

Parish Amalgamation Consultation St Brendan, Harwood and St John the Evangelist, Bromley Cross

Paper 1: Considering the Future of St Columba, Tonge Moor

Although St Columba is not included in the proposal for this particular amalgamation (SB & SJ), its future status does have an impact upon it. At the very least it is likely that its amalgamation with the parish of Holy Infant & St Anthony will need to be deferred (due to the health of the current parish priest there) and so pastoral responsibility would need to continue being provided as part of its relationship with SB & SJ for the foreseeable future. This is not ideal.

It may be useful to remind ourselves that the deanery proposals (published in the diocesan consultation document of June 2016) included the closure of St Columba church (following amalgamation of the parish with both Holy Infant and St John). This was changed in the final diocesan proposal (published in January 2017), once St John was taken out of the equation and so there were only two parishes merging.

Initially, that diocesan proposal seemed to be a good way forward since it preserved the church building and there was a sense of relief that we would not have to face the pain of a closure (especially in an impoverished area). However, the change of plan did not take account of the stark reality of the position St Columba parish is in with regard to attendance, property and finances. These issues have been brought more sharply into focus by the preparations being made for the demolition of the presbytery and the securing of the site. Can we justify the expenditure for an uncertain future?

Attendance

The report presented at the last Parish Forum meeting showed a year on year falling Mass attendance, with present numbers being 111 of whom between 50% and 75% are from SB, SJ or elsewhere. When we made the decision to reduce to just one Sunday Mass in each of our three churches (February 2016) the numbers attending the 10.15 Sunday morning Mass at SC had fallen to around 50 (and 65 at the 6.30 Saturday evening at SJ). The current attendance, as noted above, is boosted by people from both SB and SJ (where there are no Saturday evening Masses).

We do not currently have any weekday Masses at SC, except occasional school Masses and funerals. Attempts to provide regular weekday Masses there were not responded to – with the few people who attended being largely those who happily travel to SB or SJ for Mass on other days. Even prior to December 2012 (when SC became part of this arrangement of parishes) the numbers attending weekday Mass were so small that Mass was held in the sacristy area (and even then a good number of the few attending were regularly from SJ).

Although there are quite a number of baptisms and we have a full school, this does not translate into good attendance at Mass. Nor will the anticipated building of more houses within the parish boundary necessarily boost the numbers attending in any significant way. Given the small size of the resident and active congregation, it is clear that this is not a viable parish community, which is why it is being proposed for amalgamation with a neighbouring parish. However, the question remains as to whether or not, again on the grounds of the small numbers attending, there is any justification for retaining a church within this part of the amalgamated parish?

Property

It is a sad reality that the property at SC is not in good condition. Both the church and the presbytery were surveyed in 2013 and both reports indicated that a significant amount of money needed to be spent to bring these buildings up to scratch. This reflects the poor financial state of the parish over many years, which prevented any regular programme of maintenance.

Investigation of the presbytery showed that there was a significant problem with dry rot. Since there was no proposed use for this building, a decision was taken that it should be demolished. However, we were asked to put that on hold until a decision had been made about the church.

Following the publication of the diocesan proposals (January 2017) we have revisited the option of demolishing the presbytery and some of the buildings connecting it to the church. This is not simple and straightforward, since it calls for remedial work to the church building (e.g. the making good of walls) and the diversion of electrical wiring and heating pipes. Another major concern is the security of the site, which would require the erection of a new fence around the quite extensive perimeter. The overall cost for this work is in the order of £130K + fees + VAT. The fabric of the church itself also needs extensive work, with the 2013 estimate being approximately £40K.

It is not therefore unreasonable to anticipate a capital outlay of around £250K (including fees + VAT) being necessary to bring the church and site up to a reasonable standard. The question is whether or not it is justifiable to spend this amount of money and then saddle the newly amalgamated parish (SC and Holy Infant) with this debt to pay off, especially given the likelihood that the SC portion of that parish would not be able to make much of a financial contribution.

Finances

The financial statement circulated at the last Parish Forum meeting covered the period from January 2013 to June 2017. It showed that the parish is currently in deficit by approximately £2,500 with no capital balances. It noted that many of the costs associated with the church, the clergy and wages are in fact being borne by SJ (and some by SB). It is therefore hard to see how undertaking the proposed demolition and retaining the church can be paid for without expecting Holy Infant to foot the bill. It is also hard to see how the ongoing maintenance of the church would be paid for.

Solutions?

The only proposal put forward at the Parish Forum meeting was to involve a developer who might build on the site of the presbytery and help with necessary work on the church or who might re-develop the site to include a small chapel or Mass centre. The meeting noted that such a proposal would be longer-term and would not address urgent premises or financial problems (and nor, indeed, would it address the issue of poor attendance). I have discussed this suggestion with the diocesan property manager and we were both of the view that it was unlikely any developer would be interested in this site if a substantial part of it was being retained for a church of whatever size. On the other hand, a developer might be interested in purchasing the site of both the church and the presbytery and the agreed price might either include the cost of demolition (by that developer) or might cover the cost (if demolished by someone else).

Although financial considerations are obviously important, the more significant question is about the purpose of keeping a church building which has poor attendance and is only used regularly once a week. Over a reasonable period, there has been no indication that parishioners are interested in developing any activities based around that church or indeed within that parish area. Given the location of the church (at the top end of the parish), those few parishioners who do attend have to travel some distance to get there. It would not therefore be unreasonable or particularly difficult for them to travel a little further (or in some cases a little less) to attend a neighbouring church. SB is 1.2 miles from SC, SJ is 1.6 miles and Holy Infant is 1.4 miles.

Given all the issues raised in this paper, my recommendation is that we ask the bishop to reconsider the proposal about amalgamating SC with Holy Infant and keeping the church open. It seems more sensible to me that we close the church and then divide the territory of SC parish between Holy Infant and the newly formed "SB & SJ" parish (whatever it may be called). This has the advantage that the parish priest at Holy Infant (whether Fr Molloy or his successor) would not have a second church or second school to be responsible for. More particularly, it means that those few parishioners of SC who attend Mass or are interested in other parish activities will be being invited to be part of two thriving parishes (Holy Infant or "SB & SJ") rather than struggling to keep a small community going.

Rev Canon Michael Cooke VG
Parish Priest
10 August 2017

You can respond to this consultation via www.sbsj.org.uk or via <https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/W9RTXL6> or using a paper response form available in church.
There will be a meeting for St Columba parishioners in church after the 5pm Mass next Saturday evening (19th August).