**Parish Meeting**

**12th July 2023 - Start: 7.30pm**

**Presiding**: Fr Stephen Myers and Deacon Matus Meleg

Meeting attended by members of Grays RC Parish incuding Fr Paul Bogey

Fr Stephen opened the meeting with a prayer.

Fr S thanked everyone attending this evening. This meeting is a follow up from the previous Parish Partnership meeting and to share any updates. Copies of the previous minutes may be obtained by looking at the parish website at www.grayscatholic.org. Those people who already receive their bulletin via email will have the minutes sent to them automatically.

(A limited number of the previous minutes were available and were handed out)

At the Parish Partnership meeting, each parish (S-L-H/Tilbury, S.Ockendon and Grays) reported on the current state of affairs regarding building conditions and problems.

There is a Deanery meeting next Tuesday (18th July) to discuss how each parish can work together sacramentally.

Finance summaries have been given out to each parish regarding their current monetary position.

At St Thomas’s the main bank account is £53K over drawn. This reflects the current situation regarding the escalating cost of living and increased fuel prices, so we have no idea what the figures will show next year. The collection for Church restoration fund was £100K in the black, but some of this was transferred across to the regular bank account to help with the overdraft situation.

At the Partnership meeting each parish discussed its financial resources. For example, South Ockendon will consider selling their Church Hall to release capital to help clear their overdraft. In S-L-H/Tilbury the Hall has been condemned and there has been a ceiling fall in the presbytery making the house unsafe.

At St Thomas’s there have been 3 assessments carried out.

The first one is from 3 years ago and regards the asbestos found on the premises. The cost to get this removed safely was estimated to be around £6K.

The second one was the condition survey which included use of a drone to assess the higher areas (roof etc). This highlighted some very urgent issues with a cost of around £290K + VAT.

The third was the fire risk assessment which was previously carried out around 6-7 years ago. A new company carried out the most recent assessment and highlighted many things (apparently) overlooked by the earlier fire department inspection. Fr S is being pressed to make changes urgently with threats of legal action if they are not carried out.

Fr S is trying to re-establish a fabric and maintenance group to look into essential repairs and prioritise them working out the root cause of any problems and how to resolve them on a rolling programme.

As the latest fire risk assessment report has highlighted a large number of new problems, Fr S has contacted the fire brigade to ask them to look into this and verify it. He questioned why (apparently) so many things were previously overlooked. Whilst appreciating that rules and regulations may have changed there does seem to be a huge variation between both reports. Fr S has an acquaintance who can advise on prioritising repairs. It was suggested that the main cause of many problems is damp coming in from outside. This needs sorting first and would require scaffolding so it would be obvious to get all external repairs done at the same time (roof, guttering etc).

The removal of asbestos in various parts of the presbytery is an urgent issue. Fr S is in the process of obtaining multiple quotes to carry out the work which will then be submitted to the Diocese for approval.

Fr S questioned how much does this community wish to continue and is this building (the church) in the right place. There is a chance that the Church could be made into a listed building (by the local authority) and this would prevent it being sold.

The £100k currently in the bank will not touch the full amount needed for repairs. Grays parish is very generous but taking into account present levels of donations to the restoration fund it would take around 25 years to cover the cost of essential repairs.

Charitable funding has previously been investigated – it takes a very long time to instigate and needs further research.

A question from the floor was – what does the diocese think about all the repairs that are needed?

Fr S replied that Bishop Alan realises that things need to change. He envisages that in the future (no time scale given) only 2 priests will be allocated to the partnership. It has then to be considered where they will live. He has to take into consideration how many priests are reaching retirement or have health problems. There is however a steady but low influx of trainee priests which does help. He will consider the size of the parishes, their ages etc but no timetable has yet been set for any changes.

The parish income is down by around 27% and post Covid not all parishioners have returned to the Church. This means that the weekly collection is down by around £350 per week. If the parish returned to pre covid attendance at Mass it is likely that we would NOT be in debt.

Fr S commented that fewer clergy are now doing more and more – he himself has 20 separate roles to fulfil – and this is not sustainable.

Ursula (St Peter’s) commented that the reason for a high Mass attendance at St P’s of senior parishioners is due to the fact that there is a sizeable car park next to the Church and there are no stairs of steps to negotiate. A few people have stepped up to offer help with the garden around the Church. Fr S commented that we are lucky to have many people who do volunteer in different capacities. We are also lucky to have the presence of Fr Paul who on Christmas Day took communion to every single housebound parishioner on our sick list.

If repair work is to be carried out, it has to be started soon as prices for the work will be even higher in 2024.

Fr S said that we need to think beyond parish boundaries. Why fix up one Church if it will soon be sold off? However, Canon law is very complicated on this issue. Our main priority must be to keep our buildings safe for the parishioners. The fabric committee will need to prioritise repairs to reflect this. We also need to consider what we can do together to release clergy to support other things in the parish eg hospitals and care homes. The parish partnership recommend that more help needs to come from the community. There need be more groups for example in the community so that Fr S can delegate some of his many jobs like finance reports. There need be some sharing of sacramental programmes between the parishes. This will be discussed at the next Deanery meeting.

Fr S suggested that at the next Parish meeting we prioritise what needs to be done at both St Thomas’s and St Peter’s.

The meeting closed at 9pm.