays be termed 'donor fatigue'. It appears that donors – both large and small – were more ready to contribute to large one-off capital building projects than to sustaining the regular ongoing ministry of the new parishes.

And was the money well spent? In many cases, the answer must surely be 'yes', when one reflects on the number of Victorian churches still in active and successful use. In Exeter, even if the rebuilding of St Mary Major looks in retrospect like a mistake that took little account of the wider picture of church provision in the city centre, suburban Victorian churches like St Leonard's, St David's and Heavitree have surely proved their worth over the last century. The case of Exeter though well illustrates the somewhat hit and miss nature of Victorian churchbuilding, which precisely because it was largely dependent on private finance, was shaped by local influences and the leverage exercised by substantial donors. Bishops played an important role in offering general encouragement and guidance, but were seldom in a position to impose any overall strategy. The church-building impulse was however driven by the axiomatic underlying assumption that it was essential to create defined parishes of manageable scale, with a view to placing the church at the centre of communities that would then come to identify with the church.

In the countryside moreover there was extensive investment in building and rebuilding churches against a background of stable or even declining local population. It has been argued that the landowners and others who financed such building were often motivated by factors other than rational assessment of pastoral need. They wanted to assert their own status in the community, promote a particular churchmanship or defiantly affirm an idyll of village Anglicanism that was in reality already in serious decline. For example, the inappropriately grandiose parish church at Kingston in Dorset, built in the 1870s, prompted the caustic observation from the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner that the third earl of Eldon, who had financed it, 'regarded it as a Christian duty to provide a new church, not to be commensurate with congregations, but with his own means and his own dignity'.

In the early Victorian decades there appears at times to have been a naïve assumption that it was sufficient merely to build and staff churches, and that local people would naturally then start to attend them. The fallacy of that assumption was decisively exposed by the 1851 Census, although it must already have been apparent to clergy working on the ground. Hence in the later nineteenth century strategies became more sophisticated with, characteristically, initial planting of a congregation in a mission hall, schoolroom or rented building before a church was built, with funds for it being raised from the congregation and local community as well as external well-wishers. Nevertheless there were still occasions on which determined donors could overrule such gradualist approaches, as at St Cuthbert's Philbeach Gardens in west London, constructed in defiance of existing parochial structures, without an obvious immediate pastoral purpose. At All Saints, Durham Road, in north London the vicar of the mother church, Holy Trinity East Finchley, was in 1892 less pleased than might have been anticipated when the opportunity arose to build the new church sooner than anticipated. He complained to Bishop Frederick Temple:

The congregation will have to be created from the beginning, the vicar's original proposal to put up an Iron Church with a view to collect the congregation having been overruled by the conditions of some large donations.

Schools were usually integral to mission strategies. Thus half a century earlier at Holy Trinity East Finchley, the opening of the church was immediately followed by starting a school in a cottage, and launching an appeal for a proper school building. 'The CHURCH', a subsequent report proclaimed 'must be united with the SCHOOL'. The building was started in 1847 just a year after the church itself opened and was in 'active operation' the following year. The school was intended to be a place of moral and spiritual as well as academic and practical instruction, and it was hoped that non-churchgoing parents would be reached through their offspring. The report claimed that the school had played a major role in achieving the moral and spiritual transformation of what had hitherto been a rough unchurched community.

The efforts of the Victorian Church of England were motivated not only by an aspiration to reach the unchurched but also by intense competition, not only with Nonconformists and Roman Catholics, but also between church parties within the church itself. Anglicans were united by a sense of need to maintain a position as the dominant, if not monopolistic Christian tradition, if they were to stave off the threat of disestablishment. On the other hand they were divided by theological and ecclesiological controversy as to the best means of securing that end. For High Churchmen the imperative was to assert Anglican identity and tradition as a branch of the historic universal church, for Evangelicals it was essential to sustain the Protestant character of the Church of England, and for Broad Churchmen to build a national church that was as comprehensive as possible, even if doctrinally imprecise.

The Diocese of Exeter in the Victorian era was a significant focal point for these tensions. The three Bishops of Exeter who successively presided over the diocese during the Queen's

reign were also representative of the three main church parties. The formidable High Churchman Henry Phillpotts had become Bishop of Exeter in 1830 and was still in his prime when Victoria came to the throne in 1837. He lived until 1869 when he was succeeded by the leading Broad Churchman Frederick Temple. Following Temple's translation to London in 1885, the prominent Evangelical Edward Henry Bickersteth became Bishop of Exeter, remaining until failing health forced his resignation in late 1900, just a few months before Queen Victoria herself died.

Despite their obvious theological differences Exeter's three Victorian bishops had much in common. They all had enormous energy and commitment and were prominent instigators of what Arthur Burns has called 'the diocesan revival in the Church of England'. Indeed Phillpotts and Temple both responded heroically to the challenge presented by their then vast and undivided diocese, stretching as it then did from the Somerset border to the Isles of Scilly. Phillpotts was probably the first Bishop of Exeter actually to visit Scilly, while Temple in May 1875 travelled overnight from Penzance in order to lecture the Prime Minister, Disraeli, on the need for a Cornish see, only to be disarmed by the great man saying with exaggerated politeness, 'You must be very tired; *won't you sit down?*' The subsequent creation of the diocese of Truro gave Bickersteth a more manageable task than his two predecessors, but he took the opportunity to give closer attention to Devon, where diocesan institutions were notably strengthened during his episcopate, with, for example, cathedral canons being assigned defined diocesan responsibilities.

Nevertheless church party tensions also loomed large in the south-west, especially during Phillpotts's episcopate. His attempt to enforce the wearing of the surplice in the pulpit provoked riots in Exeter in 1844 and then between 1847 and 1850 the diocese became a storm centre of wider tensions in the Church of England as the *cause celebre* of *Gorham v The Bishop of Exeter* made its way through the courts. George Gorham was an Evangelical whom Phillpotts refused to institute to the living of Brampford Speke near Exeter on his account of his allegedly unsound doctrine on the question of baptismal regeneration. The case came to be seen as an essential touchstone of the theological identity of the Church of England, and the eventual judgement of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in Gorham's favour led to the conversion of Henry Manning and others to Rome. Phillpotts, for his part, announced that he would excommunicate the Archbishop of Canterbury, who had concurred in the judgement, if he proceeded to institute Gorham over his head. This pronouncement does something to set current tensions in the church in perspective! In my view though, it is important to see the Gorham controversy in a diocesan context: Phillpotts was committed to reform and uniformity on his own terms, and clearly saw Gorham as a disruptive influence. His more considered response to the Privy Council judgement was the convening of the Exeter Synod of 1851, which in addition to affirming the Bishop's view of baptism, engaged extensively with practical matters of diocesan reform and management. It was a landmark in the revival of English diocesan synods, which had not met since the seventeenth century.

Meanwhile in the late 1840s and early 1850s church party tensions became particularly acute in Plymouth, where the Evangelical Vicar of St Andrews, John Hatchard, was at odds with innovators inspired by the Oxford Movement, the Devonport Sisterhood, founded by Lydia Sellon, and George Rundle Prynne, incumbent of the newly formed parish of St Peter's. Phillpotts's sympathies were more with Sellon and Prynne than with Hatchard, but their highchurchmanship was more advanced than his, and he eventually withdrew his support.

Following Phillpotts's death in 1869, Frederick Temple's nomination to the bishopric provoked church party tensions of a different kind. A decade before, Temple had been one of the seven contributors to *Essays and Reviews*, which was perceived as a provocative manifesto of liberal theology and biblical criticism. While it was hard to find anything objectionable in Temple's own essay, there was still substantial unease that a bishop should be associated in this way with the more radical views of the other essayists, notably Benjamin Jowett with his dictum that the Bible should be read like any other book. Temple stood his ground refusing to withdraw his essay until the formalities of his appointment had been completed, thus raising the possibility that the Exeter Greater Chapter might take the drastic step of refusing to endorse his nomination by the Crown. In the event, he was duly elected by 13 votes to 6, and the controversy then subsided.

During the three remaining Victorian decades party tensions in the diocese of Exeter lessened, although in 1874 and 1875 Temple was drawn into protracted litigation with the Dean and Chapter of Exeter over the legality of a new reredos in the Cathedral. Otherwise though Temple's commitment to a comprehensive church, and Bickersteth's accommodating personality which overlaid his firm Evangelical convictions ensured that issues that might have proved explosive in Phillpotts's day were handled more pragmatically. In this respect Exeter differed from other dioceses where the campaigns of the Church Association against ritualising clergy led to a series of divisive court actions, culminating between 1888 and 1892 in the prosecution of Edward King, the Bishop of Lincoln.

We may seem to have moved some way from the discussion of church building, but my underlying point is that such controversies drew their intensity from underlying theological divergences about the nature of the Church of England and accordingly the way in which it could most effectively engage with the wider society. In that sense they reflected the same missionary impulse that prompted such extensive church building.

So, in the light of all this, there are a further three implications I should like to draw out for the twenty-first century church. First, divisions and controversy should not automatically be perceived as negative, as especially in the first half of the Victorian period they were indicative of an energy and dynamism that inevitably generated varying responses to common problems. Viewed in this light Bishop Phillpotts's often misunderstood attempts to impose uniformity on his diocese may actually have been more divisive than the problems

he was trying to solve. Nevertheless the Victorian era also provides ample examples of controversies that ultimately proved sterile and introspective, especially when the parties resorted to protracted litigation. The past does not suggest any straightforward models for handling present-day divisions on rather different issues, but I do believe that it offers useful perspective and an important resource for wise reflection on how to handle even profound disagreements in ways that are ultimately creative rather than destructive for the wider ministry of the church. In particular the effective outcome in the Victorian period was usually the acceptance of a diversity of views and approaches within the Church of England.

Second, there is surely perspective here for informing contemporary decisions about the care and development of churchbuildings. As a churchwarden I had the experience of trying to mediate quite profound disagreement on a PCC as to whether a substantial windfall capital sum should be spent entirely on improvements to the building or whether a small proportion of it at least should be invested in people to enhance the ongoing ministry of the church. I hope I am not being unduly jaundiced in suggesting that such incidents illustrate how a preoccupation with buildings is a continuing feature of Anglican organizational and spiritual DNA. Of course there are very real dilemmas when the roof starts to leak or the ancient boiler ultimately breaks down irreparably, and very real anguish if it is suggested that an undistinguished Victorian building which is nevertheless hallowed by time and association might have become surplus to contemporary requirements. More positively, improved facilities can often offer enhanced opportunities for mission. Nevertheless I do think there is scope for stepping back from what might be termed 'the bias to the building' inherited from the Victorians, in the light particularly of an awareness of the intentions and expectations of the original builders. In some cases the exercise might inspire a renewed sense of purpose, in others cool analysis might suggest that original strategies are now outdated or unrealistic, and that radical alternatives should be considered.

Third, I return to the value of historical perspective for informing the setting of realistic expectations in the present. Inspired by the highest ideals, clergy and congregations now as then are naturally prone to be discouraged by seeing the glass as more than half empty rather than at least partially full. Later Victorian Christians were prone to expressing a sense of failure when they realized that aspirations for the evangelization of the whole nation were not being fulfilled. Historians have perhaps been too prone to take them at their own estimation or to judge them by their long-term legacy, and discount very real achievements. For example, a well-publicised scheme implemented between 1839 and 1854 to build ten new churches for the east London district of Bethnal Green, has been readily judged a 'failure' by later Victorians and historians alike, because in the long-term manifestly did not bring the majority of the population of the area into regular churchgoing, and only two of the ten new churches remain open for worship today. However, judged by the objectives of its original promoters, it was more successful, in somewhat increasing churchgoing, and raising the moral and social character of the area between the 1830s and the 1860s. If the Bethnal Green scheme made mistakes, these lay primarily in the balance of investment

between permanent churches, and more flexible forms of ministry that might have better served the mid-nineteenth century generation. Many of the new churches proved difficult to maintain and ultimately surplus to requirements in an area where the majority of the population is now Muslim. My point is that informed historical perspective may actually encourage the contemporary church to focus on what CAN be achieved in the present and immediate future, rather than being trapped on the one hand by a mis-placed sense of obligation to the past, or on the other by a sense of responsibility to an unknowable future, that may well turn out very differently from anything we can realistically anticipate.

Before concluding I should like to tell you a bit more about the resources developed in connection with the Building on History project, which we hope can be a significant resource for those who would like to explore ways in which enhanced historical understanding can be of service to the present-day church. I am distributing a leaflet which gives the website address and other information as to what we are about. On the website you will find a variety of ways in, aimed variously at clergy and others who want quickly to investigate the historical background to a contemporary problem, at those writing a parish history, and at those with an interest in the wider historical themes. In collaboration with the diocese of London we are encouraging parishes to undertake a history audit alongside a contemporary-focused community audit, in order to gain a more informed sense of their present-day context. We would also want to encourage a vision for parish history as a community-building exercise, engaging all age groups from primary school children to the elderly. We carried out a very successful pilot project with a church school in north London, where we provided some resources that then provided a basis for teaching that encouraged all classes to look at the church building with new eyes. At the other end of the age range, the elderly may welcome the opportunity to translate their memories into informative oral history. It may initially seem a limitation that our resources, in line with our original brief, are focused on the diocese of London, but we feel that there is a concept here that could readily be customised or supplemented effectively to support similar activity in other dioceses. Indeed one of the outstanding tasks for the remaining year of the project is to explore more specifically how this might be achieved.

I recently heard a preacher observe that 'Christians of a nervous disposition should not listen to sociologists'. I trust any sociologists present will not be offended, as the comment was a tongue in cheek one. The point though was a serious one, which is that statistics that seem to plot inexorable Christian decline can be seriously demoralizing, especially when they are framed in the context of a secularization narrative presenting that decline as inexorable and irreversible. In recent years sociological views of religious change have become more contested and nuanced and the secularization paradigm is not as dominant as it was two or three decades ago. Nevertheless the conclusions of sociologists and statisticians remain profoundly disturbing for anyone concerned about the future of the church in this country. My response in this lecture has been to suggest ways in which a more purposeful engagement with a longer term history may well be helpful in addressing this

situation. I would argue that Christians of a nervous – or any other – disposition need to be prepared to engage with the past, in order to avoid unwittingly perpetuating it or unthinkingly rejecting it, but rather seeing it as a valuable resource to inform current and future mission and ministry.