



Parochial Church Council

Minutes of the Meeting held on 21 November 2022 at 7.30pm

Present:

Tony Rindl (TR) - Chair
Peter Dean (PD) – Churchwarden
Joanna Cooper (JC)
Roger Courtney (RC)
Tilly Elliott (TE)
Lesley Gray (LG)
Margaret Greenstreet (MG)
Cathy Honeyman (CH)
Dave King (DK)
Eileen Roby (ER)
Gill Watson (GW)
Marcus Jones (MJ) - PCC Secretary

1. Opening Prayer

TE opened the meeting with a reading from Ephesians 3.14-20 and a prayer.

2. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Abi Idris and Clinton Dan-Jumbo.

3. Conflict of Interest

None declared.

4. Approval of the Minutes of 10 October 2022

4.1 Amendments were made to section 9.2 of the October minutes to clarify that the projected increase in giving was per annum; and to section 9.21 to more fully reflect RC's concerns that the PCC (the Council) gave approval to very significant expenditure to update the AV system without having before it a detailed report which would in any event be required to apply for a Faculty.

4.2 MJ said that, with the Council's agreement, he would like to establish a best practice for minutes. He aimed to write and circulate the first draft within seven to ten days of the meeting. He asked members to look at the draft as soon as possible thereafter while memories were relatively fresh and to send him any amendments. This would help to avoid any disputes about what was said at the next meeting

weeks later when memories were fading. It also saved valuable meeting time because the minutes would effectively be agreed beforehand and could be quickly approved. This was agreed.

5. Matters arising

(i) *Charity Commission: 'connected' persons*

5.1 PD reported that he had completed the relevant forms to the Charity Commission notifying them belatedly about the Council's employment of Daniella Danjumbo, David Scourfield, and MG's niece.

(ii) *PCC Policies*

5.2 MJ said he had circulated a list of policies kept by Jack Faria (JF) with review dates, although he had not yet had time to check its accuracy. Policies were largely up to date (but see section 7.2 below). He said there were a wide range of policies and it was not clear which persons or committees should be responsible for actually reviewing and updating them.

5.3 PD advised that the Council should continue with the process begun earlier this year under the previous Council of reviewing one or two policies each meeting. He added that the accounting policy was reviewed and approved annually as part of the APCM process and report. MJ said he would ensure policies were placed on the agenda as a regular item.

ACTION: MJ to list policy review on each agenda.

6. Correspondence

(i) *Parish Giving Scheme*

6.1 TR said that David Clemas (DC) had written to the Council to bring the Parish Giving Scheme to its attention. This included the option for automatic uplifting of regular donations in line with inflation. The Council expressed its thanks to DC and noted the benefits of the Scheme. However, the Council agreed that it was necessary to first re-structure and update its finances before publicising the Scheme to the congregation.

ACTION: MJ to reply to DC

6.2 In answer to a question, TR confirmed that the bringing forward of the offertory plates during the offertory hymn had been re-instated. Members supported this visual reminder of the giving principle to the congregation.

6.3 TR considered that we needed to urgently explore purchasing a card reader to modernise and improve the church's methods of giving. This was supported and agreed by PCC members.

ACTION: PD to explore the purchase of a card reader.

(ii) *Letter from Capital Developments*

6.4 RC explained that that Capital Developments (CD) had identified the Brightwell Road property site for possible development and had written to the Council to gauge our interest in selling it. RC said this was a typical letter from a developer. However, the property was an asset that was to a degree inflation-proofed and produced regular income for us. We would require a Faculty in order to sell the property; and this was unlikely to be granted given that at present we had no specific plan as to how we would use the money. The property was therefore best retained. He was supported by TR.

6.5 PD pointed out that there had been certain ongoing difficulties in renting out the property. Moreover, auditors had advised that it should not be classified in the accounts as an asset because it could not be used for church objectives, such as housing staff: rather, it was an investment. He added that he had looked up the site and could see why CD wanted to develop it. It was therefore worth asking the agent's opinion about the suitability of the site for development.

7. Safeguarding

7.1 LG introduced her Safeguarding Action Plan and went through it in detail. She sought advice and agreement on actions she had identified as necessary including putting up posters, provision and use of a safeguarding email address, obtaining a list of church activities and adding safeguarding pages to the church website. She sought answers to a number of questions arising from the Council's responsibilities, including insurance cover, risk assessment and Health & Safety.

7.2 LG had updated or written several policies which the Council approved as follows:

- Safeguarding Policy
- Parish Statement on dealing with allegations
- Statement on Domestic Abuse
- Safeguarding responsibilities when hiring out premises
- Safe Use of Images Policy
- Recruitment of Ex-offenders Policy
- Dashboard Action Plan

7.3 PD separately agreed the *Promoting Safer Church* document in his role as churchwarden.

7.4 LG also raised a number of issues for discussion, about which the Council gave its views and offered advice. This included the updating of the Video Conferencing Policy, giving more explicit advice in the Safer Use of Images Policy about the posting of photos in the *Whatsapp* group, DBS checks, safeguarding training and articles to be written for *St Mary's News*.

7.5 It was agreed that the Health & Safety Policy needed to be revised. This was not specifically a safeguarding issue for LG but rather was for the Council to review in due course (see section 5.2 and 5.3 above).

ACTION:

- (i) LG to progress this work, incorporating the Council's views and answers to questions etc, including finding out the definition of 'church officer' for the purposes of section 7 of the Parish Statement.
- (ii) MJ to add Health & Safety Policy to the central list of policies and keep under review.

8. GDPR

8.1 TR explained that the previous day there had been a minor, contained data breach. This was discussed and it was agreed that the breach needed to be reported to the Information Commissioner's Office within 72 hours.

ACTION: PD to report breach to ICO.

8.2 MJ reported that he also had an item to report but this was best dealt with later (see section 9.15 below).

9. Committee reports

a. Finance

(i) Financial Report

9.1 PD said that unfortunately the Council had not received a financial report. However, he had examined the data available up to 31 August. As this was two thirds of the way through the financial year it gave a good indication of the direction of travel. He observed that congregational giving was substantially down with only some 50% of budget income having been received. Rent from Brightwell Road was also down and needed to be chased up. The overall expenditure was broadly in line with forecasts.

9.2 PD reported that although progress had been made, it had not been possible to meet the goal of fully transitioning JF to book-keeping duties by the end of October due, in part, to delays in making her a bank signatory.

9.3 It was pointed out that the figures referred to might or might not be accurate and were several months out of date. However, if income had dropped as PD had reported, the end-year deficit could considerably exceed the forecast at the start of the year of £25,000.

9.4 TR said there were difficulties reconciling the figures to the end of August with the apparent increase in giving of £9,500 per annum previously calculated by PD (see

section 4.1 above and section 9.2 of the October 2022 minutes). Furthermore, he was aware that invoices for lettings had been issued and paid and these should have resulted in an increase of income. This indicated that the financial situation might not be so bleak but, as the figures were not up-to-date, this could not be substantiated. PD commented that his estimate of increased giving was based on the increases in Standing Orders that he had seen. It was possible that other giving, and other forms of income, had not kept pace.

9.5 There was a lengthy discussion in which the Council agreed that the church appeared to be heading for a very significant deficit and the overall situation could be said to constitute a financial emergency. TR reiterated his concerns that too much was being expected of PD and about the way the finances were being reported. In his view there had been problems for several years with too much reliance on verbal reports, and things had become worse. He suggested that an emergency meeting of the Finance Committee should be convened as soon as possible to collectively unscramble the finances. This was necessary to put the Council in a position to properly consider the options set out in the paper by RC, TE and MJ: *Proposals for reducing expenditure this year and in 2023*.

9.6 Others took a different view. The reporting situation up to April 2022 had been satisfactory but since then the Council had wrestled with an absence of financial information. It was now just six weeks before the end of the financial year at which point the Independent Examiner would become involved and was likely to be critical of the situation. There was an urgent need at this late stage of the year to seek outside help through requesting the Archdeacon to arrange for the necessary expertise to sort out our financial systems, in line with the exchange with the Archdeacon that TR had mentioned in previous meetings. Among other points made, it was observed that we needed to be very mindful of what was set out in the *PCC Accountability* booklet: "As PCC members, we are responsible for the money, how it is looked after, and for providing clear information about all of our money that belongs to the church."

9.7 There was discussion about these alternatives. TR and PD considered there was a need for the Finance Committee to gauge whether and to what extent outside help might be required. Others considered that the issue was that we needed to understand why our systems could not produce reliable, up-to-date figures. If we had been capable of addressing this issue ourselves, we would have been able to resolve the problem. As we had not, we needed outside expertise. This reporting deficiency was a different issue from the problem of being in deficit, which was an issue that we shared with many churches. Once we had reliable, up-to-date figures the scale of any deficit would be revealed and we could, if necessary, then seek advice on addressing this. It was emphasised that the Council was not critical of those involved with the day-to-day keeping of the church's financial records because there were any number of reasons why there might be problems.

9.8 It was agreed that these alternatives were complementary. Thus, there should first be an emergency meeting of the Finance Committee, to include TR, PD, GW, MJ, RC, JF, Anniefrida Kadzura (AK) and Helen Baldwin. MJ would then write to the Archdeacon requesting assistance, incorporating any useful pointers from the meeting about the areas where that assistance might be required.

9.9 Accordingly, RC put the following proposal to the Council which was seconded by TE and agreed unanimously:

The Council notes that:

- *In recent years, St Mary's income has not covered its operating expenditure, with the result that its reserve funds have been seriously depleted.*
- *Income and expenditure forecasts prepared at the start of 2022 indicated that another significant end-year deficit was likely, with consequent risk that the reserves policy set by the Charity Commission would be breached.*
- *The church's financial systems have not been able to provide the Council with up-to-date financial information for most of 2022, and despite continued requests there seems little prospect of this situation changing in the near future.*
- *An appeal to the congregation was made in July but its impact on income is unknown. Remedial actions to reduce expenditure significantly could impact on individuals and have large impact on the working of the church. The Council has not felt able to take these measures without a clear picture of its finances.*

In view of the operational and reputational risks inherent in the continuing absence of reliable financial information, the Council mandates the PCC Secretary to write to the Archdeacon of St Albans setting out the situation and requesting the urgent assistance of a financial expert from the diocese in order to restore confidence in the church's finances and financial systems.

ACTION:

- (i) TR & PD to convene an emergency meeting of the Finance Committee by 2 December
- (ii) MJ to write to the Archdeacon requesting urgent expert advice.

9.10 MJ reminded the Council that one of the recommendations in *Proposals for reducing expenditure this year and in 2023* was that the church's refund and tithe of lettings income of around £9,000 should be suspended. This was normally paid around the end of the year. He said that this payment should be postponed pending accurate, up-to-date figures to enable the Council to come to a fully informed decision on the recommendation. This was agreed.

ACTION: PD to advise AK/JF to postpone the relevant payments.

(ii) *Report on cleaning contract expenditure*

9.11 TR reported that the Facilities Manager had written to him answering the questions Standing Committee had asked about the cleaning contract. He had not forwarded this to the Council as it was in simple Q&A format and did not constitute a report. He recognised there had been delay which reflected the current workload.

9.12 MJ pointed out that over four months ago the Standing Committee had unanimously agreed this report should be done by 31 August and that he, RC and TE had sent regular reminders about this. They had given explanations and guidance, put questions to help focus the report and corrected misunderstandings. However, there had been on-going delays despite their best efforts. He recognised the increased pressures with the loss of the Curate and Children's Worker but said he needed to emphasise that if the PCC agreed that something had to be done, it must be done and done according to the agreed timescales.

9.13 PD said that if questions were asked of the contractor there were concerns the charges would increase. MJ said he had previously addressed this point: nobody was being asked to contact the contractor but to analyse the contract against the service we were actually receiving to see if it was value for money and, if not, if there were cheaper alternatives (see section 9.13 of the minutes of 10 October 2022). It was important to identify if there were any cleaning savings to be made. If not, they might have to come from items far less easy to cut.

(iii) Israel Update

9.14 MJ said he had circulated the exchange of correspondence he had had with the Archdeacon. She had advised that he and RC should meet with Person A to discuss their concerns and that the extract of the Israel discussion from the September minutes could be shared with them. A meeting had been arranged and MJ and RC would report back to the Council at the next meeting. To prepare for this, MJ said he had asked TR and JF to provide the documentation so that he could prepare a timeline of events to facilitate the meeting. He expressed his grateful thanks to them for taking the time to do this. He shared some extracts with the Council which gave a flavour of the complaints.

9.15 He noted that there had been a data breach on 3 February 2020 when an email containing certain personal details of those on the 2018 trip had accidentally been sent to those who had booked for the 2020 trip. This had now been reported to the ICO.

9.16 TR reported that everyone who had asked for a refund had now received it. He hoped the meeting with Person A could be resolved amicably but expressed the concern that if the present level of scrutiny were maintained, it could further damage his health.

(iv) Christmas Flowers Budget

9.17. TE asked if there was a budget for Christmas flowers. The Council's view was that as this was discretionary expenditure monies from the General Fund could not be used. However, as it was important for flowers to be displayed during Christmas, TE should ask the congregation during Sunday service(s) if they would like to donate money specifically for Christmas flower arrangements.

ACTION: TE to liaise with TR about announcements at morning services

(v) Hardship Fund

9.18 TR reported he had received his first request for help with the cost of living. He asked the Council for guidance about when and how to allocate monies from the Fund to those in need. Suggestions included the person having no recourse to public funds, whether offering assistance would make a significant difference, and distributing funds to the person either regularly (e.g. monthly, weekly) or as a one-off payment. Much would depend on the amount available in the Fund. PD confirmed no accurate figures were available but he estimated from what he and others had been told by donors that some £1,000-£1,500 had been donated to date.

b. Buildings

9.19 RC introduced his written report and gave an update. Work was progressing on the bell platform and was expected to be completed by the end of November.

9.20 RC had had a meeting to discuss practical aspects of the proposed AV system which would result in a detailed proposal of the physical implications for the church. PD commented that the item in the report was better referred to as an 'upgrade of the AV'.

9.21 RC reported that on several occasions a small leak had occurred in the Church Centre over the partition between the lounge and Pre-School areas. The new roof was under warranty and subject to further investigation he would be contacting the roofing contractor.

9.22 PD noted that the ventilation duct for the children's toilets passed through the boiler room in a manner which arguably constituted a fire risk and was therefore inconsistent with building regulations. Remedying it would require expenditure. RC responded that he had provided an estimate for this work, but when the Buildings Committee had inspected the boiler room several other matters of similar nature were identified. He would ask our Inspecting Architect for advice when he carried out the Quinquennial Inspection early next year. PD also raised an issue over the operation of the light and extraction fan in the toilets. RC agreed to discuss this further with PD.

ACTION:

- (i) RC to contact the roofing contractor about the apparent leak in the Church Centre roof.

(ii) RC to discuss fire safety issues in the boiler room with the Inspecting Architect.

c. Pre-School

9.23 MG presented the Pre-School Committee's (the Committee) report to the Council. There were now four members of staff, one of whom is an apprentice and the aim is to appoint another more experienced and qualified person to be Deputy Manager by January 2023. Pay had been reviewed and some adjustments agreed from January.

9.24 MG said that the Committee had discussed the Council's decision about defibrillators (see section 9.30 of the minutes of 10 October 2022). The Committee had concluded that, irrespective of any arrangements by Watford Council, it would be beneficial for the cheaper type of defibrillator to be purchased and kept in the Church Centre, so that it could be used if required by the church community. TR reported that he had not yet approached the Council.

9.25 MG reported that the Committee was concerned about the safety of the children in the garden owing to the low hedge and railings. There was a risk that children could climb over the railings. Although there were Conservation Area restrictions that applied to this area, a solution might be to put up some willow screening inside the railings to increase security and safety. Council members strongly agreed with these safeguarding concerns. In particular, members were worried that children could be snatched by a passer-by. RC offered to convey these concerns to Watford Borough Council.

ACTION: RC to contact Watford Borough Council to convey the PCC's safeguarding concerns about the low fence/railings around the children's garden area and to discuss possible solutions.

d. Climate Emergency Committee

9.26 RC reported that a meeting of the Climate Action Group was planned for 24 November and he would report back to the Council at its next meeting.

e. Missions Committee

9.27 There was nothing to report.

10. PCC membership

10.1 MJ reported that he had written to three Council members about their attendance and had circulated the emails to the Council. One member had not replied but was in attendance that evening. One had replied that he would be attending but TR said he had received a text during the meeting saying that that member had been delayed at work. The third member had promised to telephone MJ on 23 November.

ACTION: MJ to report outcome of the third member's call.

11. Deanery Synod

11.1 TR reported that the meeting of Deanery Synod for November had been cancelled. The next meeting was due in February 2023.

12. Groups using church facilities: communication

12.1 TE explained there had been several instances of her Thursday Connect Group being interrupted by people coming and going from the Church to the Church Centre, often to use the toilet facilities. She asked if something could be done by the Facilities Manager; in particular that she (TE) be advised of any groups using the Church or Centre while Thursday Connect Group was taking place. TR considered that a solution would be for the doors in the link corridor between the Church and Church Centre to be locked which would result in people using the west door into the Centre if they needed to use the toilet facilities. He also undertook to see if TE and others could obtain access to the Church Diary e.g. on the Church website.

ACTION: TR to discuss with the Facilities Manager improving communication about, and practical management of groups using church facilities, including wider access to the Church Diary.

13. Vicar's Report

13.1 TR reported that there had been progress on tackling the anti-social behaviour of the small community which tended to gather outside the Church drinking alcohol etc. There was to be a meeting on 22 November and another in December to discuss and agree solutions in consultation with New Hope. He confirmed that he was also involving the Lead Chaplain of WTCC in this issue and commented that it was likely this group would be invited to the Christmas Day lunch.

13.2 It was observed that there needed to be a balance between dealing with this community's anti-social behaviour and reaching out to it and consequently the Christmas lunch initiative was welcomed.

13.3 TR also reported that:

- he had attended a helpful conference arranged by St Alban's & Peterborough Dioceses reflecting on ancient wisdom;
- the 2022 pilgrimage to Israel had been successful and had been greatly enjoyed by the pilgrims, including DK who supported TR's comment.
- the Remembrance Service and parade on the afternoon of 13 November had been well received. Further, St Mary's could be a part of the work being carried out by Luther Blissett and others working with ex-servicemen.
- it had been a joy to attend a re-union of youth workers he had worked with in the 1990s, many of whom had graduated to ordained or other full time Christian ministry.

13.4 TR set out the schedule for forthcoming services, in particular Advent and Christmas, which he confirmed would be publicised:

- 27 November: The 5.30pm Encounter Service would be an Advent Carol service
- 4 December: 10.30am Worship for All with Christingle
- 11 December: Afternoon service for the bereaved
- 18 December: 10.30 am Family Nativity, Lessons & Carols in the evening. The time for the latter was normally 6.30pm but as the World Cup Final was taking place that afternoon, this would be shifted to 7pm, subject to discussion with Anthony Wilson.
- 24 December: 11.30pm Midnight Communion
- 25 December: 10.30am Family Christmas Service
- 1 January: 10.30am Worship for All

14. Health & Safety

14.1 RC reported a serious incident that had occurred at the Cloisters Office. Our usual electrical contractor had carried out the remedial works identified in their 5-yearly inspection on Friday 4 November but in the course of that work two wires had been incorrectly connected in a wall socket. When a member of New Hope (NH) staff had put a plug in the socket on Monday 7 November there had been in a loud noise and unpleasant smell. Fortunately, the person had been holding the insulated part of the plug at the time and had not been harmed although the equipment attached to the plug had been damaged. On receiving news of this incident, RC had immediately contacted the electrical contractor who had urgently checked all the wiring, ordered replacement equipment and commenced an investigation. This found that the electricians concerned had been at fault and consequently they had been given written warnings and had been sent on a training course. The firm had made a donation to NH. NH had reported the incident to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and in the light of the contractor's prompt and appropriate response considered the matter closed. PD had similarly arranged for the incident to be recorded in the church's H & S register. RC considered the contractor had acted swiftly and correctly and pointed out that this had been the only incident he was aware of over the period of at least 20 years that we had used the firm.

15. Any other business

(i) Car parking

15.1 TE reported that she had had a conversation with Peter Taylor about the difficulties of car parking for members of St Mary's and the organisations using the church in view of the work being done for the Watford community. He had offered to meet her to discuss this and TE said she would report back to the Council in due course. The Council thanked her and expressed its support for her initiative.

(ii) *Together in love and faith*

15.2 MJ explained that earlier this year the Church of England (CoE) had completed its biggest ever consultation on sexuality and might well change its stance on gay marriage in the near future. Steven Croft, the Bishop of Oxford, had written a booklet *Together in Love and Faith: Personal Reflections and Next Steps for the Church* in which he set out the reasons for his change of mind on the issue, examined whether the relevant scriptures support gay marriage and explained possible next steps for the CoE. MJ recommended that Council members read the booklet as before long PCCs might have to take some key decisions on this issue. It could be purchased for £2.50 from <https://store.oxford.anglican.org/product/together-in-love-and-faith>.

(iii) *Christmas Candles*

15.3 MG reported that the wooden holders used for candles at Christmas for many years were in a state of disrepair. Volunteers who put up the holders and lit the candles used to stand on the pews to do so but these tasks had become difficult with the removal of the pews. Consequently, it had been suggested that new holders would be placed across window ledges where the candles could be more easily lit. This was approved by the Council.

16. Date of next meeting

16.1 The next Council meeting will take place at 7.30pm on 9 January 2023 in the Church Centre.

The meeting closed at 10.45pm with the *Living God's Love* prayer.

Marcus Jones
PCC Secretary