

Summary of the Renewal Meeting held on Saturday, 2nd March, 2019

Present: Robina Debnam, Linda Wheater, Alfred Wheater, Mike Barry, Simon Latham, Janet Yates, Jenni Balcomb, Isobel Barron, Siobhan Evers, Harriet Middelboe, Susan Ridley,

Apologies: Phillip & Celeste Slater, Sara Booth, Amanda Waples, Michelle Davison, Damian, Fiona & Phoebe Walsh, Pauline & Joe Butler, Chloe Hopkins, Mick Hughes, Roger & Josie Pettett

Summary of the Renewal Meeting held on Sunday, 3rd March, 2019

Present: Nelion & Libby Ridley, Rob Sinnot, David Jarvis, Kate Fox, Sheelagh Chapman-Foort, Matt Foster, Linda & Alfred Wheater, Robina Walsh.

Plus visiting Catherine Wellingbrook-Doswell 6th March 2019

This summary will mainly cover the official meeting on Saturday 2nd but comments across all meetings have been recorded.

Linda started the meeting with the Stewards of the Gospel prayer. She then went on to give a slideshow which explained fully the future for the churches in the Parish Partnership, as made clear in the Vision Document, The slides showed that at present we have six priests, nine churches and 16 weekend Masses.

By 2021, according to Fr Martin Nott of Dunmow, many of our priests will have retired and we will be left with just 3 priests allotted to the North Essex Deanery by Brentwood. We will still have 9 churches, 16 weekend Masses, with each priest only being allowed to serve a maximum of 3 Masses per weekend. Leaving a huge logistics problem.

It was made clear to everyone that the SotG in the PP have to find a way of making our allotted 3 priests work. We would like to try to make sure all churches have a least one Mass per weekend with the larger churches having more Masses to accommodate their large numbers.

Linda showed charts of Mass attendance numbers, Bardfield & Thaxted were the lowest, fire risk numbers and number of Masses each weekend in each church in the PP.

We have two large churches in our Deanery which are almost at their legal capacity with attendees and needing 3 weekend Masses. The outlook is one of Masses being withdrawn where possible, church closures where possible and the sharing of priests.

Harriet Middelboe gave voice to the fact that we must all accept change since every church in the NE Deanery would be affected by the lack of priests.

Mike Barry had looked at the situation over the past week and agreed it was very complex and needed flexibility and co-ordination by the PP and clergy. There are no quick answers.

Catherine Wellingbrook Doswell asked if Brentwood would consider linking with another Diocese who could help us by sharing their priests. She also asked what Brentwood was doing to encourage young men to enter the priesthood, the time it takes to become a priest should be considered. This will be put to the PP at our next meeting.

Alfred told the meeting that the one glimmer of hope for the future of Bardfield Parish is that he had spoken to Fr Kevin Hale, the Vicar General, enquiring what we as a parish should expect if Fr Richard Rowe retired. Fr Kevin said that he had some priests retiring this year and so long as we brought our priest's house up to specifications, we would be considered as a suitable parish for a retired priest who did not want to forego saying Mass whilst having lighter parish duties.

This brought forward more debate in the meeting. Everyone agreed that we must begin the refurbishment of the flats immediately. We explained this had already been approved by the Parish Council, and dependent on funds, we will now proceed with all necessary works.

Alfred further explained that he had taken Fr Richard to see Bishop Alan last week. During the meeting Fr Richard was assured by the Bishop that he could continue saying Mass in the Anglican Church in Thaxted for as long as is necessary. Jenni Balcomb asked where the Blessed Sacrament was stored. Janet Yates assured us that nothing is left in the Anglican Church and storage of all sacred vessels is with Fr Richard.

Whilst Alfred was at Brentwood he managed to see Steve Webb, who is overseeing the Vision Document for the Bishop. He asked him the present position with our church at Thaxted. Steve said it is still with Brentwood's surveyors and the insurers. Alfred asked if there would be any objections to Bardfield housing a retired priest and Steve replied that Bishop Alan would fully endorse this but added this was not his (Steve's) area and we must talk to Fr Kevin to firm up any arrangements.

Simon Latham then suggested that we sell the property at Thaxted since the church is unlikely to be repaired and the money raised from the sale, after a donation to the Anglican Church in Thaxted, would enable us to do all the necessary work to the Church in Bardfield to house a priest who could continue saying Mass and helping with the problem of the allocation of only 3 full time priests. This will be put to the Parish Council and Brentwood since the church and the grounds would have to be de-consecrated before any sale could be negotiated.

Linda suggested that a Chapel could be built in the Priest's House to accommodate those parishioners who find the stairs up to the church in Bardfield un-negotiable. It could be called 'The Chapel of the English Martyrs'. The Stations of the Cross and, hopefully, the Altar from Thaxted could be placed in this chapel. This will be brought before the Parish Council.

These very important Renewal Meetings were attended by as many parishioners as the SotG could reach and we have asked those present to share what they have learned with others.

We are entering a challenging time for our Diocese, Deanery and Churches, we can only succeed with the help of our community working together. To this end we would ask you to attend as many Renewal Meetings as you can, offering your ideas, talents and time. Your Stewards of the Gospel are working on your behalf and endeavouring to keep you fully informed and aware. Please remember them in your prayers.