Parish partnership meeting

Date: Wednesday 21st June 2023

Time: 7.30pm in Parish room

**Present:** Fr Stephen, Fr Francis, Fr Anthony, Deacon Matus and Steve Webb (Director of Development for Brentwood Dioceses)

Representatives from Grays, Stanford, Tilbury and South Ockendon parishes.

Opening prayers

Minutes from last meeting reviewed verbally – no hard copies available at the time. They will be available to parishioners at the weekend.

Fr Stephen: The report on St Thomas’s parish finance will reflect future plans for St Thomas’s. The income from collections 2022-2023 is much reduced and shows an overspend of £30K. The parish currently has an overdraft of around £53K

The collection for the church restoration fund stands at around £100K

There are many reasons for this including the cost of living crisis and the fact that there has been a fall of 27% in Mass attendance post Covid.

Fr Francis: S Ockendon parish has similar issues. The many costs to the parish include bank charges of £400+, gas/electricity £2000+ insurances £4000+ and renovations to the church and presbytery.

Holy Cross has around £20K deficit per annum. The Hall is currently closed and repairs to enable the reopening would be around £40k. The church itself has some open spaces in the roof area, but there are no funds available for repair, so a bank loan (with charges) would need to be granted.

Fr Anthony: Financial information is available on the Church website. Tilbury parish had around £92k in the bank. This money has come from selling some property and has gone towards reducing the current deficit of around £30-40k. The church has roof leaks and has suffered a ceiling collapse in the presbytery and so there are urgent repairs needed. The kitchen has damp/mould issues. There is not enough money in bank for the repairs.

Although the offertory collection at Stanford Church has improved a little they are barely living within their means. The Hall has been condemned and all plans for repair are on hold.

Question was asked from the floor – ‘So what is the answer’.

Reply: At this time we do not know. There are no funds available from Brentwood, however there is an insurance claim going through (for Tilbury)

Question put to Steve: What are your thoughts on the situation?

Reply: Not good. The parishes are just not covering their day to day costs and this is a great concern. Some fund raising is definitely needed. Realistically the parishes would need to start selling some things (buildings) to carry out repairs that are required. The congregations are declining across the whole county and if it continues, we would not need all the churches we currently have. However at present we do. We need to consider if we actually need all of the presbyteries and halls we have. The Bishop wants each parish to make its own decisions on this.

Question: Will we be selling some of our buildings in the future?

Steve: We need to keep all 4 churches open now but if attendances decline further, then obviously not.

Fr Stephen: We have the domino effect. There is no point in just ‘painting/papering over the cracks’ on repairs that need to be done. We need to deal with the basic underlying problems first. There are no simple or quick fixes. It all comes down to money.

Question: Each parish needs to be self sufficient. However there are a few wealthy parishes in the diocese and they have no urgent repairs etc needed. Can they not bail us out and share resources.

Fr Stephen: Some parishes have large amounts in their bank accounts. The question has been raised about their investing in us. Also, about selling land/building to fund rebuilding (flats, houses etc) to generate income (profit) has also been discussed.

Steve: All parishes have banking arrangements with HSBC. Canon law directs that individual parishes are not allowed to cross lend monies.

Question: Instead of selling properties would it not be better for example, to redevelop some into flats to give us a monthly income?

Steve: Of course you would firstly need money to carry out redevelopments. We have to work with what we currently have – and right now we do not have anything unless you sell something. We need to agree to do something quickly.

Question: This was done at Aveley football club. They sold land, developed it and then had the resources to build a new club and stadium.

Fr Stephen: So where is the land we (apparently) have to sell? Mass attendance is down by around 25% and the value of the land at St Thomas’s is unknown.

Steve: We would need to sell everything we have in order to build things from new. Our first priority has to be to generate more/increased income. The question is how. The vision document asked parishioners ‘What do YOU want?’ - it is not what the bishop might want, he has no plans himself. It is up to us to start the ball rolling. We have to decide what stays and what has to go. If not, we are just going around in circles!

Question: When can the 4 parishes start working as one entity, so funds can be shared. We need a time frame.

Steve: In theory we could started tomorrow. If the parishes merged then all fund could be shared across the parish partnership.

Fr Stephen: Parishes that are currently in credit are not paid any interest. This helps the parishes that are in the red as we all bank with an arrangement with HSBC. 25% of our income from collections does actually go back to the parish. We need to look at what we can do together and merge the 4 parishes and their assets.

Question: Only a small number of parishioners attend these meetings. Something needs to go out to all parishioners for their opinions.

Fr Stephen: Information will be going out to parishioners this weekend.

Moving on to the sacramental programmes. 71 young people have been signed up for the next FHC course after interviews. Of those, 30 have been signed up for the CALIYP programme for those children who are considered not yet ready to begin preparation for FHC. There have also been interviews for those wishing to prepare for confirmation.

Steve: Some parishes have merged their preparation classes.

Fr Stephen: A question was raised at the last meeting about Catholic schools. We have 4 primary schools, 1 secondary school run by the LSU (of which 20% are RC children). St Thomas’s has 55% RC children and Holy Cross 42% RC children.

Question: What is the cost to the diocese annually to run these schools?

Fr Stephen: The majority of the cost is funded by central government. At Voluntary aided schools, the government allocates a certain amount per pupil and salaries are paid by the government. The school contributes 15% of any building work costs. If a school has Academy status all capital expenses are paid by central government. The Bishop has set up teams to work with the schools (86

in the diocese), and these must have a head, deputy and RE leader who are all Catholic. Regarding the land covered by these schools, they account for the biggest part of land that is owned by the church.

So, how do we move forward and engage the wider parish with the issues we have?

Steve: In Chelmsford, individual parishes meet together as a partnership. We really need to do this here in order to move forward or we will just keep going round in circles.

Fr Stephen: Priests are here to serve the community. They come and go for various reasons and the parish community need to start helping more.

Question: Obviously we need to move quickly in a way to suit our parishes. This proposal should be put the parishioners very soon.

Fr Stephen: Sometimes I am in a position where I have to make decisions alone, but I would rather do this with the parish supporting me and after consultation with them. I think we need to create an avenue where this can happen.

Steve: The Pope and Bp Alan both agree that people need a bigger say in matters. a more synodial Church.

Fr Stephen: Are there any suggestions as to how this can happen?

No reply

Steve; Jobs that need doing in the parish need to be done properly with quotes being obtained to get the best value for money. However, if someone in the parish is able to do the work (eg painting, decorating) this can just be done without quotes. If the work cost is below £10k this is acceptable, and can just be carried out. Costs of over £10K must be approved following correct procedure.

F Stephen: The next steps. Do we follow the Chelmsford model and work together as a partnership to maintain our communities? Don’t forget meeting can take place in the Church itself if it is not in use for Mass, if the parish in question does not have a usable hall.

Fr Anthony: Stanford hall needs £22K to make it watertight. It also has asbestos lagging and this would need to be professionally removed. It is currently registered as ‘condemned’ as it is unsafe to sue.

Fr Stephen: We need to agree on a date for our next meeting – best left until after the school summer holidays. By then we should have feed back from each parish. Each parish could send a representative with suggestions on what do with any land assets and how we can better live our community in faith?

It was decided that the next meeting will take place on Thursday 14th September at 7.30 in St Thomas’s Hall. It was also noted that there is a deanery meeting on July 18th at S Ockendon.

Meeting closed at 9pm