

Church: St Laurence, Brundall

Interviewee: B3

Date: Friday, 10 July 2015

1. NW: So can you just tell me how long you have been incumbent here at the church.
2. B3: In August I'll have been here 2 years.
3. NW: Right, OK. And you've obviously got this very pretty little church behind the vicarage here, what's your sense of the role that the church plays for the community? Both the church community, and the wider community.
4. B3: The role the church building plays?
5. NW: Yes.
6. B3: The church building is one of those things that many people within the community don't attend church but if you were to try and do anything with it, certainly there are a lot of what I call 'stakeholders' who make themselves known. So it's held very dearly within the community. I think there has been a disconnect between what we've been trying to do as a church and the community, which I think bridges are now being built, so that's been positive.
7. NW: With respect to the building, do you mean, or...?
8. B3: Well I think people don't see any difference between the building and the church, the community, that is. So, yeah, we're doing things as a church that people feel quite positively about, then they'll look positively at the building, so the two I think go hand in hand. In terms of those who attend church on a regular basis, the congregation, I think again there's quite a split in terms of... The church is held very dearly, but people recognise that actually the church building has limitations to the worship that we would like to be able to engage in in the twenty-first century. I think that's the best way of describing it. There's a sense of cherishing the building. So that in itself brings issues I think, whenever you want to do something with the building.
9. NW: In an ideal church building, what pattern of worship would you have, what would you be wanting to do?
10. B3: Well, we've embarked on building a family of congregations where we offer a variety of different worship styles. The space inside the building is limited, and so instead of building big congregations, we've committed to increasing the number of congregations, so we have smaller units of congregations that worship with different styles. So personally I would like to see a worship area that is flexible, or could be used flexibly, much more flexibly than [what] we've got now. We recognise that we'll never fit in the hundreds of people, and I'm quite comfortable with that. But I do think...
11. NW: Is the capacity of the building about 100?
12. B3: Totally it's 130. But then you get into issues of not being able to see people, of people feeling disconnected because of the geography of the building and so on. The other thing that really interests me when we're talking about developing the

use of any church building is that there are people who think it's been like that for years – well it has been like that for years – but actually it has been changed over the centuries, and people forget that I think. That I think is quite interesting.

13. NW: Can you outline for me your understanding of the building project that came along and failed before you came into post? Can you outline your understanding of it?
14. B3: Yeah. From what I understand, and I haven't got the full picture by any means, it was a project that was developed over quite a number of years. People have been talking for a long time about needing to increase the capacity within the building, and at the time it appears that the current building was at capacity, and you had to get there quite early for a church service if you wanted a seat. From what I understand what was planned was quite a modern extension that would seat 200. And the current church would almost become like a side chapel within that. The building would include toilet facilities, meeting or counselling rooms, and so on. And so it wasn't a small extension, we're talking a large addition to the current building. So the discussions had happened even before my predecessor, from what I understand, and it was my predecessor who continued to build on those, until it became apparent that actually it wasn't going to be possible.
15. NW: Because they'd got to a planning application that was refused, I think.
16. B3: I think it had gone twice to planning, and had been refused from what I understand, but yes, definitely it had been refused. But I think for me it was more than that. It was about ill feeling within the community as well, and I think that needed – and was – listened to. Because it's alright having a building, but if the community don't want it and won't have it, then it's not going to get used, is it?
17. NW: So you are coming into this situation after the event, but you don't see it as a great shame that it failed?
18. B3: No, not at all. And in seeing the plans, I can understand why people were concerned about the scale of it. I have made it very clear that had the building happened and they'd have had 200 in there as a congregation, it wouldn't have been a church, it wouldn't have been a position, that I would have applied for. Because I just believe in smaller congregations, and actually building community that way. So for myself I think it would have been built with a background of ill-feeling in the community, and that would have been a real issue I think. For me the church is about being used by the community, and I know for a fact that the community [laughs] would not have used it had it gone ahead.
19. NW: Or at least parts of the community. Was it a monolithic opposition to it, or were there different views?
20. B3: I'm sure there were different views, I don't know. They had by the sounds of it quite a coordinated opposition in terms of what it would mean for the village, yeah. And part of the problem is that I think it was seen as [that] the scale of it was too much for many of the residents within the village.
21. NW: So in terms of your vision for multiple smaller congregations, the church in its current form, with conventional pews, is suitable for some of those, I guess, but perhaps not all of them?

22. B3: Some of them, yeah, [but] not all of them. And again I've not made any secret of the fact that over the next few years we'll be seeking to reorder the church. I wouldn't be seeking to increase the footprint of the church. But bringing that flexibility through chairs. One of the suggestions is that we have a toilet, and all that sort of thing, but actually I think it can be incorporated within the building that we've got.
23. NW: And then you've got the two, one temporary and one hexagonal...
24. B3: Yeah [laughs] yeah, yeah.
25. NW: ...buildings outside, which do more community type stuff, is that right.
26. B3: Yeah, the Church Room, which is the hexagonal one, is used really heavily and we've just embarked on a programme of refurbishment for that. And that's used as cafés during the week, youth cafés, cafés for older people, it's used ever such a lot. And for me that's really the hub of our missional work to the community.
27. NW: Is there an issue for you around that being a separate building to the church, or not?
28. B3: For me, no. That said, it would be nice if the flexibility was in the church building, but actually there's no reason that we couldn't run something in there. I don't really have an issue with it being separate.
29. NW: OK, thank you. How would you describe the character of the building, the existing church building?
30. B3: How would I describe the character? I do think it's full of character. I would call it your traditional village church. Which again one of the reasons for the extension was that when it was built would have served the community quite well in terms of capacity. Now we're heading up to 5,000 residents within Brundall, and actually the capacity isn't enough. I think what's its strength is also its weakness. So what you've got here [is] a small idyllic rural church building, but equally that's its weakness. We have people who say they would have got married here but can't because it's not big enough to fit all their guests in. We have services, particularly at Christmas where we have to think really carefully, we have to duplicate services to make sure the capacity is there. But more than that I think the interior of the church, it's not a great church to bring people together, because you've got the north aisle that's separated by pillars, you've got pockets of people around, and it isn't great in terms of bringing people together. And as a service leader you have to work quite hard to bring that sense of worshipping together. On the other hand, it's brilliant if we have a small congregation, or if there's a prayer meeting for fewer numbers, actually that doesn't matter because that sense of... you still fill the church.
31. NW: Yes, you're held by it.
32. B3: Yeah. That's why I say its strength is also its weakness, that we have to work quite hard to overcome.
33. NW: And in a place that is growing...
34. B3: Yep.

35. NW: ...in terms of population, that balance is perhaps changing, is it?
36. B3: What, in terms of...
37. NW: In terms of the weakness becomes more...
38. B3: Oh, more apparent, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And also it's about having a knowledge about exactly what we're going to use the church for outside of Sunday worship services. And that's one of the things we've had to think really carefully about with the Church Room, because we have these different rooms. It'll happen with the temporary building as well, because that won't last forever. What is it that we're going to use these spaces for? Because there's no point embarking on any expensive reordering or refurbishment unless we're really clear about what the use is going to be. Which again, we did that with the Church Room; we spent time [discussing] what is it we're wanting to do, and that then enables us to know what facilities we need, and so on.
39. NW: Do you anticipate that you'll face some of the same opposition when it comes to reordering, or...
40. B3: I wouldn't think so. I think people will be less bothered about the reordering of the internal, and I think also if we can explain to people sufficiently why we want to do it, I think people may not like it, they may not necessarily agree, but I'm not sure they'd oppose it to the same way. I think some of the opposition will come from within the church when we look to reordering.
41. NW: Thank you. I don't know whether you have enough of a sense of the history of the project to know whether it was a good process, aside from the result which was at planning...
42. B3: Yeah, yeah.
43. NW: ...whether or not it was a good process that was gone through.
44. B3: I don't know the full ins and outs. What I do know is that people, even now, felt it was something the church was doing *to* them, so they didn't feel as though they had – I mean obviously they felt they had a voice – but they didn't feel it was their... It was something they felt was happening to their church without their...
45. NW: And is that people within the church and outside...
46. B3: I think both. Even now, even people within church have said that they felt they didn't agree with it but felt they couldn't say anything. So how true that is, I mean that's just anecdotal, but yeah.
47. NW: So was it quite divisive of the church community do you think?
48. B3: Yeah, definitely, there were people for and people against. But I know through conversations that even if people were against they didn't feel they could... they didn't feel their voice would make any difference because they felt it was a journey the church was going on whether they agreed with it or not. Again, whether that's just perceptions, or whether opportunity wasn't given I don't know, but definitely people just felt that it was happening to them whether they liked it or not.
49. NW: And ultimately, presumably for a collection of those reasons, it failed.

50. B3: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And there are people who are saddened about that, and there are people who are relieved about that, even within the church community. So, yeah.
51. NW: Do you think there is an ongoing legacy, or has the community got over that?
52. B3: No, not at all. Not at all. And I think when I came, I knew there were issues between church and community and bridges that needed to be built, or restored. I was not prepared for the length of time people remember this sort of thing for. So now, if we do anything that people may not agree with, then it all comes back up to the surface. 'Well the church was going to do this...' you know, and so on. And people have often reminded me about how the church behaved, how they tried to push through the extension that nobody wanted. Here has a very long memory, very long. And I think the legacy has been really negative, in terms of the church isn't generally – I think we're getting there now – but when I arrived it wasn't well respected, it wasn't thought of very positively. If you tried to hold an event and open it up to the wider community it was like 'We're not going to turn up.' So we've had to work quite hard at reintegrating ourselves within the community. Yes. But there is definitely still a legacy that hangs there.
53. NW: Dave and Roger were talking particularly about opposition from immediate neighbours; are those relationships also still...
54. B3: I think they're more on an even keel. We still have issues with our neighbours. So, we run a youth café, and there will be two neighbours down the Chancel Close side that still have real issues about how we want to use the Church Room. And when you talk to them, it all comes back from the church: 'Well, the church extension, da da da....' But they were some of the most vocal, and from the sounds of it, the opposition, it wasn't always pleasant for the church, or for the incumbent. So I think there's been a lot of hurt on both sides actually, all for a building that really split the community.
55. NW: Do you feel pushed into the same category along with the people that caused that hurt?
56. B3: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. And I've been quite clear that I'm not looking to resurrect the building project as it stood. I've been quite clear that actually we're trying to bring in a new era in terms of relationship with the community. But definitely, there's mistrust there, and I think, will we ever get it back? I don't know. I hope so. But I think the trust that, rightly or wrongly, a priest can often expect in rural contexts, just isn't here. And I don't think that's because we're less rural here, I think it's because it's been used up.
57. NW: On that project particularly...
58. B3: Yeah, yeah.
59. NW: So from your perspective, ultimately that project was, for whatever good reasons it was embarked upon, executed badly, or...?
60. B3: I think from my point of view, and again I don't know all the history, I'm not sure it was executed well. I think the design was the wrong design. It wasn't sympathetic at all to the environment and the churchyard and the history. I think it was far too

big, and actually could have been scaled down, and actually probably that would have been acceptable. I have conversations with people, and even when I arrived, people have said to me, even people who were vehemently against the building project, that they can understand the need for toilets, the need for kitchen facilities, this that and the other; what they struggled with was the scale of the project. And so I think less could have been more, in terms of getting that through.

61. NW: And taking people with you in getting that through, or taking enough people with you...
62. B3: Yes, yeah, yeah.
63. NW: So how would you approach things do you think? If you were trying to do, well you will be trying to do something of broadly the same thing when you come to reorder.
64. B3: What we've tried to do, even with the Church Room, because that's going to have an impact on the neighbours, we've tried to bring them with us, tried to explain what's happening, why we need to do it. I spent a long time before the plans went to Broadland District Council for approval, I spent a long time going down Chancel Close, just saying 'Look, we want you to be aware we're submitting these plans; this is what it will mean, look at... aren't these pictures lovely?' And so really sowing those seeds very early on, before we'd even submitted planning permission. Working with the Parish Council, I submitted the plans to them before they went to Broadland District Council. And so I would want to do the same with reordering the church as well. Actually it's about trying to bring people with us. And also I think being really clear about what difference it would make as well. What would be the benefit for the community? And that's not about increasing the size of the worshipping area for Sunday worship, it's about the things we can do to enhance community life, through the Church Room, and through the church as well.
65. NW: So expressing the benefits of the project in terms that people outside the church can relate to.
66. B3: Yeah, yeah. The benefits for them, rather than just the benefits for the church family, if you like, yeah.
67. NW: And what's the – I'm not familiar with the proposals for the Church Room – you're obviously extending it.
68. B3: We're putting on a modest extension. Because at the moment we don't have any kitchen facilities, so we're building a single storey kitchen there, and then refurbishing the interior, and then reorganising the interior to make it into a disabled access toilet. So yeah.
69. NW: But relatively small changes.
70. B3: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Nothing huge.
71. NW: And the planning application is currently underway? Is that right?
72. B3: No, that's all been accepted, yeah.
73. NW: Were there objectors this time?

74. B3: No, no. Which is great. And we've had conversations since, and for myself I work an open door policy, that I'd much rather people come and talk to me rather than... I don't want letters sent around. Come and talk, and we can sort stuff out. And so people have come and chatted. Some people have been concerned about will we allow parties, this, that and the other. We've chatted that through, and I think we've come to amicable compromises.
75. NW: Very good. With that particular project, did that have to go through DAC or not?
76. B3: Yeah, it's going through at the moment.
77. NW: So it still needs faculty permission, even though it's not attached to the church.
78. B3: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
79. NW: And has that been a good process?
80. B3: Yeah, I think, always, it bemuses the PCC definitely, and at times it bemuses me as to, we can understand it with historic churches, I think there *is* a need to preserve the fabric of the building. And actually the DAC now, I really think is very good at seeing what the need is now, and walking that tightrope between the preservation, but actually understanding what the need is. So I think that the process, and the conversations that we can have, have improved I think. It does bemuse me that we have a 1970s building and it still needs to go through all the faculty procedures, and that we couldn't...
81. NW: Because it's not an attractive building...
82. B3: No, it's not at all, and we couldn't put, we wanted [u]PVC windows but we weren't allowed those, they had to be wood. So you know it's all that sort of thing. And I think 'Oh for goodness sake!' That sort of bemuses me. But generally I've been quite pleased with the conversation. It feels more of a conversation now. Obviously, this is my first incumbency, and so I was less involved probably with faculty applications in my previous place, but it always felt you submitted the paperwork on a wing and a prayer. But here it feels, now it feels much more of a conversation that you can have with the DAC.
83. NW: Your previous place, was that also in Norwich diocese.
84. B3: Yes, Stalham. So yeah. The faculty, that's always a bone of contention for the PCC. I feel quite relaxed about it really.
85. NW: For the PCC, in terms of resenting needing to get permission, do you think?
86. B3: Yeah, yeah. 'Can't we just do it?' You know, it takes so long for a decision to happen. But like I say, I think things like the Church Room bemuses me. But I can understand it with things like the church building.
87. NW: So would you say that the process, and particularly we're talking about the DAC, does allow for appropriate change, but not inappropriate change? Is that it?
88. B3: Well, bear in mind we haven't tried to start to contact them about reordering the interior of the church. But my perception is that they are sympathetic to the needs of the twenty-first century. And I feel, definitely from the diocese, that there has been an emphasis on ensuring that our buildings are used for the wider community. And I think that's very appropriate, that it's not just about making a

more comfortable worship space for a Sunday, but actually it's [about] how we're going to use it for the community.

89. NW: Getting more community activity back into the church.

90. B3: Yeah. And that for me, I just think that goes back to how churches were used centuries ago. Hubs of community. But in this diocese there is a real emphasis for that, and I think that's good, and right.

91. NW: If you had a magic bullet to fire and could change one thing about the process by which we change historic buildings, do you have any suggestion?

92. B3: They've tried to simplify the process, and it's online, and it's this, that and the other. It doesn't seem to me to be that much more simplified. So I think we've got to find a way of reducing of what I would class – I'm sure the DAC would disagree [laughs] – but what I would class the 'red tape'. But doing it in such a way that actually the integrity of the building, and the integrity of those that care for it, can be maintained. I don't have the answer, but I just think it is a clunky system that we have to go through.

93. NW: And what's the cost of that, of it being a clunky system?

94. B3: Well we get people who are disillusioned. Projects take a long time. And I think... I agree that we don't want churches to end up being knee-jerk: you know, somebody has a great idea, 'Yeah let's do it', and it's done. I'm not sure that's right, either. But actually there just seems to be a lot of process to get through. Take the Church Room for us, that we've had it passed by Broadland Planning, but we're still having to go through the process with the DAC. So I just think it's costly for volunteers, I think, for people who give up a lot for the church already. I look at the church building project that was abandoned, and I inherited a weary church, because they had put so much of themselves into not just the DAC application, but the other things that went round, and actually have had nothing to show for it. And so when we talk about refurbishing the Church Room: 'Yeah, alright, if you say so.' So there isn't the energy there, because actually they've been there before to an extent, and they've got nothing to show for it.

95. NW: So the energy that the church needs to survive and thrive is a limited commodity...

96. B3: Yeah, I think so, yeah, yeah, yeah.

97. NW: ... and it takes too much of that, would you say?

98. B3: Yeah, yeah I think so. And it ends up... Because I think it takes energy to apply and to do all what needs to be done, people get re-energised when they see stuff happening. But I think in the case of the building project here, what happened is that they spent all their energy applying and doing all that needed to be done, but then were never re-energised. And I think that's...

99. NW: And presumably money, sacrificial giving...

100. B3: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We could ... yeah ... it's not worth going there, but you could weep, the amount of money that's been spent. And for nothing. Although I think we've learned stuff along the way, difficult lessons about what it means and our

responsibility to community as well. But maybe there are cheaper ways of doing that [laughs]! I don't know.

101. NW: But maybe in the long term very valuable lessons.

102. B3: Yes, and we've certainly approached refurbishing the Church Room, and we will approach reordering the church very differently, because we're mindful of what it means to be the community church, definitely.

103. NW: What do you see as your role in that overall process? Is it around being the one to provide the energy, or the vision, or how do you see it?

104. B3: I think for me it's about being one of those people that try and hold the wider community and the church community together. I think that's an important role. And sometimes I think that means inevitably that you get flack both sides, and that's OK. I think part of my role is about envisioning the church, not in the nitty gritty of we'll get rid of the pews, or we need a toilet, or that nitty gritty, but actually let's have a bigger vision about what the church is about. And let's have a bigger vision of what mission means in this community. I do get concerned at the number of churches that are awarded quite substantial grants for reordering, that actually have no sense, or very little sense, of mission, and what it'll mean, or how it can be used as a tool for mission. I know lots of people complain about medieval churches, and we've got a lot of them in Norfolk, but actually I really see them as an asset for mission, and a vehicle for mission. And I think my role is very much about the broader missional picture, and then from that, well we need this don't we, well, yeah we do, let's make sure the church has that. Rather than starting from actually we'd like comfy seats, I think we've got to start further out.

105. NW: So your role then is safeguarding the missional context for the church as a whole, and making sure that any building project takes its right place within that.

106. B3: Yeah, yes, yeah. And can enhance that missional role, I think. And that for me was part of the problem with the other project, was that it was apparent that actually it was having the opposite effect, and actually was a barrier to that mission.

107. NW: You mentioned before about medieval churches as being, I can't remember the term that you used, but an opportunity...

108. B3: An asset.

109. NW: An asset. Do you want to spell that out a little bit more?

110. B3: I think for me, a lot of churches within these sorts of communities, they're held... there's this funny bond that people have with these churches, and they may not come to church regularly, but it's still their church, that they feel connected. I think there's something important that they've been sites of worship for centuries, I think there's something spiritual about that too. And you look at the architecture of some of these buildings, and you look at the modern architecture, and it's just not on a par really. And I think they can really be used as places of mission, that welcome people in. I look at St Stephen's in town, that actually the way they draw people into their church, I mean that's just one example. but I think we can and we should be really using them as... seeing them as hubs of community.

111. NW: And that there are opportunities there that we are not taking.

112. B3: Yeah. What, do you mean nationally?

113. NW: Yes

114. B3: Yeah, definitely, definitely. I think we've got to return to the roots of the church, where we don't just see it as a place for worship on a Sunday, but actually we see it as the centre of community. And awful though some of these cutbacks have been for communities, actually they've given the Church a real opportunity to serve the community. And I think the challenge for the Church really is whether they're willing to grasp that opportunity and use their church buildings, and reimagine the use of their church buildings as ways of serving community.

115. NW: And it will be interesting to see how your effort to do that with a reordering...

116. B3: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

117. NW: ... plays out, and where those who are uncomfortable with that come from, and no doubt some of those will be within the church.

118. B3: Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. And I think our church is no different to the Church nationally, that actually we're having to take the congregation on a journey of what it means to be Church today. And within that, what role the church building plays for our church. I think it spans even the little things. If the church is used by the community, when does it get cleaned? Does it get cleaned on a Saturday ready for Sunday worship, or actually do we want it cleaned ready for community use on a Monday? And I just think it's little things like that actually we're having to reimagine what church is for, and how it's to be used. And I don't think we should underestimate the journey that the Church, by and large, is having to go on. I think it's easy for people to say 'Well, we just open up the doors.' But actually there's a cost involved as well, I think.

119. NW: But you're hopeful that that reimagination can happen?

120. B3: Yeah, I think so, I do. I don't think it's too extreme to say that I think the survival of the Church depends on it. A lot of people still expect new residents to automatically come to church. You'll have seen as you came in the building site down at the bottom. And I've had a number of people [say] 'Oh, that means we'll get more in the congregation.' No, not necessarily. We've got to go out, and we've got to serve, and we've got to encourage them in, and we can no longer expect people to automatically come to church; those days have gone. And whether we agree or disagree, that's the reality we find ourselves in.

121. NW: How many houses are being built there?

122. B3: 150.

123. NW: So that's 400 people or so.

124. B3: Yeah, something [like that], yeah.

125. NW: Thank you [NAME]. I think we've probably got to the end of our time. I'm most grateful.

126. B3: No, it's my pleasure.