

Working with churches with a small population

A number of conversations are going on in the Diocese concerning the sustainability and flourishing of local worshipping communities. Various deaneries have developed deanery pastoral plans; in this context some of the clergy consulted have raised questions about the viability of some churches in very small communities. There have been proposals to unite parishes and there is a need to consider the impact this would have, not least in terms of Parish Share. Other dioceses have been exploring options to support churches in very small communities and it is useful to assess whether some of these options might be applicable in individual cases in St Albans.

We recognise that that no one option will work for every case. This paper looks particularly at the context of rural churches in parishes with a very small population, but churches with a small worshipping community in urban or suburban contexts may share some of the same characteristics and may find some of the suggested options helpful.

What are the issues?

26 parishes in the diocese have a population of up to 200, while 32 parishes have a worshipping community of 12 or fewer, based on the Church Membership Figure combining usual Sunday attendance and electoral roll numbers. Churches in a very small community can be very much the heart and focus of life in their community, often supported by a higher proportion of the local population than elsewhere. There is much local love for them and they often flourish.

However, they may have limited resources of people and financial supporters. Their main expenses of Parish Share, their share of clergy expenses and church building insurance may take up all their income, so that no money is available for mission activities, church repairs and other projects. They often rely on one or two volunteers and may struggle to find churchwardens, PCC members, people to lock and unlock the church and to sustain the life of the worshipping community when those volunteers have to give up.

Other churches in the benefice may feel they are restricted in their own mission by supporting churches in very small populations. As well as this missional argument, some say "if this were a business, we would immediately close down unprofitable outlets". It is not the intention of the Diocese to close churches but to try to find solutions and options to keep churches open.

Across the diocese, there is a need to prioritise the allocation of resources to support growth, sustain a Christian presence in every community and support new worshipping communities, either in areas of new housing or in non-geographical missional contexts.

What are the options?

Sustaining Ministry

Some very small parishes cannot support even a small proportion of the Stipend Contribution for ministry across the benefice. How can ministry be sustained in a very small worshipping community?

- **Focal ministry** provides a designated minister, perhaps a recently-retired priest, a Reader or a self-supporting minister, with a particular responsibility for a worshipping community
 - What scope is there to work with Readers in a particular area to see how they might be deployed, whilst recognizing their individual circumstances?
 - Lay Leaders of Worship are currently authorized only in their home parish – further consideration may be needed about how the basis of authorization of LLWs might be altered to allow them to be deployed slightly further afield.
- **Flexibility in frequency of services:** Canons B11 (morning and evening prayer) and B14 (holy communion) now provide that the services shall be said in at least one church in a benefice, rather than in every parish church. Canon B14A also provides that the Bishop may agree to dispense with certain services in a particular church, provided this does not mean that worship entirely ceases in that church.
 - In considering flexibility in the frequency of services, parishes and deaneries should consider how does this fits with the aspiration that there should be a service in every church every Sunday.

Sustaining Buildings

- Work in the Diocese of Exeter encourages PCCs of multi-parish benefices to explore together what the **role of each church building** is within their missional community. This may mean that one church is a hub for community meetings, another hosts children's activities, while a third remains "undeveloped" – without a toilet and with minimal heating – as a place for summer worship, special events and passing visitors. See <https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/growing-rural-church/>
- Often there is support for the church building from the local non-churchgoing community.
 - Sometimes this can be effectively channelled via a Friends organisation
 - Community support is strengthened by enabling local people to feel a relationship with the church, e.g. by keeping the church open during daylight hours; advertising services and encouraging the use of the church for other events
 - Are there local people, within the worshipping community or not, to unlock and lock the church regularly or to be keyholders?
 - At one church in the Diocese, the Chairman of the Parish Council is on the rota for unlocking the church
 - This may be something people can do whilst walking their dog
- There is much evidence that widening the use of church buildings can help to strengthen their sustainability.
 - The Diocese of Hereford has worked with very rural churches over 20 years to develop individual schemes of wider use involving partnerships with other organisations and has drawn the experience together in the *Crossing the Threshold* resources: <https://www.hereford.anglican.org/Crossingthethresholdtoolkit/>
 - Schemes require an individual approach based on the context of a church, its own vision and needs and the needs of the local community.

- Long term viability is dependent on developing uses and partnerships that are not vulnerable to changes in wider policy and funding [one Hereford partnership was with Sure Start, from which Government funding was then withdrawn]
- Some dioceses have sought a solution which transfers responsibility for such churches to a *separate trust* (sometimes referred to as the “**Festival Church**” model, although the term Festival Church would apply to any parish church used on a less frequent basis for services) which receives any fees and pays for insurance and basic maintenance of the church building. There is information about Festival Churches at <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/diocesan-resources/strategic-planning-church-buildings/festival-churches>.
- At present there is no intention to create a separate trust in the Diocese of St Albans or to transfer responsibility for maintenance and insurance of any churches away from the local church. Any proposal to do so would raise difficult issues about where the initial money would come from to enable a trust to operate and about what would happen when a church requires major repairs.

Sustaining Governance

In many cases, there is already wider local support for a church within a multi-parish benefice.

- A larger church may be willing to provide support structurally, by means of a **Joint Council**
 - the Church Representation Rules provide for a Joint Council to have corporate status, allowing it to take over the main functions of separate PCCs for which separate legal identity is needed.
 - Another diocese has a policy of *one priest, one PCC*
 - Joint Councils can now operate across a number of separate parishes in a benefice, allowing the existing arrangements for Parish Share to continue
- **United parish:** A very small parish can be united with a larger one or with other parishes in a benefice
 - This can be combined with changing the status of churches in very small communities to a Chapel of Ease within the united parish
 - A **Chapel of Ease** remains open for worship, but does not need separate churchwardens
 - This model lifts the burden of administration and finding volunteers from a very small worshipping community, but it relies on a larger parish or grouping picking up the legal, financial and administrative responsibility for the Chapel of Ease
 - The model has wider implications for Parish Share:
 - who picks up the Stipend Contribution and the Ministry Support contribution (share allocation) of the smaller parish?
 - Is it possible or acceptable for the benefice to pay an increased Stipend Contribution?
 - Is it right for other parishes across the diocese to pay an increased Ministry Support contribution?

- **Supporting PCC officer functions:** There may be scope for deanery or diocesan options e.g. for supporting Treasurer functions for a number of smaller parishes. The Church Representation Rules now make provision [Rule 84 (3) and (4)] for the Bishop to appoint a person to carry out a PCC officer function, where something is not being done or a PCC is too small to form a quorum.

Postscript

If none of these options is achievable in every case, as a last resort it is possible that a number of church buildings in very small communities may close. However, the closure of a parish church creates another set of issues:

- Will removing this burden release energy and financial resources in the other parishes in the benefice?
- What will the cost be across the diocese of maintaining closed churches in the (often extended) use-seeking period?
- Where an appropriate and sustainable new use is hard to find, what impact will the process and the presence of the disused church have on the continuing life of the church in that locality?

Emma Critchley
DMPC Secretary
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