



Friends and Festival Church Conference

St Mary's Church Ely, September 30th 2024

On Monday 30 September, the Church Buildings Department and Association of Festival Churches jointly hosted the 'Friends and Festival Church Conference' at St Mary's Church in Ely. The goal of this conference was:

- To provide training and information about Festival Churches, and help churches to discern whether they should become one themselves.
- To hear more about the work of Friends Groups in our Diocese, and create opportunities for PCCs to understand how and why to start one for themselves.
- To afford Friends Group and Festival Church members the opportunity to meet together, network, and exchange stories, advice, and guidance.
- To continue our commitment of supporting PCC/Friends Groups efforts to widen their organisational sustainability and engagement/support from their parish community.

Attendance

Despite it being a wet and soggy September day, there were just over 40 delegates in attendance at the conference, and several others who interacted with our materials when they were shared online. In attendance were representatives from Friends Groups and PCCs from across the Diocese of Ely, neighbouring Diocese, members of CCT Friends groups, and Support Officers from other Diocese.

Topics discussed

The day was introduced by the Ven. Richard Harlow and jointly led and co-ordinated by Geoffrey Hunter and Samuel Pedlar. The conference was split into two sections with a lunch break in between.



Section 1: Festival Churches

The Festival Church section was led by Nigel Mills from the Association of Festival Churches who explained:

- What Festival Churches are.
- What the advantages of becoming a Festival Church are.
- How a church becomes a Festival church.
- Nigel also emphasised that becoming a Festival Church is:
 - A local decision.
 - A way to do less formal worship - but do it better.
 - A way to allow more people to be actively involved in the management of the church.

Following Nigel's presentation, delegates listened to a pair of fantastic presentations from the Rev'd Andrew Whitehead, who is the incumbent of a Festival Church in Norfolk, St Peter's Haveringland. Andrew was followed by Gavin Cameron from the Rampton Action Group, a group who work to support the maintenance and care of All Saints, Rampton, a Festival Church just outside of Cambridge.

Following a Q&A section, delegates were served a light lunch, during which they were able to attend surgeries during to ask our experts about:

- Festival Churches (Nigel Mills).
- Fundraising (Holly Robinson).
- Models of governance (Geoffrey Hunter).
- Consultation and Engagement (Samuel Pedlar).

Section 2: Friends Groups

The afternoon section was opened with a presentation from the CofE's Head of Church Buildings, David Knight who spoke about the national importance of Friends Groups to help churches to engage with their community, support the PCC's efforts, and make a parish church more organisationally sustainable and accessible.

The conference was then treated to a series of excellent presentations from across the Diocese of Ely and elsewhere including representatives from Friends Groups in rural and urban settings, and those that are managed as a sub-committee of the PCC, and those who operate as a separate charity.

These presentations enabled the delegates to hear different ways that Friends Groups have been established, the different objectives they have, and the various ways that they have fundraised and assisted their PCC's. The key points expressed were:



- Friends groups help PCCs to manage their buildings, fundraise and secure grants, and support the activities of the PCC.
- Friends Groups enable PCCs to feel and be more sustainable, and are a great vehicle of community engagement because they allow community members to get involved with the running of the church.
- Friends Groups should be creative, there is no one size fits all Friends Group model.
- The relationship between the Friends Group and PCC should be carefully managed, and both parties need to make sure that they communicate their goals and roles clearly.

The event and its speakers

The 'Friends and Festival Church Conference' was the largest meeting of Friends and Festival Church representatives that we have held in our Diocese, and the first of a series of such events. It is a demonstration that we are committed to promoting sustainable forms of management of and engagement in church buildings.

The conference had many excellent speakers to whom we are extremely grateful for contributing, these included:

- Ven. Richard Harlow - Archdeacon of Huntingdon and Wisbech
- Nigel Mills – Association of Festival Churches, Development Officer
- Revd. Andrew Whitehead – St Peter's, Haveringland (Festival Church)
- Gavin Cameron – Rampton Action Group, All Saints' Rampton (Festival Church)
- David Knight – Head of Church Buildings, Church of England
- Revd. Paul Hutchinson – St Mary's, St Neots
- Pat Robinson – Friends of the Painted Church, All Saints' Cambridge (CCT)
- Alan Draper – Friends of St John the Baptist, Somersham
- Kate Jackson - Friends of St Clements, Outwell
- Caroline Lewis – Friends of St Peter and St Paul, Alconbury

Each of our speakers contributed to the event and made sure that the conference heard different voices, different perspectives, and important personal stories and reflections that all in attendance could learn from and apply to their own disciplines.



Follow Up

Delegates were polled after the conference and of the replies, the key statistics were:

- The overwhelming majority would attend an event like this again.
- The overwhelming majority had their questions answered about Friends and Festival Churches and came away wanting to learn more about how they could get involved.
- All those polled enjoyed the event and found it informative.

Many delegates commented on how much they enjoyed the presentations from the Friends Group volunteers. This was encapsulated by the following feedback:

“The case studies were especially interesting. Hearing real people describing the challenges and how they overcame them was especially valuable.”

To follow up from the conference, our Church and Community Support Adviser will be writing case studies about Friends Groups across the Diocese which will be posted to our website. Further support for Friends Groups is available through individual assistance by our Church and Community Support Adviser, and by joining our support group – The Church Building Support Network.

Future planned complementary events.

Following the conference, our Church and Community Support Adviser, Samuel Pedlar, will continue to work with our churches to encourage them to consider new models of governance, and explore fresh ways to build their support networks (including the creation of Friends/Action Groups) where applicable. Samuel is available to any PCCs who feel they need more support or would like to better engage with their community.

Similar training events to this will also occur in the coming months across the Diocese. You can stay up to date about Church Buildings events by subscribing to the Church Buildings newsletter and keeping an eye on the Diocese of Ely social media pages and Ministry Mailing list.

Further support and information.

A selection of presentations from the ‘Friends and Festival Church Conference’ have been posted on the building section of our website. You can read more about Friends Groups and Festival Churches by visiting the following websites:

- Association of Festival Churches: www.festivalchurches.org.uk
- REACH ELY: [REACH Ely - Diocese of Ely](#)

Alternatively for individual advice or support, you can email our Church Building Support Officers Samuel Pedlar (samuel.pedlar@elydiocese.org) or Holly Robinson (Holly.robinson@elydiocese.org).

For further support, PCC and Friends Group members are encouraged to join our Church Buildings Support Network, a regular support group that aims to equip and educate those looking after and caring for our Church Buildings. Email Holly Robinson on the address above for more details (<https://www.elydiocese.org/parish-support/church-buildings/church-buildings-support-network/>).