PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCIL OF ST EGELWIN, SCALFORD

AND ST MARY, CHADWELL

Minutes of special meeting held on 27th Nov 2021

at 2pm in St Egelwin’s Church to discuss St Mary’s Church, Chadwell

Present from the PCC: Rev Canon John Barr, Paul Taylor (Lay Chair of PCC), Penny Clemons (Churchwarden), Helen McNamara (PCC Secretary), Sue Taylor (PCC Treasurer), Doreen Ottewell (PCC member representing St Mary, Chadwell

Other people present were residents from Wycombe and Chadwell.

1. Rev Barr opened the meeting by explaining the purpose of the meeting was to provide an update about the physical state of St Mary’s, Chadwell, which is currently closed, to give residents of Wycombe and Chadwell the opportunity to express their ideas and feelings about the church and to discuss the options available for the future of the church. He stressed no decisions would be made at this stage. Paul Taylor would be chairing the meeting and there would be input from Penny Clemons (Churchwarden) and from Gill Elliot (Buildings Development Enabler) from the Leicester Diocese.
2. Paul Taylor took over as Chairperson of the meeting and explained Penny Clemons would first explain the current situation and answer questions, followed by Gill Elliot who would outline the options available for the future of St Mary and answer any points people wished to have clarified.
3. A questionnaire had been compiled which would be circulated to all households in the two villages, which could be completed in person or online and to be completed by Friday 3rd December. Gill Elliot will collate the questionnaires and submit the results to the PCC by 14th December. Speakers were asked to limit themselves to three minutes to allow everyone present the opportunity to speak.
4. Penny explained how the management of St Mary’s is carried out. The PCC have the responsibility of making decisions and making sure expenses are paid. For some years the practical task of raising money for repairs and caring for the building has been vested in the Friends of St Mary’s. Before the church was closed because of the pandemic, only four services were held each year, plus a monthly prayer service. These were poorly attended. With the relaxation of Covid restrictions a letter was sent to residents asking for help and one offer was received.
5. Penny further explained that concern was raised over cracks which were appearing in the structure of the church, the insurance company insisted that external safety fencing should be placed around the chancel and the tower, the church should be kept locked, the electricity should be disconnected and an architect’s quinquennial inspection (a once every five yearly report carried out in all churches) should be carried out as a matter of urgency. The latter was done and showed there were several very serious issues with the fabric. The PCC took the decision, based on cost, to insure the church for public liability only, at a cost of around £2,000. The money comes from the St Mary’s account, which is totally separate from the Scalford Church account, but which is finite if money ceases to come in from the community.
6. The current structural problems have no doubt been slowly happening for some years but have only recently manifested themselves in visible cracks in the walls and a sudden collapse in the floor. Two contributory factors could be extremes of wet and dry weather and a lack of external drainage at the base of the walls. It will need a great deal of commitment for these problems to be remedied.
7. Questions answered by Penny:
8. Rod Weston – Will the insurance only cover the making safe of the site? “Yes”.
9. Ivor Vaughan – Did the insurance cover subsidence before this happened? “No”.
10. Geoff Goodwin, Chairman of Friends of St Mary’s then outlined the repairs he considered needed to be carried out. He believed it would eventually need £65,000 to carry out all repairs, but £53,000 of this would be needed within the next two years to make the building safe. If this was done the church would be in a stable condition for at least 25 years, and then it would be up to future generations to take over. He said the church was 1000 years old, needed to be looked after and maintained for future generations, and the residents of Wycombe and Chadwell should have the final say in any decisions made. The residents would need to vote on whether they would accept a commitment to raise the £53,000, each household to have one vote and 30 days for votes to be made.
11. Gill Elliot then introduced herself, said it was important for residents to have their say and that she was here to facilitate this. It was important to raise the level of discussion and look at options available for the future of the church. She works with many churches in poor condition and it doesn’t always have to result in closure.

The national picture is one of a huge number of highly listed churches, costs of repairs are much higher for listed buildings, and the buildings are often difficult to adapt for other uses. There are also falling numbers of people to look after these buildings. The community would need to look at how St Mary’s, Chadwell could be made into a sustainable asset to the community. Gill then outlined the following options, but firstly explained that the closure of Chadwell Church is only to be thought of at the moment as temporary:

**Keeping the church open:**

1. **Looked after by the PCC**

The church is legally looked after by the Scalford Parochial Church Council, which is ultimately responsible for both churches within the parish. It would need more people, with particular responsibility for St Mary’s to be part of the PCC. Some people may feel uncomfortable with this.

1. **Looked after by a sub- committee of the PCC or a Trust, or a CIO (a Charitable Incorporated Organisation)**

This would mean having a relationship with the PCC but not direct membership. There would need to be several legal processes to allow this to happen.

For either of the above options to be sustainable, it would need the church to be used for community needs as well as church services – questions about this on the questionnaire. As an open church it could operate as a Festival Church, as at present, with services only on special occasions (i.e Christmas, Harvest etc), and the rest of the time be used for alternative activities.

Money – at the moment to PCC are responsible for raising money, although in practice this has been done by the Friends of the Church for some years, and there are grant funds available to the PCC, but the situation is bleak at the moment, so a considerable amount of money may need to be raised by the local community.

Questions answered by Gill and points put to her by residents:

1. Geoff Goodwin – Friends of the Church have been raising money for years and maintaining the church building.
2. Question asked about ownership of the building – churches are considered to belong to the local communities, but on a Trustee basis, members of the PCC being the elected Trustees, who have a custodial responsibility to maintain the building where possible for successive generations.

**Closing the church as a place of worship**

The process to close a church is a legal process which has a number of steps. The first step is for the PCC to initiate a local conversation with the primary question being “Is it needed for the cure of souls?” There has to be the enabling of representations and conversations with key stakeholders.

A closed church is one at which weddings, funerals and christenings can no longer take place.

A question was asked about who pays for the insurance. Doreen replied that it was the church that paid the insurance and not the Friends of St Mary’s.

A question was asked if this would mean that the doors will be locked and no community use would be allowed. Gill explained the following options:

(a) To re-purpose the building – the churchyard being dealt with separately. The building could be leased to other organisations, but it makes more sense to keep the church open and use for all purposes.

1. Another option is for ownership to be transferred to the Churches Conservation Trust, who look after churches of significance. However, at the moment they will only take on one or two churches a year so this option is unlikely to be available.
2. To demolish the church and redevelop the site, but this option is extremely difficult to achieve when the building is listed, St Mary’s being Grade 2\* which is the second highest listing.

Questions were asked about who gets the money if the church is sold for re- development – this would be the Diocesan Board of Finance.

Paul Taylor then thanked Gill Elliot for her presentation, re-iterated that she will collate the questionnaires and react accordingly. Geoff Goodwin, Chairman of the Friends of St Mary’s repeated his earlier claim that the issue should be put to a vote by the residents, but Paul explained the current exercise was about information sharing and not decision making. Gill said it was important to identify the people willing to support the church and that definite commitment was needed.

Lisa Neale - felt there was little support at the moment.

Chloe Jardine - felt there had been a lack of information sharing over the past few years. She also said that although there was a shift away from religion during recent years, particularly among younger people, there were people like her who were still passionate about keeping the building in use.

Sue Wall – loved the church but feels it is impossible to raise such a large amount of money in a relatively short time. She thinks there are not enough people who would be interested in using the church as a social hub. Also asked about who has legal responsibility, to which Gill Elliot explained the following:

1. that as an open church the church is subject to the faculty system (the Church of England legal system for controlling what happens with church property), but as a closed church the building would then be subject to listed building consent for any work carried out. There is also legislation in place regarding articles in churches.
2. As a repurposed building there would be a legal process go through to obtain change of use, the first stage being to inform residents, but other bodies such as Heritage England would also have a say. This process can take considerable time.

Ron Edwards – Is there funding available for Grade 2\* listed buildings and is it possible to get the church upgraded to Grade 1 in order to attract funding more easily? – No this is not likely and is in the hands of Heritage England who are responsible for listings, although funding could be available to St Mary’s as a church which had been identified on the “building at risk” register.

Ron Edwards – how would we get funding for this need? – You would need to establish what purpose you wish the building to be used for and what need there is for this purpose. Realistically it is virtually impossible to get funding for a closed building, but also extremely difficult to get funding if the building is kept open unless sustainable use can be shown.

Point raised by resident that funds would need to be raised but more people would have to show willing – Gill Elliot agreed that the bulk of the work would rest with the local community.

Geoff Goodwin – reasserted his claim that each household should have a vote on how to proceed. – Gill explained that the questionnaire is not just about fixing the fabric but the future use and sustainability of the building are things that the PCC also has to bear in mind.

Sue Wall – concerned that everyone will agree to help when filling in the questionnaire but will disappear when action needs to be taken.

Penny Clemons – made point that in recent years hardly any practical help has been forthcoming and Doreen was no longer able to do this all on her own.

Ron Edwards – would it be better to keep the building open in the hope of getting funding? – Gill – cannot tell local community what is best to do, but can only inform re the options.

Chloe Jardine – if the pews were sold it would bring in a small amount of income and improve the space for community use.

Paul Taylor summed up by thanking everyone for taking part, Gill for coming and explaining the options and Helen for taking the notes.

John said the questionnaire is designed to assess the feelings of each household when they have been given all the information and had time to think around the whole situation.

The meeting was then closed.