

Church of England sees its cathedrals at risk

by [Catherine Pepinster](#) in the [May 10, 2017](#) issue

England's cathedrals are often described as the crown jewels of the nation's architectural heritage, yet their future is in doubt following a series of financial crises.

Most of the 42 Anglican cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages as Catholic churches and were taken over by the fledgling Church of England following the English Reformation, when Henry VIII ordered the dissolution of monasteries. Issues of maintenance and repair are causing most of the cathedrals' problems today.

To address those issues, the Church of England is forming a special working group to study how cathedrals are governed, their accountability, and how decisions about finances are made. The archbishops of Canterbury and York, Justin Welby and John Sentamu, ordered the review. Adrian Newman, bishop of Stepney, will be the chair.

"The buildings themselves are a huge problem," Newman said. "It is possible to see a cathedral as an albatross, but they are also our best assets."

England's cathedrals still attract millions of tourists a year. Around 55,000 people were expected to attend Easter Sunday services. Nine of the cathedrals have turned to charging entrance fees to help finance their buildings, on top of grants from the main Church of England funding body and other fund-raising grants and events. The rest are averse to charging tourists and are looking for alternatives, such as more visitor attractions and museum displays.

The review group was created following a recent report on the financial crisis at Peterborough Cathedral, a former Benedictine abbey from the 12th century in the Midlands, which houses the tomb of Queen Katharine of Aragon. Recently, the dean of the cathedral resigned and 12 other staffers were laid off.

A study by its bishop, Donald Allister, warned that the situation there was so grave that it posed "serious risks to the reputation of the whole Church [of England]."

Allister warned that despite compliance with the Cathedrals Measure, a document governing cathedrals drawn up in 1999, Peterborough was in trouble, suggesting the 18-year-old document is “clearly insufficient to prevent the problems that occurred.”

Another distinguished cathedral in financial difficulty is Durham, founded in the 11th century in northeast England and the location of the shrine of St. Cuthbert. It has an annual deficit of 500,000 pounds (about \$621,000), and its annual report states it is not raising money fast enough to cover running costs.

At Exeter, a cathedral in southwest England with the longest vaulted ceiling in the world, there is a predicted deficit of 175,000 pounds (about \$217,000) after a costly plan to restore the Roman baths on the site failed. There has also been talk of staff reductions, and the dean is expected to retire.

Even a newer cathedral, Guildford, a postwar church near London, is struggling following a major renovation and the removal of asbestos. Plans to secure an endowment fund by developing its land for housing were rejected by a local council.

A temporary government fund to mark the centenary of World War I helped provide 40 million pounds (\$49 million) over two years for repairs.

Vivienne Faull, dean of York and vice chair of the working group, said deans will be lobbying the government for a similar fund.

“The World War I fund was a godsend,” she said. “Major building works and urgent repairs are the shocks that can cause the financial problems, especially for the smaller cathedrals.” —Religion News Service