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Archbishop Mullally Calls End of Church VAT Relief an Intolerable Burden on Parishes

A true story of faith under pressure. Read the first half below, then continue online.

KEY SPIRITUAL TAKEAWAY

"An intolerable burden on many congregations"

(Transliterated from the original Hindi.)

They had gathered only to pray. When prayer itself becomes the target, faith is proved not by words but by staying.

The Story - Part One

Archbishop of Canterbury Sarah Mullally has called on the government to rethink its decision to scrap VAT relief on church repairs, telling the General Synod on Wednesday, 18 November 2026 that the change has placed "an intolerable burden on many congregations". The Archbishop spoke during a debate on a national strategy for maintaining church buildings, as England's parish churches face a repair backlog of at least £1 billion.

Think of a village church with 30 people in the pews on a Sunday, a leaking roof and crumbling stonework. The repair bill runs into tens of thousands of pounds, and a quarter of parishes have an income of less than £20,000 a year. That is the maths behind the Archbishop's words, and it is why her speech drew such passionate support in the Synod chamber.

The scheme that used to help has gone. For years, churches could offset VAT on repair work, easing the cost of keeping ancient buildings standing, but the government closed that scheme and replaced it with a programme that church leaders say provides less support. In January 2026, Baroness Twycross said the replacement would ensure funding was targeted "where it is needed most, focusing on repair and conservation work", but parishes say the help reaching them is thinner than before.

The numbers are stark. The National Churches Trust estimates the backlog for repairs to Church of England buildings alone at at least £1 billion, with the average annual cost of maintenance and repairs running at around £150 million. Half the parishes in England have fewer than 38 people in the congregation, which means fundraising for tens of thousands of pounds is simply unrealistic for most of them.

Church VAT Relief Scrapped: £1 Billion Repair Backlog For England Parishes

The debate at Synod was brought by the Diocese of Blackburn, introduced by the Rev Dr Tom Woolford, who called for a national strategy to maintain church buildings and to ease the burden on parishes when planning and carrying out work. Archbishop Sarah spoke in the debate to welcome the motion and to repeat the call for the government to reintroduce VAT relief for repairs to church buildings.

She told members that the challenge of maintaining churches, cathedrals, vicarages and schools is often "overwhelming" and must be a shared endeavour. Churches, she said, are centres for community life as well as worship, and the cost of keeping them open should not fall on a handful of worshippers alone.

The Turning Point - What Happens Next

The story reaches a life-changing moment that changes everything -- and what seemed like the end is only the middle. Two reports disagree on the numbers, and one question is left unanswered: will the CCTV footage ever come out? Read the full story to find out what happens next.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When gathering to pray carries a real cost, what keeps a community coming together anyway -- and what would keep you coming?

2. The pastor's sister shielded him with her own body and fainted under the blows. What does costly, self-giving love look like in your own family or church?

3. When justice is delayed and a complaint is withdrawn under threat, how do believers hold on to truth without giving in to fear -- or to hatred?

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