

## **The Parish of Stony Stratford with Calverton**

### **A Middle Way – Background information for the Parish**

*A sub-committee of the PCC<sup>1</sup> was tasked with finding a way to resolve the differences expressed at the November 2022 meetings about the future direction of the parish.*

This Anglo-Catholic parish was identified by the Archdeacon as one with which we have a lot in common and have found a 'middle' way which as Fr Christopher Woods says, is unusual and almost unique in the CoE but has been working well for them, though they are now going through a period of discernment though not an interregnum (Fr Christopher is the incumbent vicar).

### **Parish of St Barnabas and St Paul, with St Thomas the Martyr, Oxford**

During the Zoom meeting, Fr Christopher Woods explained the history to their situation.

Before he was appointed about 4 years ago, the parish, which had merged in 2015, reviewed their resolution in 2018 and agreed to leave the society but still have a resolution and statement of Need under the House of Bishops Declaration. Four candidates for vicar were shortlisted and interviewed – two were Society priests, two were not. A non-society priest was appointed to the role (Fr Christopher).

The parish has women in many lay roles, including women deacons, some of whom preach, but none of whom are ordained priests. Until a year ago, it had episcopal oversight from the Bishop of Oxford who allowed the PCC and vicar to work with the Bishop of Ebbsfleet which in practice relied on close communication between the vicar and the then Bishop of Ebbsfleet. For the past year, since the Bishop of Ebbsfleet became a Roman Catholic, the parish has had oversight from the Bishop of Oxford only and has continued to flourish without oversight from a Society bishop.

Worshipping and living in their parish they have a woman who is training to be a priest, She will become a deacon in July 2023 and be ordained priest in 2024. The Diocese has asked the parish if they would consider having her as a curate.

This circumstance prompted the PCC to enter a period of discernment, which ends in January. At their PCC meeting on 21 January 2023 they will vote on their Resolution and Statement of Need.

In its open letter about the period of discernment (see <https://www.sbarnabas.org.uk/updatesandnews/2022/11/30/ministry-of-women-priests-in-our-parish-an-open-letter>), the St Barnabas PCC and vicar have stated that should their Resolution and Statement of Need be rescinded, it would undertake to accommodate the very small number of parishioners (3) who have strongly declared that they would not accept the sacraments from a woman priest, in the following ways:

1. We would ensure that on every Sunday and major Festival, at least one of the Masses in the parish is celebrated by a man who has been ordained by a male bishop.
2. We would ensure that those who are unable in conscience to receive the ministry of a priest who is a woman are able to call upon a male priest for any of the relevant Sacraments (for example Confession, or Anointing).
3. We would ensure that we detail who is celebrating each Mass, so that we are as transparent as possible with all.

### **Advice for our Parish**

Fr Christopher read through the document containing all the Interregnum news and extracts from the questionnaire report Peter sent to him before the Zoom meeting. He suggested that maybe our parish was at the stage of needing a similar arrangement to his parish before the Bishop of Ebbsfleet left. In practice this would mean leaving The Society and Forward in Faith, having oversight from the Bishop of Buckingham and establishing a working relationship with the new Bishop of Oswestry, once he is in post, with the agreement of the Bishop of Buckingham. This would have to be agreed by both Bishops who would need to work with each other as well as our parish. Fr Christopher emphasized the importance of building good communication relationships with and occasional visits from both Bishops, which has been his approach since he was appointed. There would be a need for the new Bishop of Oswestry to work with the Oxford Diocese, while being located in the Diocese of Lichfield. Apparently the Bishop of Oswestry is

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<sup>1</sup> Sub-committee members: Peter Eales, Anna Page, Mike Parsons, Gwen Yates.

likely to be licensed as an Assistant Bishop in the Oxford Diocese, presumably to enable him to work with other Society Parishes in the Oxford Diocese.

Fr Christopher also advised that it was healthy for a PCC to periodically review the Statement of Need.

## Follow Up

Gwen sent the following questions about the **St Barnabas PCC** open letter to Fr Christopher via email and he replied after the meeting.

In the procedures it says:

a. *We would ensure that every Sunday and major Festival at least one of the Masses in the parish is celebrated by a man who has been ordained by a male bishop and*

b. *We would ensure that those who are unable in conscience to receive the ministry of a priest who is a woman are able to call upon a male priest for any of the Sacraments.*

1. Are these visiting priests?

They could be visiting priests if necessary, but at the moment it would be either myself as Vicar, or one of my retired priest colleagues or the male SSM assistant priest.

2. Who would have pastoral care over the congregation as a whole?

Myself as incumbent

3. Would those who want the sacraments from a male priest, accept the pastoral care of a female incumbent?

I think we discussed this question and that pastoral care that is not specifically sacramental can be received by all

4. If not, how would this be arranged?

5. How would these priests be paid for?

Because they are either SSM, retired or visiting, they would be given expenses by the PCC

6. Would the male priest and the incumbent (if female) conduct some services together such as Easter? For instance, if the incumbent was female and an Anglo Catholic you could be in a position where you would be having two Anglo Catholic celebrations of the Easter Mass

This is an important question. For us in our context, I'd envisage alternating between the Easter Vigil, the 8am Mass and the main Parish Mass year by year.

7. Would the male priests have Episcopal oversight by the Bishop of Oswestry?

If the PCC votes to rescind the current resolution, then all the priests would receive oversight from the Bishop of Oxford

8. Would these male priests necessarily have to be Forward in Faith priests? If not, then this opens up the position to many more male priests who have been ordained by a male bishop but do not disagree with the ordination of women.

No, they would not have to be Forward in Faith priests (though they could be). And indeed as you say, if they weren't Forward in Faith, there would be a wider range of male priests to call upon.

9. How would you organise children and young people activities when you have opposing theological views in the parish?

Our Sunday school leader is currently a female, but yes, one would have to think creatively and sensitively about this.

Fr Christopher also responded to email questions from Anna about the Statement of Need, clarifying some points, including (importantly) that what their parish had until a year ago was not 'dual oversight' by the two bishops though it may have looked that way, in fact it was:

"The Bishop of Oxford maintained oversight of the parish as Area Bishop. It wasn't completely delegated to the Bp of Ebbsfleet. He allowed the PCC and myself to work with the Bishop of Ebbsfleet in a sustained and collaborative manner (how that worked out in practice was in fact reliant on a close communication between myself and the then Bishop of Ebbsfleet). So I guess to most people it looked like 'dual oversight', and it worked well for the parish when I was appointed. It was a creative solution to a very 'mixed economy' parish. But legally I don't think dual oversight is possible; and in actual fact the arrangement was made possible because the Bp of Ebbsfleet was an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of Oxford."