

The Reasons for Proposing a New Church for the Solent Pastoral Area

History: In the 1950's there were three churches in our area, St Mary's Gosport, Sacred Heart Fareham and a small corrugated iron chapel at Lee-on-the Solent. At this time after the war there was a rapidly growing Catholic population due to immigration and the post-war baby boom. Vocations were also plentiful, helped by many priests from Ireland. Development of the area proceeded very quickly. New parishes were established in Park Gate, Portchester, Stubbington, & Bridgemary. In 1993 there were 7 parishes served by 8 full-time priests.

The Situation Now: Now in 2006 we have four parishes served by 4 full time priests who generally work a six day week with regular commitments from morning to evening. Our Sunday congregations have declined by somewhere between 13% and 28% between 1998 and 2005. Yet we still have 9 churches to maintain. Two churches (St Mary's & Sacred Heart) are historical buildings and must be retained. Three churches (St John's, Our Lady of Walsingham, St Columba's) have a small capacity and of these one (OLW) is in need of extensive repair and the other (STC) in need of refurbishment. Of the four remaining churches St Margaret Mary, Park Gate has been recently extended & refurbished and is the only church serving the west of the area. St Philip Howard is too small for current needs and because of poor design & cheap build materials is inappropriate for extension. Immaculate Conception church is meeting current needs, but poor design has meant that the roof has given problems right from the start. Nearly £100,000 has been spent on repairs since the church opened, and while at the moment the repair is satisfactory the underlying design fault still remains and causes concern for the future. St Joseph's church is also in need of extensive repair and refurbishment.

The Future: By 2020 we will have just half the number of priests we have now and this is not allowing for unexpected deaths and departures. If current trends continue our Sunday congregations will have fallen by somewhere between 23% and 45%. This will entail falling church income as against rising maintenance costs.

The Diocesan Pastoral Plan: Our situation is not unique. Bishop Crispian initiated a very extensive process of teaching, discussion and consultation that resulted in the launch of the Pastoral Plan in September 2005. The two central foundations of the plan are the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist and the creation of Pastoral Areas. **Centrality of the Sunday Eucharist** means the unbroken practice and tradition of gathering together on the Lord's Day to celebrate Eucharist (Mass). We are one Body in Christ and this unity should be reflected in the way we celebrate Eucharist. As far as circumstances allow as many people as possible should be able to come together to celebrate Eucharist every Sunday. The consequence of this belief is that small, occasional Sunday celebrations which fragment the community and cannot accommodate everyone are not desirable even though they may be convenient for smaller localities. The development of **Pastoral Areas** means that parishes which operated more or less independently are now called to work together in a wide range of pastoral, liturgical, catechetical and administrative responsibilities. New ways of working have to be developed which are appropriate to local, parish, area and diocesan levels. At the same time local communities are to be sustained and supported.

The Proposal: The proposal is to build a new church, as central as possible to Fareham, Gosport, Stubbington & Lee. (Park Gate is not really affected by this proposal but will be affected when clergy numbers are reduced). It is hoped that the project can be wholly or largely funded from the sale of existing church properties.

What will be gained by having this new church? Firstly, together with the remaining churches (St Mary's, Sacred Heart & St Margaret Mary), we will be able to accommodate all our practicing Catholics at Sunday Mass every week. It is hoped that most people will gain by having this new church roughly within 4-5 miles. Secondly, we will have a centre for drawing together and concentrating the energies and talents from the wider pastoral area. Thirdly we will have more opportunity to nurture our young people who will feel less isolated and find greater support from one another. Fourthly our priests will be more available after Sunday Mass to meet the people who need to see them. Fifthly it is hoped that priests will no longer be over-stretched particularly with regard to their Sunday duties and that absences due to sickness or holidays will be able to be covered from within the pastoral area. Sixthly, it is hoped that significant savings will be made on current maintenance and running costs. Finally this a proactive response to the challenges facing us. This is to be preferred to the sudden cancellation of Masses and the inevitable and unprepared for closure of churches.

What are the losses? Every parish loses something. There is no preferential treatment. There will be the planned and orderly closure and disposal of six existing churches (St Joseph's, St Columba's, St John's, Our Lady of Walsingham, Immaculate Conception and St Philip Howard). There will be losses of more local facilities and connections. Two of the churches are adjacent to our schools who make use of the churches from time to time. People will have to travel further. Getting to the new church will be more difficult for those without transport. Individual Mass time communities will be dispersed and people will need to make new connections. There will be a serious challenge for both priests and people to nurture local communities without the presence of a local church building. It will be a test of the depth of our commitment to one another locally. There may be some remaining debt on the new church.

Why can't we keep all our existing churches open? This would mean the eventual rationing of Sunday Mass around the churches. It would not be possible to accommodate everyone. Buildings would be underused and under funded. The clergy feel this would be a recipe for slow, visible decline with buildings and grounds falling into disrepair and vulnerable to vandalism. It would place tremendous burdens on clergy in terms of travel, oversight and responsibility.

Why can't we just use our main churches and invest in them? This is a possible alternative to the proposal. St John's, St Columba's & Our Lady of Walsingham would have to close as soon as we dropped to 3 priests. St Joseph's could possibly be retained a little longer. If we kept the Immaculate Conception it would need a whole new roof and St Philip Howard would have to be rebuilt if its was to accommodate the larger congregation. Our clergy would still have to work to maximum capacity all the time, with no "slack in the system". Holidays and absences due to ill-health could not be accommodated. Sudden cancellation of Masses would be inevitable in some circumstances. Maintenance costs and burdens would be still be relatively high.

Why can't we import priests? Why can't we have married clergy or women priests? The UK still has the highest ratio of priests to Catholic population in the world after Malta! Other countries, especially Africa & Asia have much greater needs than we do. Making priesthood more available to others may be desirable in itself but it will not necessarily solve our problems. The Church of England has both married and female clergy and still has similar problems. And at the moment it is only the universal Church under the authority of the Pope which can allow such changes. This seems highly unlikely and discussion of these questions was prohibited under Pope John Paul.