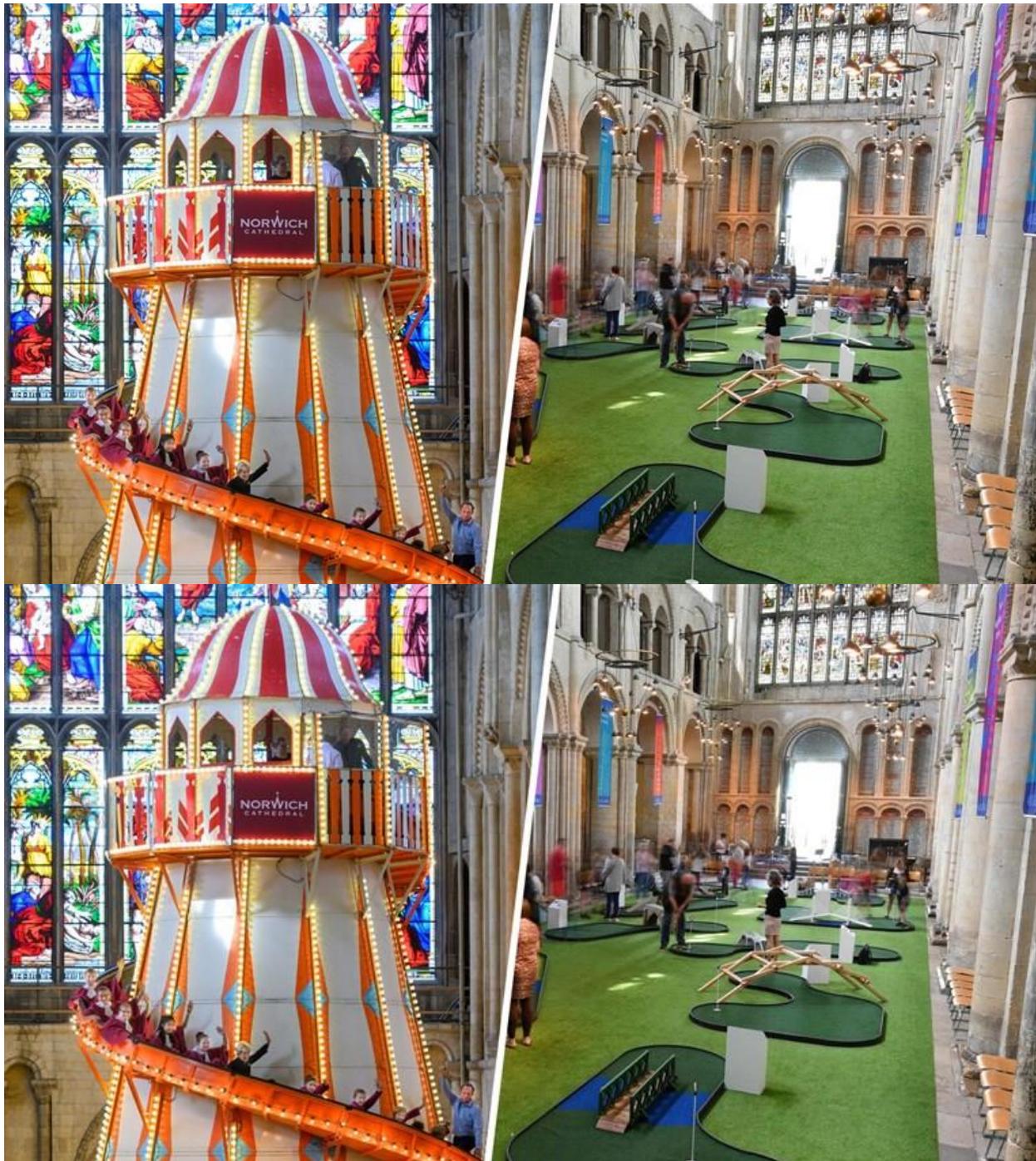


With attendance plummeting, church turns to a new solution: carnival rides

“Our hope is that it will bring a very different audience into the cathedral,” said Rev. Jane Hedges, dean of Norwich Cathedral.



Prayer time or playtime? Amusements installed inside famed cathedrals

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By Nick Bailey

NORWICH, United Kingdom — When a place of worship has stood for almost a millennium, it would be easy to be skeptical about claims that it now includes a never-before-seen attraction. The huge carnival slide parked in the nave of Norwich’s ancient cathedral looks like it falls into that category.

The first to christen the ride in early August was the Very Rev. Jane Hedges, dean of the cathedral, who slid down amidst the bright lights and vibrant colors at least four times in the space of 15 minutes, all while wearing her traditional vestments. The organist blasted along an accompaniment.

“Our hope is that it will bring a very different audience into the cathedral,” she said, flushed and a little breathless from the rides. “I mean, look around now, there’s a lot of young people.”



The Very Reverend Jane Hedges slides down the helter skelter inside Norwich Cathedral. Joe Giddens / PA via AP file

It's no wonder Hedges was focusing on the younger crowd in the cathedral — these are the very people the Church of England desperately needs to lure back.

While it is the establishment church of England and the mother church of the international Anglican Communion, which counts some 85 million members worldwide, it is falling short of worshipers in the United Kingdom. [A study of British social attitudes found that in 2018](#) the proportion of the population identifying as Anglican or belonging to the Church of England or sister churches in Scotland and Wales had plummeted from 40 percent in 1983 to just 12 percent.

One former archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, warned the church was [“one generation away from extinction.”](#)

It's something Hedges is acutely aware of.

“What we would hope is that people have engaged in faith again,” Hedges said. “And to possibly think about going to their own church at home when they get back — just to make that first step really.”

The slide in Norwich was part of a summertime festival called [Seeing it Differently](#) — to encourage people to not just ride the carnival attraction but also undertake a range of activities related to faith.

The festival's centerpiece was the brainchild of Norwich Cathedral's Rev. Canon Andy Bryant, who wanted to work out a way of getting visitors closer to the building's carved, domed ceiling.

Norwich Cathedral is adorned with more than 1,000 medieval roof bosses which display the stories of the Bible. The collection is the largest of its kind in the world.



A Victorian helter skelter ride sits in Norwich Cathedral Norwich Cathedral/Bill Smith / Reuters

The nave immediately above the slide features 255 of these bosses, depicting seven Old Testament episodes and seven New Testament episodes.

“We are always looking at how we can broaden our appeal, how we can bring in people who maybe think, ‘Oh, cathedrals aren’t for me, they’re stuffy and exclusive,’” he said.

Along with Norwich Cathedral, which is 120 miles northeast of London, Rochester Cathedral, 37 miles south of London also got in on the act by installing a miniature golf course.

Rochester’s attraction was bridge-themed, as part of what the cathedral says is a plan to [educate visitors about engineering](#), with a clear metaphor of bridge building of a social kind, as well.

Linda Woodhead, a professor and an expert in culture and religion at Lancaster University, was nonplussed by the golf.

“It’s just so strained, that metaphor,” she said. “I understand where it’s coming from, but be careful what you wish for, what are the long-term consequences of associating the church with fun — these buildings have a particular place culturally and it could undermine that.”

But Norwich Cathedral made no apologies for its move to the lighter side of faith.

“I know it’s a very playful thing to have in a very serious place,” Bryan said. “Cathedrals are about capturing the whole of life.”

But the carnivalesque atmosphere does not obscure what is very serious about the church, he maintained, and that is the “amazing story” of the Bible.

Jo Rudd, 42, a stay-at-home mom from Stevenage, north of London, was visiting with her daughter Anna, 18. She found the slide was a welcome surprise, noting the building was full of children.

“I think it’s great,” she said, as the squeals from the slide echoed off the fabled walls, and other tourists lay on yoga mats nearby to stare at the ceiling.





Mini-golf course inside English church encourages playing and praying

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“The religion will be lost if we don’t do something. I mean the reality is, there will be less and less of the older generation, so we need to get younger people in.”

But others found the surprise less than welcome.

“This isn’t right, there’s something in me that doesn’t really go with [the slide] in a sacred space,” Maura Merion, a retiree who was visiting from London, said.

“I’m a practicing Catholic and this would be anathema with the Catholic Church,” she said. “For me, if it was in the cloister outside it would look wonderful, but no, not in there.”

Jodie Wong, a student from Manchester, felt the slide created a precedent.

“I mean it will leave people wanting more and having different expectations from the church,” Wong, 26, said. “I mean this year the slide, what next?”

At the side of the church a small model dinosaur display already answers that question, as next summer the nave of the cathedral will host the enormous 72-foot-long skeleton of “Dippy” the diplodocus, on loan from London’s Natural History Museum.