How many regulatory systems?

Being in charge of a Church of England church building can be a nightmare, especially when the building happens to be listed by English Heritage. The Parochial Church Council and its Building Committee have for many years done battle with regulatory systems which all seemed designed to prevent work being done to preserve ort improve the church for the future.

In fact, at Holy Cross, we have potentially to deal with three regulatory systems. The first is the Diocesan Faculty Jurisdiction. But when it comes to some matters such as external issues like the bell tower for example, the Local Authority Listed Building people and Conservationists become involved, and then we get to English Heritage.

Before we get to this stage, we need to prepare a submission for the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) who make a recommendation as to whether the work can go ahead without further ado or whether it requires a legal application, a petition to the Chancellor of the Diocese for a faculty, in effect, permission to go ahead. It all feels very heavy and almost as if the powers-that-be are determined to prevent local people from doing a job, let alone a good job.

Recently, we had an example of this attitude in action. The Quinquennial Inspection undertaken in March 2007 highlighted several urgent works to be carried out and among them the repair of the glass in the Old Church which is in danger of falling out. The PCC decided to do this work, but we needed to ask the Diocesan Advisory Committee to approve the plan. Despite the fact that the Quinquennial Inspection had identified this work as essential, and despite the fact that we have the money and have an expert to do the work immediately, the DAC sent the PCC a letter demanding first that we send them photographs of the windows, and demanding more detailed descriptions of the damage and demanding an assessment of the historic significance of the glass. Why? What possible reason could there be to delay the work contingent upon these conditions? We were not allowed to know the reasons, and indeed there are no reasons. All the conditions could have been requested without delaying the actual work of saving the windows, but, no, we are here dealing with bureaucracy at its worst.

To be honest, the letter made me see red. Such pettifogging destroys the will to live, let alone preserve churches. How dare they act like latter-day self-important Caligulas, pontificating with the thumbs now up, perhaps down, on the future of our windows? Perhaps we should just let them fall out and then fir nice new UPVC glazing which won’t require maintenance?

The Faculty procedures and the DAC can cause a lot of irritation and heart-ache to parishes and we need to streamline the whole system before the windows fall out!

Neil Richardson