

Flock to church for yoga and coffee

Clergy have given their blessing to replacing pews with space for non-religious activities, writes **Kaya Burgess**

Churches should boost their efforts to double up as community hubs by hosting more playgroups, yoga classes, concerts, exhibitions and cafés, more than 70 per cent of Church of England priests told a Times survey.

The poll of almost 1,200 active Church of England clergy found most respondents wanted churches do more to transform themselves into places where people could gather for non-religious events, activities and amenities.

Analysis found that 250 churches per year were applying for permission to rip out pews, replacing them with foldable chairs that can be moved aside to create space for community groups.

For churches with dwindling congregations, it is seen as a way to raise money while inviting people to a place where they encounter a Christian space and may be inspired to return as worshippers.

Many churches have been criticised by heritage groups for removing pews and fitting modern amenities. Cathedrals have also faced a backlash for hosting events such as fashion shows, crazy golf courses and helter-skelters.

The survey asked priests: "Some churches and cathedrals have been granted permission to alter or offer their buildings for use outside of service times by community groups such as playgroups and yoga classes, for events such as exhibitions and concerts, and for amenities such as cafés and post offices. Do you think churches should be doing more or less of this?"

In response, 71 per cent said they should do more while 21.9 per cent said the present level was "about right". Only 3.7 per cent said they should do less.

It was mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries that churches were fitted out with fixed pews. Before this, nave tended to be open spaces and medieval churches were commonly used not only as places of worship but as a focal point for the neighbourhood, with evidence of markets, dances and other civil functions being held in them.



LIE SMITH/REUTERS



Yoga classes like those held at Durham Cathedral, left, may help to lure people back to church. A café opened last year at All Saints' Church in Leamington Spa, where the pews have been removed to create space for community activities



building. It is difficult to think of any secular activity that has no connection with it."

Emily Gee, the Church of England's director for cathedral and church buildings said: "Our churches and cathedrals have long been, and remain, at the centre of our communities. Church

serve, but with worship and prayer at their heart. We are pleased there is such support for creatively offering community use alongside worship and with the significance of our wonderful buildings in mind."

Meanwhile, 60 per cent of priests had confidence in the Church of England's

form an independent safeguarding watchdog collapsed this summer.

The Times survey asked priests how confident they were "that the Church of England's safeguarding system and policies are adequate".

It found that 60.5 per cent of respon-

saying they were not confident "at all".

The Church of England must also pay attention to the views of Anglicans overseas, the survey suggested. More than three quarters of priests believe that the opinions of the 80 million Anglicans in foreign churches should