

# SANCTUARY UK

A National Trust for churches involving the local community

Lawrence Mortimer (2006)

**The “4-page” substantive part of this paper begins on page 4 with Section 3.**

## Preface

This paper has no authority beyond that which the writer can claim for himself.

That authority is probably enough for a discussion paper such as this. I have been a parish priest of the Church of England for 35 years, and these pages are about English parish churches and what we should do about them. Toss in the experience of over 20 years working in communications at a time of extraordinary media development, and it cannot be said that the concept of Sanctuary UK is the product of too much available time in the study of a rural parsonage.

This short document is, more particularly, the distillation of some rather obvious conclusions drawn over the past ten years as I and a small local Trust, together with the Parochial Church Council, have battled to make sense of what we should do with our very own heritage building. We call it “The Saxon Sanctuary” and attract a number of visitors and tourists. In this, we are merely typical of thousands of parishes across the country, where processes might differ but where the intention is the same: to cherish the church building as a place we are proud of, far beyond its functional role as a gathering place for the Christian congregation.

That all this effort happens in isolation is absurd. That the Friends of St Agatha’s have to learn the same lessons as the Friends of St Hilda’s two miles down the road suggests that in matters of heritage (as in ministry, but that’s another subject!) it’s every parish for itself. This is a recipe for disaster in terms of what we can reasonably anticipate for the next 50 years. As more money is required to fund ministry, and as an ecclesiology kicks in which demands Anglican Christians engage more with the world around, so church buildings become the poor relation. Almost without warning, the local church veers towards redundancy, matching some 18<sup>th</sup>-century engraving in its decay.

Sanctuary UK is a simple concept, but a vital one. It proposes a ‘brand’ for all those individual enterprises which, as things presently stand, keep our church heritage in remarkable order. It enables these ‘small businesses’ to feel part of something bigger, without threatening their local integrity, helping them indeed to develop their own local economy. By embracing this local energy, Sanctuary UK morphs it into a national strategy. The careless black economy which is the multi-million-pound turnover of thousands of local church projects becomes within the framework of Sanctuary UK a measurable contribution to national heritage with which strategically to confront the future - and government policy.

The overall Aims and Objectives of Sanctuary UK are stated in Appendix 1.

Appendix 2 is the report of a mini-survey of three dioceses in January 2006 which demonstrates that the concept of Sanctuary UK is welcome to a large number of clergy and that a number of parishes are ready to serve as a pilot for the scheme. It is hard to imagine a pilot for such a big idea, however, and the better way perhaps is to understand that launching a fully-fledged ‘Phase 1’ would not be a difficult thing to do, given that an infrastructure is in place (the parishes of the Church of England) and that the staffing of the umbrella body could be modest and quickly self-financing. The paper speaks of a readily conceivable membership of 100,000, representing an average of 50 members within 2,000 parishes, most of whom might be recruited from existing electoral rolls. (The National Trust has a membership of nearly 3½ million).

In such a Phase 1, Sanctuary UK is unashamedly restricted to the Church of England, probably targeting its 12,000 listed churches in particular. This will lose me friends. Several of those whose opinions I have sought in the writing of this paper have expressed strongly the view that this scheme should be ecumenical from the start, and should indeed cover the whole of the UK.

That is undoubtedly how Sanctuary UK should finally emerge. But the curious and often incomprehensible workings of the Established Church provide Sanctuary UK with a rare and early advantage in its need for status and support. In its dealings with the Church Commissioners nationally to church wardens locally, Sanctuary UK is immediately incarnated within an organism that incorporates the whole heritage debate. Once it has reached critical mass, there will be no problem in devising a Phase 2 which can include the other denominations and provinces.

Finally, a couple of stylistic apologies.

This paper is not a piece of academic research, though hopefully it might inspire such. Other people’s ideas creep in alongside my own without any acknowledgment except a possible listing in Appendix 3.

Secondly, I have chosen to write as though Sanctuary UK exists – primarily because I believe passionately it should, but also to save the reader a tedious sequence of conditional clauses. This means that I lay claim to all sorts of deals having been done which will be news to CEOs in a number of organizations.

*Lawrence Mortimer*

## 1. Fighting for our heritage

This is a crunch moment for church buildings in Britain. It is very possible that in their up-to-1,000-year history they have never been so loved and so well maintained. It is equally possible that they are destined for destruction within a generation. The congregations which cherish them are ageing, and where there are younger worshippers the preference is often for warmer, more versatile, community-based venues. It is entirely conceivable that many of the Church of England's active 16,000 churches could transform into the romantic ruins of a quaint left-behind culture.

In the face of this threat, a number of things are happening.

All of them are, at least partly, encouraging.

- The Church's built heritage issue has been championed by the Bishop of London, and the General Synod of the Church of England is taking it all very seriously. In spite of other enormous challenges, like what future form the ministry of the Church should take and how new financial constraints are to be managed, the Synod has vowed to act upon the Church Heritage Forum report "Building faith in our future" - and to encourage parishes to do so as well. The Synod's Cathedrals and Church Buildings Division, incorporating the Council for the Care of Churches, has built into it a wealth of experience and resource, and the capacity to network sympathetically and authoritatively with government and heritage agencies.
- English Heritage has come out banging a drum for church buildings. So often perceived by Parochial Church Councils as a brake on local initiative, and a grudging allocator of grants, English Heritage has its own 'places of worship strategy manager' and a current communications strategy called *Inspired!* The inherent funding problems of church buildings are, however, only part of the debate around how heritage generally should be budgeted for, given the priorities of this government and the prospect of lottery cash being diverted towards the London Olympics. If the Church is under threat, then so is English Heritage.
- There has already been some ministerial response to Synod's articulate appeal to government. Minister of Culture David Lammy convened a meeting of church leaders, English Heritage and others in early December 2005. As a sometime member of Archbishops' Council, he's an important and influential ally in government. Things will undoubtedly happen, but don't hold your breath for big solutions. Another MP, Frank Field, has been especially busy on behalf of redundant churches. He also explored the idea of tagging churches on to the National Trust portfolio, but with no evident success.
- The enormously diverse diocesan advisory committees and their countless consultants, along with the arcane amenity societies who keep a wary eye on what's happening to their various favourite places, are finding a common focus and mood in the initiatives surrounding this debate. There are new informal groupings which bridge old divides. Though everyone remains protective of heritage, there's a less stuffy feel in the air. (Most of the time).
- The local church congregations themselves, at the heart of all this agonising, are much readier to change than in days only recently gone by. Often they have little choice. Often the traditional objectors are simply dying off. But just as often, a reordering or a new use for the building is understood as an investment in the future and greeted with enthusiasm. The more examples there are of such adaptations (and plenty are cited in the "Building faith" report), the more this process becomes normative.

There is a campaigning tone behind all this, a righteous indignation that the government should not expect the country's heritage to be paid for indefinitely by churchgoers who have their own scale of priorities. The local church should be properly valued in terms of what it gives the nation willingly and freely. When you take into account the number of volunteer hours, the educational resource, the tourism potential, the community glue the church provides, that is worth surely half the cost of repairing the building. "Stop messing around, we want a serious share of taxpayers' cash". That's the message, and the parishes are being urged to pick up the cry and get political.

## 2. From top-down to bottom-up

The idea that the government should allocate enormous amounts of public money towards old church buildings seems optimistic in the extreme. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't fight for it. Who knows, the great British public might decide to opt for a 'church tax' at the very moment the Germans are wanting to be rid of it.

There is another question to consider. What happens if we get it? Even when there's cash available, local churches still have to get their hands on it. The formidable application processes, which discourage many PCCs now from bothering with grants, will doubtless be more highly refined and will promise a greater chance of success, but you still need someone locally to fill them in.

Whatever the scenario, whether government pays half the bills or whether, as now, the full burden falls on the congregation, the success of the local church economy lies in the locality. If we want to score with the national team, it will not be by taking our eye off the parochial ball.

"Building faith in our future" is largely a celebration of local initiative, recording imaginative uses of church buildings across the land. Even the photos are inspiring. The campaign launched on the back of the report is attracting new stories of similar creativity to the churchcare website. There is no question that this spirit of local enterprise is what counts most in persuading government or regional partners to invest in heritage buildings which generate new community life.

What we don't want, however, is for government investment to be such that it actually has the capacity to influence how church buildings generally should be developed, nor that a local perception grows that the parish church belongs more to the nation than the community. That would be truly to kill the laying goose. Insofar as the local church building has any kind of investor base, it is to be found in the four or five square miles surrounding it.

Traditionally, the local church is maintained by those who worship in it. But the tradition is actually more subtle than might first appear. Today the often small congregation has to meet not just the expenses of a heritage building, but also a significant proportion (if not the whole) of the vicar's stipend, expenses and pension, the costs of the church's ministry, worship and mission, and (normally) a contribution to the wider Church as well. Not that long ago, most of these costs were met by the inherited wealth of the Church Commissioners, and landowners such as the patron of the parish, the lord of the manor, and indeed the vicar himself. Those days are gone. Church of England congregations (unlike other denominations) have never really got used to the 'tradition', less than 50 years old, that the local church, its building and its ministry, is their financial responsibility. Only now as the money runs out is it becoming clear to an increasing number of PCCs that, beyond their own reserves, there is nothing to rescue their much-loved building from ultimate redundancy.

The Churches Conservation Trust is on standby to salvage at least the building. It is the only ecclesiastical body to which the government gives money. It is in every sense a last ditch enterprise to save heritage buildings from otherwise scandalous abandonment, where the tiny volunteer custodianship has itself succumbed to natural wastage or relative poverty. But the evidence is that the CCT, with 330 or so churches in its care, will soon itself reach a budgetary impasse as the number rises. Is the government really going to want to fund 70% of the maintenance of, say, 1000 redundant churches while not investing in living community-engaged churches, which also have a stake in heritage? CCT is vulnerable to whatever kind of deal emerges from the new campaign to get government to subsidize church buildings as a whole.

The alternative to 'church conservation' is to find another use for a redundant church, and there are plenty of good examples of what can be achieved by imaginative adaptation, for which the Church Commissioners deserve much credit. However, there is the real possibility that, as more buildings become available where an alternative use is not appropriate, redundant churches become private houses. A national heritage open to public access could very easily start signalling 'no entry'.

The key is to ensure that heritage church buildings are not allowed to become redundant. Such an objective cannot be set by global strategists, whether the Synod or the government. It must come from the communities which are actually threatened with the loss of their building, and in the perspective of the next fifty years, that is arguably most of them. They must come to 'own' their church and not let it go.

### **3. Sanctuary UK**

Sanctuary UK seeks to facilitate 'ownership' of a heritage church by its local community and in the process to relieve the Parochial Church Council of its exclusive responsibility. It intends not simply to shift the burden but to open up a new local economy to achieve specific aims. In a sense Sanctuary UK is a throw-back to those times when the local church was built and enlarged through the enthusiasm and involvement of its community. It will unashamedly tap those instincts of pride and competitiveness which are harder for a contemporary Christian congregation to exploit. For these reasons, Sanctuary UK is a bottom-up structure, beginning and ending in the locality, but benefiting from an umbrella organisation which dispenses with the isolation experienced by PCCs each struggling with their individual heritage agenda.

Sanctuary UK is the generic name (and core staff) of a network of Sanctuary UK associations. Any PCC can opt to set up such an association, which – during the initial phase of Sanctuary UK - goes under the acronym SAfE (Sanctuary for England). In so doing, the PCC is devolving its heritage agenda to the SAfE on the understanding that the new community body will be better equipped to tackle it. The SAfE acts in much the same way as a traditional "Friends of St Agatha's" group, raising money for the Appeal Fund, but more than that, it serves as the PCC's executive in managing the quinquennial maintenance programme and progressing development projects. Legally speaking it is a working group of the PCC, as ultimately all decisions have to be ratified by the PCC. Indeed any proposals requiring alteration to the fabric of the church need to be forwarded by the PCC to the diocesan advisory committee and thence to the Chancellor for approval.

However, it is expected that as Sanctuary UK becomes more established, and SAfE groups acquire a reputation for trustworthiness and efficiency, the local association will have effective (if not legal) charge of the heritage building and a corresponding sense of final responsibility for it. In this sense, the SAfE will be encouraged by the PCC, the DAC, English Heritage and the rest, to 'own' the building. They may well be the initiators of a new use for it, and serve as a panel of reference for any consequent management committee.

### **4. The local SAfE group**

Given those expectations and that kind of status, the SAfE requires a certain calibre of membership. Sanctuary UK provides strict guidelines for their selection. At the launch of a new SAfE, the PCC head-hunts and appoints a Chairperson, who with the PCC then selects his/her Secretary and Treasurer. None of these need be members of the church congregation, but if none of them are members of the PCC, the PCC appoints two of its number to form with them a core SAfE which then co-opts its remaining membership to a maximum of nine. A SAfE might choose to include an elected member by offering an ex officio place to one of the two church wardens, elected by the whole community at the Annual Vestry Meeting.

The SAfE is an active group, primarily concerned with fund-raising (not unlike a school PTA), and members must demonstrate an appropriate energy, though there will also need to be those who through experience, authority or professional networking can engineer sponsorship and grant-funding.

Membership of the group is for three years in the first instance, with half the group reviewed at a time to allow for a continuity of experience. A standard audit process offered by Sanctuary UK measures the success of the group against its declared targets, which will at least in part relate to the church building's five-yearly architectural inspection. One half-group review will take place soon after the quinquennial inspection when it is clear how individuals may have contributed to achieve maintenance targets. The other review might correspond to progress on a development project.

On the strength of the audit, the Chair might ask a member to stay or to retire. The post of Chair is for five years, and before the end of his/her term, the Chair should discuss with the PCC his/her recommendations for the future of the SAfE (which might include his/her reappointment). A new Chair should be selected by the SAfE (including of course its PCC representatives) and then formally appointed by the PCC.

## **5. Sanctuary UK membership**

The feature of Sanctuary UK which is its particular strength, and differentiates it from the myriad of other local and national initiatives seeking to save our ecclesial heritage, is its subscriber base. What binds together the ‘competing’ communities and their infinitely varied SAfE programmes is a shared membership of Sanctuary UK, representing a common ideal and resourcing its fulfilment locally.

Sanctuary UK is a church heritage ‘National Trust’, appealing to the general public to save 12,000 listed churches (and a great many others as well) by involving them in the issues imaginatively, educatively and personally. In this it is similar to the National Trust, which has just 300 buildings in its care (and much else of course), but thereafter the paths diverge. In both fund-raising and consciousness-raising, Sanctuary UK is a national means to a local end. Unlike the National Trust’s world-class built heritage, there are so many beautiful churches, that most of them inspire pride only in those who live beside them. Large amounts of money for a particular church are only likely to be generated from the community close by. That will remain the case even if half the funding for repairs miraculously comes from government: the other half will never be found from a ‘national trust’, only from the neighbours.

Nonetheless, Sanctuary UK does have enough financial substance to make it immediately attractive to participating churches and to individual subscribers. A £30 annual subscription is divided so that Sanctuary UK receives £10 and a nominated church £20. A local SAfE cannot be authorized until there are 50 local subscribers to Sanctuary UK (which is a good way of getting the church’s Electoral Roll onside). 2,000 churches with 50 Sanctuary UK subscribers and a total membership of 100,000 generate £3M, with £2M going back directly to nominated churches.

A church with the basic 50 gets £1,000 a year (plus the corresponding Gift Aid equivalent). It’s not much. But it’s enough to make Sanctuary UK a sensible option for the PCC (“Get rid of your buildings agenda and win £1,000 a year”), but not nearly enough to repair the tower or replaster the Chancel. Even with a sign-up of 1000, the annual £20,000 doesn’t go far (though it’s nice!). The real value of the Sanctuary UK membership is less their subscription than their readiness to support the local heritage building they now understand as their own. Every SAfE at its launch has at least 50 people who want to ensure the future of a church they are proud of – and that’s before the group has started recruiting from the wider community.

In the event of a locality attracting more than 1,500 subscribers, the pay-back to the SAfE is capped at that level (£30,000+gift aid equivalent) and the credit balance paid to the Historic Churches Preservation Trust to become available for less population-rich fund applicants. Sparsely populated areas might choose to establish one SAfE for a number of churches to increase their Sanctuary UK membership potential and make best use of appropriate local energy and experience in the SAfE group itself.

## **6. Membership privileges**

When access to church buildings is generally free of charge, it is at first hard to imagine what membership of Sanctuary UK can possibly offer. It can offer much.

- Swipe membership card and handbook of participating churches
- A monthly colour newsletter and an annual DVD
- Free admission to charging Cathedrals and to some English Heritage sites
- A subscription deal with the National Trust
- Privileged ticket prices at concerts in SAfE churches

- Access to membership pages of the Sanctuary UK website
- Prize draw
- Gift of “1,000 Best Churches” or “The Church Explorer’s Handbook” on joining
- Special local concessions

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Sanctuary UK lays claim to the same high principle associated with the National Trust - that beautiful places should be safeguarded for the nation. That appeal of membership is marketed in its own right.

## **7. SAfE fund-raising**

Beyond the initial task of building a local Sanctuary UK subscriber base, and so an association of newly informed local people potentially committed to the cause of their ‘own’ heritage building, the SAfE establishes a development plan in collaboration with the PCC. Priorities are agreed, targets and deadlines set. These can be amended at any time in further consultation between the two bodies but there is always a ‘live’ plan, which is audited every five years when the Chair’s term of office comes up for renewal, an occasion which might coincide with the quinquennial inspection.

Once the plan is set, the SAfE takes effective responsibility for it. In preparing faculty applications for the PCC to sign off, it does more than a conventional ‘Friends’ group, but most of its energy is indeed invested in Friends-like fund-raising. The SAfE has in effect to create a working economy centred on the church building. It should not reinvent the wheel. Quite apart from resources and ideas offered by Sanctuary UK, there are many existing initiatives which can be brought or bought in at this point. Many are catalogued in the current Synod campaign. Others involving regional tourism or local education, for example, can be identified through contact with the diocesan office or local councils. Advice on grant applications and such like is ready to hand.

But some sources of income will be peculiar to the locality. There may be a lottery winner who likes the idea of being a significant patron. There may be businesses which recognise added-value in sponsoring local heritage. A pub which derives benefit from its proximity might ‘church-tax’ special meals or events accordingly. A video producer married in the church might be encouraged to repay the experience with a bookstall DVD.

The SAfE is alert to these possibilities, as well as applying itself to more conventional forms of fund-raising in the form of expensive dinners or nearly-new sales. The difference comes when Sanctuary UK members outside the SAfE group begin to demonstrate fund-raising initiative, holding coffee mornings, encouraging their school to pay for an activity-based visit, or simply running the barbecue at the Fete. This is ‘new blood’ reviving the often tired programmes of church social committees and substituting new energy and imagination. However, the congregation is itself newly energised by its release from the stress of looking after the building, so play their own part as doubtless paid-up members of Sanctuary UK.

## **8. A marginalized church?**

And what of the local church in a Sanctuary UK world? With significant responsibility for the heritage building, the venue for their worship, apparently given away to others in the community, the church might be understood to be on its last legs. In fact a PCC which has set up a SAfE has done so in the conviction that it is in every way a ‘missionary’ thing to do.

- It frees up time and resources for the congregation to do Christian things
- It opens up the church to those who think it belongs to worshippers alone
- It promises better care of a much-loved holy place
- It inspires new interest and releases new talent
- It encourages informed spiritual exploration
- It provides opportunities to introduce the Christian option.

The congregation isn't giving up on its church building. On the contrary, local worshippers can enjoy it more, and be aware that community 'ownership' of the place brings new opportunities to make connections. Instead of offering a 'what you see is what you get' schedule of services, the PCC is likely to have the unnerving experience of people in the community saying what they actually want from their church. Some of that might even be to do with God.

Neither is a new use of the church building a sell-out to a less-than-Christian culture. Whether the building accommodates a playgroup, a post office, a suite of offices, a library or whatever, it remains a place of prayer, and that can often be more powerfully experienced in its new incarnation than when it was a cold and usually empty space. For heritage to live, it is best that it doesn't always communicate death.

As a participating parish, the PCC is resourced by Sanctuary UK, not just through the material received by individual members, but also with practical suggestions on how to engage with the local community cross-culturally. A multimedia file is sent out every Easter/Summer and Autumn/Christmas which provides ready-to-run worship material, home group topics and talk presentations, all from the perspective of a variety of contemporary cultures. Generally pre-evangelistic, these resources do not appeal to all churches, but where people in the community have begun to ask questions on their own terms, they provide a popular entry-level (way back from Alpha!) to the Christian journey.

Sanctuary UK's primary remit is, however, to encourage use of the church building, and it offers a variety of technological services to that end. It helps participating churches (and/ or their SAfE) manage a tourist strategy, tap relevant databases, improve security, benefit from credit card donations and internet services, and provides online information for pilgrims and tourists. The membership swipe card records a personal journey from sanctuary to sanctuary.

## **9. Sanctuary SW1**

As the umbrella organisation for SAfE parishes, Sanctuary UK represents the small local interest in a field of big players. It serves to remind such policy makers as government and Synod, and such executives as English Heritage and the Diocesan Advisory Committees, that enterprise and commitment at the sharp end need to be respected. Local volunteers, often of a professional calibre whose performance is subject to audit, should not be mere functionaries of the heritage hierarchy, but partners in an ongoing discussion about the future of our church buildings. Sanctuary UK ensures such representation.

It is, however, far from anti-establishment. Such an illusion is quickly dispelled by the discovery that Sanctuary UK is answerable to the Church Commissioners, who – though they do not own our churches (who does?) - have ultimate say over what happens to them. The Church Commissioners give the very small Sanctuary UK staff office room. Set-up funding is provided by a capacity-building grant from English Heritage\*, so indirectly the government is modestly investing in this tiny executive for the disproportionately high returns they generate in holding together the largest network of local economies and volunteers in England.

The Church of England for its part is grateful that the vast expenditure by local congregations of nearly £60M a year on their church buildings might now be picked up by a larger section of the population. It looks forward to seeing that sum grow closer to half the £185M English Heritage estimates is the actual annual requirement. But most of all, the Church of England – and in Sanctuary UK's later phases, every other denomination – celebrates there is at last clear water between supporting national heritage and funding a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Church.

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*\* English Heritage asks the reader to remember that this is not actually the case as things presently stand. This whole paper expresses as fact a structure and programme which are only conceptual – see the cautionary note on style in the Preface.*

## APPENDIX 1

### AIMS OF SANCTUARY UK

#### Aims:

- To encourage the use of Britain's holy places without the precondition of religious commitment
- To provide a wider support base for the conservation and appropriate development of Britain's ancient church buildings
- To create a context for imaginative and informed spiritual exploration

#### Objectives:

- To establish a National Trust model of membership
- To establish a brand for participating churches
- To establish a digital methodology

## APPENDIX 2

*A brief Yes/No survey was circulated by e-mail in January 2006 to all clergy in three similar-sized dioceses (Coventry, Guildford, Wakefield), asking for a response to a 2-page concept paper introducing the idea of Sanctuary UK. It was clear that several clergy had involved their PCCs before replying.*

***Of the fifty respondents, 84% replied YES to the first question***

### **1. Is Sanctuary UK (or a similar umbrella church heritage entity) a concept worth exploring?**

*Those who replied YES were invited to respond to four more questions.  
The 84% becomes 100% in the following percentage results.*

2. Do you feel that Sanctuary UK's 'National Trust-style' marketing is distant enough from the mission of the Church to avoid the possibility of tarnishing it?

*YES 85%*

3. Can you imagine your own PCC(s) devolving their fabric agenda to a community SAfE (on which the PCC has representation)?

*YES 56% (plus a significant return of 'not sure')*

4. How would you rank the perceived benefits of Sanctuary UK? (mark 1, 2, 3, 4)

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| • A. Management of fabric and heritage issues        | <i>First place result</i><br>50% |
| • B. Access to appropriate networks and technologies | 15%                              |
| • C. Resources to bridge sacred and secular          | 15%                              |
| • D. Fund-raising potential                          | 20%                              |

5. Would you be interested in being part of a pilot scheme?  
(YES does not commit you!)

*YES 50%*

**A wider survey was undertaken from October-March 2006-7 of half the C/E dioceses.  
Over 96% voted YES to Question 1.**

The full survey result may be found on the website

[www.sanctuary-uk.org.uk](http://www.sanctuary-uk.org.uk)

### APPENDIX 3

#### Acknowledgements

*I am grateful to the following interviewees and correspondents, none of whom may be assumed to agree with the conclusions of this paper.*

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Clergy respondents to the e-mail survey

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