

DIOCESE OF MIDDLESBROUGH

MINUTES OF A MEETING HELD ON 5 MARCH 2024 AT 7.00 PM AT ST ANDREW'S CHURCH HALL, TEESVILLE, MIDDLESBROUGH TO DISCUSS ST PETER'S RC CHURCH, SOUTH BANK, MIDDLESBROUGH

Diocesan Representatives Present

Rt Rev T P Draine
Rt Rev Mgr Canon D C Hogan
Very Rev Mgr Canon G Robinson VG
Rev M Sellers
Mr J Walton
Rev P Warren

WELCOME AND OPENING PRAYERS

The Bishop welcomed everyone to the meeting. He led the meeting in prayer, incorporating a short reading from Ecclesiastes.

The Bishop introduced those seated alongside him after which he highlighted the points to be discussed as outlined on the agenda circulated to attendees on arrival. He said he was very aware that St Peter's was quite an emotive subject as was any church that had been in place for a long time. Whilst he accepted and understood the emotion on a personal basis, the Bishop asked all present to be respectful to one another and to those seated at the table, adding they were there to hear what people had to say.

The Bishop next set out some historical context concerning the parish from its inception to the present day. In 1905, the new church opened to serve the needs of the increased number of workers in local industry. However, from the 1950s the population began to migrate south of the parish resulting in the opening of new churches (St Andrew's in 1962, St Anne's in 1970 and later St Gregory's). In 1960, Fr Kilbane reported there were five priests working at St Peter's. By 1978, there was only one priest, the rapid social change, industrial decline and housing clearance in the area affecting the church with attendance averaging around 70. A major inspection undertaken in the late 1990s highlighted structural problems at a time when the parish was in debt. A period of change ensued between 1999 and 2006 during which St Peter's parish amalgamated with the neighbouring St Andrew's parish followed by St Anne's and St Gregory's parishes, resulting in one parish with one church and three dependent chapels of ease. At this time, the average attendance over five Masses in four churches was 564; St Peter's average attendance was 109 every fortnight. In 2004, Bishop Crowley informed the parish he was no longer able to supply an assistant priest. Neither at this time did the anticipated redevelopment of housing in South Bank come about. In 2006, after parish consultation, St Gregory's closed with St Peter's and St Anne's sharing a Mass on alternate Sundays. In 2016, the parish priest was sent a temporary assistant priest. A weekly Sunday Mass was reinstated at St Peter's, drawing an average attendance of 60-80. In 2019, the parish had four weekend Masses in four churches with St Peter's having the lowest attendance of 50-60. The spring of 2020 brought the first Covid lockdown. When restrictions were lifted, St Andrew's and St Anne's opened with one Sunday Mass in each whilst St Peter's remained closed due to health and safety issues.

PROCESS AND SUMMARY OF REPORTS

Mgr Hogan, Chairman of the Diocesan Historic Churches Committee, spoke next. As a listed building, St Peter's came under civil and ecclesiastical exemption. To illustrate this, Mgr Hogan first gave a brief overview of the planning arrangements for listed buildings the Catholic Church has with the State (Government) as does four other Church denominations, known as ecclesiastical exemption. This arrangement arose out of the Planning Act 1990 and led to the development of the Catholic Church having in effect its own planning authority for every Diocese invested in civil and church structure called a Historic Churches Committee. This, in its turn, is run according to the Directory on the Ecclesiastical Exemption from Listed Building Control (edition January 2019). Any proposed works on a listed building, therefore, required detailed submissions to the Committee including the use of a conservation architect for formal permission for work to lawfully begin – which is called a Faculty. Mgr Hogan stressed it was not the role of the Historic Churches Committee to initiate work on a building, that was the responsibility of those entrusted with the role of Parish Priest or someone else delegated to act in his name. Apart from giving professional advice and encouragement, so that the parishes were professionally informed, Mgr Hogan explained the Diocese commissioned a conservation architect to carry out a quinquennial inspection (ie every five years) and to publish a report made available to the parish priest. As regards St Peter's Church, South Bank, Mgr Hogan noted inspections and reports had been commissioned on 20 February 1997, 3 September 2001, 31 August 2006 and 28 June 2022, the last report having been displayed on the Diocesan website for reading ahead of this evening's meeting.

Mgr Hogan turned attention to the reports commissioned which, with their respective authors' consent, had been made available for viewing on the Diocesan website. He said after the ordeal of lockdown caused by covid, it had become apparent that a number of older buildings had not benefited from this, St Peter's being one of them. It was clear that problems of longstanding had become worse and, consequently, the parish priest asked Mgr Hogan and the Diocesan Property Manager for guidance on the next steps to take, thus demonstrating the parish priest had acted responsibly. The first step to take was a professional health and safety inspection, which took place on 12 October 2021. Mgr Hogan highlighted some of the risk ratings outlined in the report, drawing particular attention to the internal walls at ground level, crumbling plaster at high levels and the flooring at ground level. Of equally significant concern was whether any of the electrical power sockets could be used whilst there was also the presumed problem of asbestos. So, when words such as "considerable resources would have to be allocated to reduce the risk and that the building should not be occupied until the risk is reduced" were used, this gave a very clear message to the Diocese in respect to its duty of health and safety to parishioners as being paramount. Consequently, it was clear from that report that the Diocese could not advise the parish priest that he was at liberty to re-open the church and that an updated quinquennial inspection was also required which was commissioned some six months later and carried out on 28 June 2022. This inspection's report sets out in huge detail the multitude of problems concerning St Peter's Church. Mgr Hogan said they were of such a magnitude that the Diocese was told further inspections were required, namely an asbestos report, an electrical installation report, bird and bat scoping and emergence surveys, roof timber condition survey, drainage survey and structural survey. In addition, an assessment would also be required of the integrity of structural steel members supporting the bells. Mgr Hogan pointed out the costs of these additional surveys had not been included in the summary of costs published on the Diocesan website.

To fulfil its obligations under the ecclesiastical exemption measure and in response to the quinquennial inspection, the Diocese commissioned an Architectural and Historical report last March which not only provides historical narrative but also draws attention to the war memorial

and its need for restoration; it was noted the war memorial is listed separately to the church. The war memorial, Mgr Hogan said, was a separate topic that had already been discussed with a variety of people and one which must not be forgotten in the overall discussion. Finally, in September of last year, the Diocese tasked for professional guidance as to an outline overall budget for immediate works based on schedules A and B as identified in the quinquennial inspection report. This led to an initial figure being arrived at of £1.1 million. However, past experiences would indicate that once the additional surveys outlined above had been undertaken, this figure would probably become more considerable than it already was, perhaps by another £0.5 million. Concluding his address, Mgr Hogan said this was where the Diocese was at currently, saying he was reflecting the general view of the Historic Churches Committee which was advising the Diocese, particularly the Diocesan Bishop.

HOW WE GOT TO THIS POINT

Mgr Robinson, the Diocese's Vicar General, was invited to speak next. Mgr Robinson spoke of both his own and his family's ties with St Peter's Church, having lived in South Bank themselves, so understood the importance of the church to the people of South Bank and the Bishop and of the church's significance. He said it saddened him to see how much the church had been neglected as had the area around it, a situation which happens when people decide to move away. Mgr Robinson put into context how the Diocese had got to this point. He explained that part of the difficulty faced by the Diocese was the ever-reducing number of active parish priests it had, highlighting the work he assisted the Bishop with in looking at the areas of the Diocese where priests were retiring and how these could be served in the future. He commended St Peter's for its number of priestly vocations whilst expressing gratitude to those parish priests who chose to continue working past their retirement age and also those retired priests who provided help and support. He too acknowledged the part that covid had played in the situation the church found itself in. Mgr Robinson outlined the situation a parish priest would find himself in when he had more than one church to look after, likening it to spinning plates. He explained the main church of a parish had to be maintained and looked after and of the steps taken to try and keep the plates spinning, ie all churches within a parish, but sometimes there was not always enough money to do this, adding hopefully those present and their parish priest helped direct money where it was needed in their parish. He said sometimes harsh decisions had to be taken when safety concerns had to be taken into account but certainly understood where people were at. He spoke of occasions where a building had a life, a birth and an ending, adding that everyone needed to be realistic about the situation concerning St Peter's and the costs involved to address the issues. He noted he too was aware the war memorial was another matter for discussion.

Mgr Robinson turned attention to the gossip that he had heard, reassuring those present that no decisions had been taken about the war memorial, the organ or the church, that this was a fact at this moment in time. As for the future at this time, this was something he did not know. Mgr Robinson concluded his address by speaking of the contact received from the local councillors before last Christmas and of the helpful meeting held with Councillor Bendelow and Ms C Lewis at which the Diocese had explained to them what had been said this evening. As regards the Council's thoughts on any possible community use of the building, if it were not for the £1.1 million costs to put the building right, there could be possibilities but it was not felt anyone would have the funds to undertake the repairs which neither did the Diocese.

Drawing the presentations to a close, the Bishop spoke of his last visitation to St Peter's in 2016 during which the vast majority of those he had met came from outside the parish out of loyalty to the church. He said he had asked those he met if something should be done at St Peter's along the lines of the nearby Holy Trinity Church and had been met with the response

“who will come here after us”, that there seemed to be recognition by those attending that when they were no longer around, there would be no one to follow them. The parish had two churches, St Andrew’s and St Anne’s, that presently fulfilled the sacramental needs of the parish questioning if St Peter’s was superfluous to the places of worship required to serve the area.

OPEN DISCUSSION

The Bishop opened up the meeting to enable those attending to ask questions and express their thoughts. Many of those present spoke of their own historical and family ties to the parish, their own personal experiences and what the church meant to them. They felt people were drawn to the church because South Bank was the heart of Catholicism in the area and the oldest church in Middlesbrough, to them it was and had always been the Mother church of the area, that it was one of the few buildings left of the area’s heritage and acted as a focal point. Children still attended Catholic schools and there was a need to evangelise, taking synodality into account. Those present offered examples of regeneration in South Bank such as the development of the railway station, a hotel and the freeport, noting some local companies were recruiting from outside the area which could bring new parishioners to the area. Whilst the purpose of the meeting had been set out on the Diocesan website, some asked if they were not part of the process and if what they had to say this evening would have any impact. Having listened to rumours with regards to the church, some of those present thanked the Diocese for being transparent and putting the reality of the situation to the community. One person questioned why there had been a need for four churches in such close proximity. Replying to this point, the Bishop said the history of the parish indicated the churches were built because the population had moved in that direction.

One gentleman, a chartered building engineer, raised a number of questions concerning the reports which he appreciated those representing the Diocese this evening may not be able to answer. He questioned some of the content and how diagnoses had been reached given the limitations of the survey, a visual inspection, with no samples taken. He felt some of the examples cited in the reports bore no resemblance to damp, urging the Diocese to go back to the authors of the reports to ask how they arrived at their diagnoses, that much appeared to be assumptions based on assumptions. He asked how one could know how much it could cost to undertake repairs if one did not know the exact cause of the problem.

One person proposed that given the capacity the church could hold with a large car park adjacent to it, it should be considered a venue for large events including funerals and concerts. There was a need to try and find the funding to keep the building in use and if a decision could be taken together to fix the building, to make it a viable asset, that there would be a vibrant community if one reached out to them. This person also suggested perhaps the building next door could be restored and transformed into a visitor’s centre or museum.

The lady who had been the last organist at St Peter’s Church raised the lottery funding received by the Diocese for the restoration of the organ some 20 years ago, she understood to be in excess of £47,000. She said one of the conditions for receiving the funding had been that the organ was supposed to be used for the giving of concerts and similar events but that this had not been fulfilled, asking why not. She asked if there had been any records kept indicating if the organ had been used for anything other than church services. She added no one would be willing to take the organ and that it would be a waste if it were let go along with the church. Replying to the points raised, the lady was informed it would not have been the responsibility of the Diocese to maintain records as the application for funding had been made through the

parish and not the Diocese, suggesting the parish priest at that time may be able to offer some insight.

One person asked if the Diocese had such concerns about the building, why had it let everything inside deteriorate such as the organ, furnishings, statues and why had nothing been removed. Mgr Robinson explained the reasons why items had not been removed whilst Mgr Hogan addressed the question concerning deterioration of items. He said no evidence had been found of any deterioration of artefacts, that the issues raised were in relation to the fabric of the building, particularly the roof. He said a survey on the organ had just been undertaken which indicated it was in working order.

Turning attention to the projected costs, some of those present felt if a Go Fund Me or similar fundraising page was set up, the money would be raised to undertake the repairs identified in the budget summary, especially if ex-parishioners living around the world got to hear of the situation. Others present asked questions concerning other possible ways of raising the finances required. One person asked if the Diocese had any properties not used for liturgical purposes that could be sold to raise funds for St Peter's Church. It was also suggested the Diocese should approach the Vatican to request assistance and funding. Replying to the points raised, the Bishop said the Vatican itself was in deficit, though the individual who had raised the point, having checked online, say this may no longer be the case. As for selling a property to fund St Peter's, the Bishop said other parishes, particularly those with churches older than St Peter's, would make similar requests which would not be sustainable. He said to those present that if they felt they could raise the £1.1 million required and once they had decided how this could be done, to provide him with evidence and he would listen, however it would be up to those in the room to commence this work. Another person asked if the Diocese had applied for grants, quoting examples of recent lottery funding given to listed places of worship. Replying to the point raised, Mgr Robinson said the Diocese had not applied for grants as the purpose of this evening's meeting was to listen to people and hear what they had to say. If it were possible to obtain grants, this could be a direction to go down. However, he said all needed to bear in mind that if the church was restored, it would need to be maintained, that the parish would have three churches it would need to fund though the income it received. He added whilst the parish currently had its own resident parish priest, one needed to look at the bigger picture as there may come a time in the future when the parish may need to be served by a priest from another parish who may struggle to serve a large number of churches across more than one parish. Another lady said she had been offered £500.00 for St Peter's by a business person in the area which she said she could not accept until this meeting had taken place, saying this demonstrated how people felt about the church.

Those present asked if the building was habitable and, if not, if it was possible to get in it to get it open and then make something happen. Referring to what had been said earlier, the professional guidance received indicated the answer was in the negative due to reasons set out in the health and safety report. One lady spoke of the parish centenary celebrated in 2005, saying it was disappointing no one then had had the foresight to protect the future of the church, that perhaps a lack of air due to the building being closed was contributing to the damp. Another asked in the spirit of synodality, how could the church be brought back to life. One suggestion put forward if there were not enough parishioners attending the church was for part of the building to be used for worship and another part developed for the benefit of the whole community along the lines of the now closed John Paul Centre's Upper Room. It was felt quite sinful to have a locked church when people were sleeping rough on the streets, not what Christ would want. In his reply, Mgr Robinson acknowledged these were points for discussion, however it was not straightforward to open up every church to people in need as aspects such as safeguarding, insurance, damage and fire had to be taken into account. He added there were

places currently where people could go and whilst he liked the idea of the Upper Room, perhaps going into partnership with someone or another organisation, the Diocese needed to abide by the laws it was given that tied its hands at present.

Referring to the outline budget, one person asked if the full amount would need to be spent in order to bring the church back into use or if there was a minimum figure that would need to be spent to get the church open again. Mgr Hogan replied to this point, outlining his understanding of the reports received which indicated from a visual inspection that the roof may be one of the biggest problems to address as there would most probably be undetected problems such as water penetration given there were missing tiles. On the basis of this, he felt it would be misleading to try and make assessments. The individual asked if it may be possible to get an indication to enable them to consider how much money would need to be raised to bring the church back into use given there appeared to be no suggestion of imminent danger or collapse and then address other issues further down the line. The individual who checked the church each week noted he had not seen one drop of water fall from the roof for as long as he could remember.

One person asked as both the church and the organ were listed, if there may be any assistance forthcoming from Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council. Both the Bishop and Mgr Robinson replied to this point, noting councils themselves were also strapped for cash. Reference was again made to the meeting between Diocesan and Council representatives held in December. Mgr Robinson noted the Council itself had its own priorities but he would be happy for the question to be put back to them.

Another lady asked if a communications strategy could be developed so that there was a two-way process between the Diocese and the parish, adding what she felt was required in terms of the next steps was an action plan. This, she said, would help quell any rumours. The Bishop reminded those present that the parish priest was their representative and spoke of the importance that those present worked together with him.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Drawing the meeting to a close, the Bishop thanked all present for their attendance and for their openness to which all those from the Diocese had listened to. Once a record of the meeting had been produced, a copy would be sent to the parish priest for making available to them. He wished them a good evening and a safe journey home.

The meeting closed at 8.35 pm.