

# Beanz meanz packed pews in church

Churches that install shops and post offices are reversing the decline in congregations

Catherine Pepinster

In a village in the West Midlands, the Church of England has uncovered a secret. The national decline in congregations can be reversed with baked beans.

The number of worshippers at St Leonard's, in the Herefordshire village of Yarpole, was down to 25. Then a shop was installed in the west end of the nave.

Pews were removed to make way for business while the altar remained in the east end of the church. Known locally as the "shop in the church", it is open seven days a week and includes a post office, with a cafe in the church gallery.

It soon emerged that people who cross the threshold for commerce also stop by to light a candle and pray. Christmas was wildly popular and the Easter service next Sunday is expected to be packed.

"It seems to stabilise congregation numbers and weddings and baptisms go up," said Becky Payne, who has advised the local diocese on how to turn churches into community hubs. "People start to see the church as part of their lives."

Similarly, when residents of Stadhampton in Oxfordshire and West Hampstead in north London go to church this morning, they will enter buildings already familiar as places for Pilates, ukulele practice or buying stamps.

St James, West Hampstead, features a post office, cafe and play area within the nave with the funds raised supporting a debt advice centre. Jane Edwards, -director of the facilities, said it has transformed a church that used to be open one day a week for 40 people.

"Conversations start about the church among people who would otherwise never come in," she said. "They look at the icons and statues and ask questions."

Income from the lighting of candles for

prayer has risen 10-fold to £3,000 a year. At 20p a candle, it implies 15,000 prayers.

At St John the Baptist, Stadhampton, Sunday service attendance was in single figures despite a community of 800 before lottery and local funding enabled the church to double up as the village hall. Kerri Jones, who helps run events in the hall, said it has transformed village life with a big impact on the church, too.

"I'm Jewish and I was not attached to the church, but I went to the crib service on Christmas Eve," she said. "People feel it is their church. We had a Mother's Day service which attracted many people."

According to the National Churches Trust there are now more churches than pubs in Britain and they are filling the gaps as other local facilities disappear. Official figures show 40,300 UK church buildings being used for worship, compared with 39,000 pubs.

The draw of community-hub churches will be welcome news for the Church of England. In 2017, 722,000 people attended its Sunday services, a drop of 18,000 on 2016. Figures from British Social Attitudes show affiliation with the church, at 14% of the population, is at a record low. It is 2% among young adults.

This month Dame Caroline Spelman, the second church estates commissioner, told MPs the church was spending considerable sums trying to boost attendance and plans to train 1,000 evangelists.

Payne said people should remember that "the whole church is a holy place" and facilities might have to close for a midweek funeral. The Roman Catholic Church is keeping its churches as entirely sacred spaces. They are used all week for mass, not just on Sundays.

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