

2021 Annual General Meeting of the Forest Parish

In Attendance

John Fallon, Joan Holloway, Barnabas Page, Brian Lord (Joint Chair Fabric & Finance), Dot Lord (Joint Chair Fabric & Finance), Eddie Bainaville, Pam Bainaville, Julia Sams, Tessa Wards, Helen Crawford, Barbara Rakowski, Slawek Rakowski, Dorota Dufort, Fiona Mills, Beverley Chisholm, Peter Chisholm, Susan Hamilton Smith, Sam Buchanan, Sara Perkins, Pip Deave (Chair, Pastoral Council), Noel Riossi

Apologies: Helen Molyneux, Richard Coward, Teresa Hoult (Treasurer), Paul Dekkers, Keith Pannen

2019 AGM MINUTES

Due to the Covid pandemic the last AGM was held in 2019. Copies of the 2019 Minutes had been made available at the start of this AGM. There being no matters arising the 2019 Minutes were approved.

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR

The Chair delivered her Report to the AGM. It had been two years since the last AGM and the intervening period had been challenging. In particular:

- Our much-loved Sister Celestine had departed this life at the end of 2019. She had been a major influence on the lives of many Forest parishioners over many years and was very much missed.
- The Covid pandemic brought about a national lockdown in early 2020 resulting in the suspension for many months of the ability of Forest parishioners to gather together in worship. From a standing start we adapted quickly. We developed and implemented an online facility to record Masses and other services and make them available to parishioners over the Internet.
- Our fledging St. Vincent de Paul operation had to suspend activities and remains stalled at present. The hope was to revive this early in the New Year.
- It had been necessary to suspend the opening of churches for private worship. Sadly this state of affairs remained unaltered at the present time. The aim was to revisit this in 2022 but much would depend on how the pandemic progressed.

Despite the strictures of the pandemic we had managed to keep the life of the parish going and there had been some notable success:

- The online Mass offering had developed and grown over the intervening period so that we now had a full Live Stream service available not only to the Forest parish but also to Newent parish. Viewing figures proved that this facility had been a great success. It was appropriate to record particular appreciation to Peter Chisholm who had enthusiastically embraced the task of creating and delivering recording and live-streaming facilities. Thanks were also due to all the Forest and Newent parishioners who had given generously in order to fund delivery of the facility.
- Despite the suspension of the church Collection Plate (due to no physical services being possible) the Forest parish was in a healthy financial state. We had managed to carry out several major repairs and refurbishments at our churches and still maintain healthy reserve funds. On the revenue side we had ended the financial period covered by this report with a small surplus of income over expenditure. Thanks were due to all parishioners who had adapted to new ways of making donations and giving generously.

- The operation of prayer and discussion groups had continued throughout the pandemic as an online function and physical meetings have recently been held.
- There had been a successful launch of the 'Inspired' initiative designed to open up a dialogue between the Pastoral Council and parishioners. The first leaflet had been issued in June 2021 and had received a positive response with many thoughtful responses having been received. An emerging theme from opinions expressed was the recognition that if the aim of a long-term future for Forest churches was to be secured it would be necessary to give serious thought to the possibility of having a single Mass centre, in an accessible location and with good transport and other support.
- Planning permission had now been received for residential development of Sedbury church. Formal offer for sale was in abeyance pending the resolution of an outstanding legal issue.
- It had been possible in 2021 to re-start the social life of the parish. The Parish Picnic held in mid-summer had been a great success as had been our Annual Fete in September. On a local level the Coleford Harvest Soup Supper was our first indoor social event since the commencement of the pandemic. Hopefully it would be possible in 2022 to re-start other indoor events such as the Friday Lunch Club.

Looking to the future there was still much to be done:

- The successful functioning of our parish churches was dependent upon the willingness of volunteers to give of their time in order to perform a number of functions. Age and infirmity were slowly but surely reducing volunteer numbers and a major effort would be required in order to garner new volunteers and to organise them by providing defined tasks and by providing guidance on the performance of those tasks.
- There was a major gap in our provision of facilities for young people and families in order to encourage them to become more active within our parish community. Raising the profile of the Forest Parish in the local community and improving links with other organisations was key to this and the Council would give further thought to how this might be achieved.
- Provided that parishioners were in agreement the Council proposed to progress thinking around the concept of one single church for the Forest parish. This would unfortunately involve the closure of churches within the community, which would be upsetting for some, but on any dispassionate analysis this was the only way forward to maintain a healthy, vibrant and viable community for the long term. A single centre could be low maintenance with adaptable and flexible space that would enable us to offer facilities of interest to new young Catholics.

On a personal note, the Chair wished to thank both her fellow Council members for their willing involvement, hard work and support, and also all volunteers who did so much behind the scenes to keep parish churches clean and running smoothly.

It was proposed that the Report from the Chair be approved and adopted and on a show of hands the AGM unanimously approved and adopted the Report.

REPORT FROM FABRIC AND FINANCE COMMITTEE

Finance

A summary Financial Report had been made available at the start of this AGM. As mentioned in the Report from the Chair our financial position for the full 2020 financial year was satisfactory with healthy reserves and a small income surplus. It was appropriate to note the following;

The figures shown for 2021 were interim in nature being calculated to 31st October 2021. Final figures would be available early in 2022 following the end of the 2021 calendar year.

Living and other general expenses for our parish priest were initially paid from out of the bank account for St Margaret Mary Coleford. Subsequently a contribution proportionate to the other parish churches was transferred between accounts.

The bank balance shown for Our Lady of the Victories at the end of October 2021 contained funds that were awaiting transfer to St. Margaret Mary to cover Live Streaming contributions.

Gift Aid was available on loose plate collection income provided that individual donations did not exceed £30.00p

Given the ongoing nature of the Covid pandemic parishioners were encouraged to donate to church funds by Direct Debit or Standing Order wherever possible.

Fabric

St. Margaret Mary

There was significant expenditure this year at SMM in Coleford. A new heating system was required to replace the old gas heating that had been deemed unsafe. Repairs to the roof were also required followed by essential internal redecoration. Live Streaming equipment was also purchased, although this latter expenditure item would be the subject of contributions from both Our Lady of Victories Cinderford and Our Lady of Lourdes in Newent.

Our Lady of Victories

The Cinderford church has its own buildings sub-committee and also its own reserved budget to cover the particular maintenance needs of that church. That sub-committee is chaired by Greg Moger who exercises tight control over the budget. It is also worthy of note that Greg has personally undertaken valuable maintenance work in the year to date and the Committee feels it appropriate to record its appreciation of the time and effort that he has devoted to the task of maintenance.

General

It should be noted that oversight of major expenditure is provided through both the use of a Purchase Order system to ensure that tenders, quotes and similar were properly drawn up and costed and also through overview by the Forest Pastoral Council. All cheques for such expenditure must be signed by the Chair of the Council.

ELECTIONS TO THE PASTORAL COUNCIL

The Constitution of the Forest Parish called for members of the Pastoral Council to be elected on an annual basis. The Chair reported that all current Council members had indicated a willingness to continue to serve. No other candidates had put themselves forward for election prior to the AGM. The Chair invited candidates to offer themselves for election, but no such candidates emerged. Accordingly the existing Council members were duly proposed, seconded and elected to serve for another term. Those re-elected were;

Coleford

Peter Chisholm, Sarah Perkins

Lydney

Dorota Dufort, Pip Deave

Cinderford

Richard Coward, Noel Riossi

Sedbury

Helen Molyneux

A small number of posts on the Pastoral Council are subject to appointment by Father Barnabas. Those re-appointed were:

Brian Lord (Fabric & Finance)

Dot Lord (Fabric & Finance)

Fiona Mills (Safeguarding Representative)

DATE OF NEXT ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The current AGM had been unduly delayed by the Covid pandemic and so it was necessary to take steps to restore the natural AGM cycle. Several alternatives were discussed but finally it was the unanimous wish of the AGM that the next Annual General Meeting should be held in April 2022.

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

'One Church' Proposal

The notion of moving to a 'one church solution' was challenged. The view expressed was that most parishioners wished to retain the existing churches. Although the rationale for moving to one church was supposedly financial, the current accounts showed a healthy financial position and so the case was not made. In addition, many parishioners were elderly and would find it difficult to travel to a central location.

Views were also expressed in support of the proposal:

- One parishioner was fully supportive of the suggestion that we might share premises with other faiths for sacred and other purposes. Having lived for many years in Switzerland where this approach was commonplace he was in favour of the idea. The system had worked very well, with Christians, Jews and Muslims all having dedicated areas set aside for worship and sharing common areas for other purposes. It was of course necessary to draw up a Rota so that services did not impinge upon each other, but this had never caused any problems.
- Another parishioner made the point that people resources were also an important consideration to be borne in mind. It was a fact of life that the Forest parish was dependent at present upon a fairly small number of volunteers, none of whom were getting younger. If there were only one church to be maintained this would make the task of volunteers very much easier.
- Another parishioner raised the issue of the continued availability of a Parish priest. Our Bishop was on record as saying that within a few years the Diocese could expect to have insufficient priest to meet Diocesan needs and that many parishes might need to accept sharing a Parish Priest.

Father Barnabas was asked to comment upon the future of Parish priests. His view was that change was inevitable. The Church is suffering from both an ageing priesthood and a shortage of new priests. Our Diocese had some younger priests but not a sufficient number to meet its needs. The Religious Orders who had in the past provided priests to run parish churches had largely withdrawn from this role. Although he could not provide a timescale at present he did foresee a time when there would be one mass in the Forest and one mass at Newent each weekend.

A number of other salient points were raised by parishioners:

- People would be willing to travel. On a show of hands at the AGM it was clear that the majority of people already travelled to services.
- Transport would need to be a priority if a 'one church' solution was to be adopted. Might it be possible to organise a Rota of parishioners willing to provide transport for others?
- Not everyone had the luxury of a church on their doorstep. In the Forest parish there was a time when Lydney had to share facilities with Sedbury and the arrangement worked well.
- If the parish was indeed reliant upon a dwindling band of ageing volunteers then there was a pressing need to bring younger people into the churches. Given the number of new residential developments in the Forest there had to be a pool of younger Catholics available. How might they best be reached? Should the parish consider employing someone to run a Mother & Toddler group or something similar?

The Chair made the point that no decision had yet been made regarding the future of Forest churches. That said, responses to the 'Inspired' leaflet clearly suggested that parishioners would accept change if such were to be necessary. Therefore she invited a 'show of hands' upon the proposal that the Pastoral Council be mandated to continue discussions upon the possibility of a 'One Church' solution.

The proposal received unanimous support from the AGM.

Business Model for the Forest Parish

Referring to comments earlier in the AGM concerning church income and financing the question was posed as to whether there was any form of business modelling available for churches to be run on a more commercial basis. Might we ask the Diocese to streamline the current system for accounting for donations received?

The AGM was informed that the Diocese was already engaged in an effort to move from its Diocesan-administered donations system to one that was based on parishes administering their own donation receipts. Appropriate training for parish finance representatives was in the course of being arranged.

The overall view of the AGM was that the Forest parish should be slow to consider any move towards a business-orientated operating model. The primary function of churches was to operate on a charitable basis and sight of that fact should not be lost.

Church Synod

The attention of the AGM was drawn to the fact that Pope Francis has called upon the Catholic Church to engage in Synod to discuss whether the time has come to create a different Church based around the principles of Communion, Participation and Mission. The Forest Parish had arranged a series of sessions during the Advent Season, commencing on 1st December, to consult with parishioners upon their views regarding the questions his Holiness is asking about the future direction of the Church. All parishioners were encouraged to contribute to these sessions since it was important that the upper echelons of the Catholic Church might be made aware of the views of the worldwide Catholic community.

'American Dirt'

The attention of the AGM was drawn by an attendee to the book 'American Dirt'. This book was an expose of the problems faced by refugees and immigrants trying to pass from Mexico to the United States of America. Inter alia the book drew attention to the active role played by the Catholic Church in both Mexico and the USA in seeking to ameliorate the refugee crisis and this parishioner recommended that all Catholics should read the book and reflect on the story it told.

There being no other business the Annual General Meeting concluded at 1225 hours.

Notes to the Minutes

- (1) A full copy of the Report from the Chair to the Annual General Meeting is available on request from the Parish Office.
- (2) A summary of the responses received to the 'Inspired' initiative may be obtained from the Parish Office.

In order to obtain copies of the above please contact Sam Buchanan in the first instance by either;

Telephone:01594 833173

Email:forestrc@cliftondiocese.com

- (3) A quorum of members being present a brief meeting of the Pastoral Council was convened. At that meeting;
 - Pip Deave was re-elected to serve as Chair of the Pastoral Council
 - Noel Riossi was elected to serve as Secretary to the Pastoral Council