
St Petroc's Church

Firstly, on behalf of both the Methodist Church and St Petroc's Church Councils thank you for inviting me to speak tonight. I hope that I will be able to provide you with a useful update as to 'Church' in Petrockstowe.

If I may I will split my comments into three distinct sections;

The first will be to talk about the problems we face

The second will be to talk about 'Church' here in Petrockstowe,

The third will be to talk about the historic building we call St Petroc's Church.

Let's start with the problems:

I am sorry to say but the main one is money!

Over the last 50 years church attendance has declined. At St Petroc's our normal average Sunday congregation before COVID had reduced to only about 10 to 12 people. In contrast the cost of running the church – Heating, Insurance, Grass Cutting, Cost of Clergy (Salary, Pension, Training, Housing, etc) has increased each year. The monthly cost to the Parish of Petrockstowe, before we undertake any repair or maintenance on the building would now be running at £1,059 a month. It's not a good comparison, but to illustrate the problem we face, if we treated each service as an event where people paid an entrance fee, then each person would be paying over £88.00 per month just to cover the basic costs of running the church. This is one reason why we need to fundraise as most church attendees do not have pockets deep enough to meet these costs.

At one time every church had its own Vicar, but sadly this is no longer the case. Martin looks after 9 Parishes. His resources are limited which in practice means he is only able to provide a church service once a month. The majority of the monthly costs are still incurred, but with only one service a month it becomes increasingly challenging to meet the monthly running costs.

To this we now add a building that is in need of major work. The roof is suffering from nail rot as well as a mixture of dry & wet rot. The gutters need replacing and considerable work to the stonework is needed to stop water penetration. The drainage needs to be sorted with soakaways re-dug as well as downpipes unblocked. Considerable work on the tower is required before the clock can be repaired, which includes fixing a crack which is almost wide enough to put your hand through to the outside. Even then there would be no kitchen or toilet facilities, and the lighting and heating would still be very poor.

Like many of our local churches we could see that the work could only be financed with external grant assistance. We involved the church approved Architect in the multiple applications we submitted and as an idea of the costs involved just to repair the building he costed the recommended work at £500,000. It should be noted that this did not cover every defect and there would have been substantial work still to undertake at a later date. In addition to the grant applications we launched an appeal, which raised nearly £10,000. We are extremely grateful to everybody that supported this but clearly our congregation, and I am going to suggest that our wider village, was not able to finance the required work to initially repair and then maintain an old Grade 2* listed building. This money was an important part of our grant applications as almost every grant provider expected us to be able to put some of our own money towards the costs, often their support was limited to just matching what we could raise.

We were unlucky, the grant system changed at about the same time, nearly 10 years ago, that we started to apply for grants and it has consistently become harder for small rural churches to be successful as the rules and expectations of the grant providers changed each year. We were no longer competing for money against just other small churches but were now competing against Art galleries, Museums, Tourist Attractions, Cathedrals and the like. One of the new key factors for success was the amount of Heritage at the 'venue' and how we would promote this to bring a wider audience into contact with the heritage. To make our life

even harder the rules worked against us, as increasing the number of people in church on a Sunday would not be counted or seen as a success factor – as they do not want to be seen to be promoting religion. Submitting a grant application is not cheap process, each application cost at least £1,000 with the professional reports and fees that were needed to be submitted with each submission. We felt we came close to success with the last application, only to fall at the last hurdle as it was felt we had insufficient Heritage (compared to a museum, gallery or cathedral). They illustrated what success would have looked like – They expected us to have lots of schools wanting to visit in addition, as Devon is a Tourist area we would be expected to find ways of encouraging tourists to visit. At the entrance to the church it was suggested that we provide each visitor with an I-Pad to guide the visitors on a tour of all the heritage points of interest in the church. To me – there expectations sound far more relevant to a large urban church rather than a rural village in North Devon.

That was 2019 and we really were not sure what to do next - Then COVID struck and we could not use the building for services and were unable to fundraise. The grant rules changed yet again now focussed on supporting people impacted by COVID – our team of employees could have benefited!

During COVID we made a decision to use the appeal money to undertake urgent repairs to the building rather than support future grant applications. We would like to thank Dorian, Kate & Barry for the work they carried out. We had a very limited budget and a sizeable problem but they approached it in part as a service to the church and village. So publically let me say Thank You for the help you gave us. Despite these emergency repairs being carried out on the roof, bearing in mind that the amount of money spent was only a fraction of what was actually required' it is not really a surprise that within 2 years further water penetration led to water pouring over the main fuse boards and the electrics being declared dangerous.

But let's go back to 2019 and our repeated failure to obtain grant assistance. As I said earlier we were not sure what to do next, but we, St Petroc's Church Council, did start to consider what we would do if, or even when, the building deteriorated so much that we were unable to use it. It was not difficult to answer we had two options, either go down the road to the Methodist Chapel or come here to the Baxter Hall – problem solved!

It took us until the end of the year before we, the Anglicans and Methodists, started to speak to each other and we discovered how lucky we had actually been, as both churches were in real danger of being closed. The Methodist Church had also seen reducing attendance over the last 50 years. They also had similar pressure on their clergy in that there was no longer a Minister in each church. Chris, the Methodist Minister now looks after 13 churches, which like the Church of England means that only one service a month can be provided in each village.

The Petrockstowe Methodist Church had only a very small number of members and rule changes in the way that the central Methodist Church viewed the ongoing viability of a church meant that that they would now be below the minimum threshold and were at real risk of closure.

Both churches were assuming, without really talking to each other, that if one had to close there was always the option to go to the other church – we nearly left it too late! In my career I was always taught not to assume as it only made an ass out of U and me (for those that have not seen this write out the word ASSUME – the first three letters are ASS, followed by a U and then by ME)– if we had not started to talk we could have been faced with the closure of the Methodist Chapel due to its low membership as well as the closure of St Petroc's due to the physical condition of the building – This would have resulted in Petrockstowe having no church at all as both the Methodist Church and the Church of England were encouraging in these situations people to travel to other churches as an alternative means of attending church.

This takes us to the second part of this talk – Church here in Petrockstowe

What is Church? – is it the building or is it the people? We firmly believe that the people are the church – we happen to worship in a building that is also called a church, which often causes confusion. It is important to make the distinction between church and church building, as our ‘Church’ is thriving despite the problems with the building.

The discussions between our two church councils quickly highlighted that both churches were at real risk of closure. Whilst a challenge, it really helped focus our minds and concentrated our thoughts on making sure that we maintained at least one church building here in Petrockstowe. I think it is worth stating that this is being driven by us, the church congregations here in Petrockstowe – it is not something that is being forced on us from outside the village. We want to preserve a Church Building in Petrockstowe. By combining our resources we could see that a solution, a good solution exists.

The Methodist Church building does not leak! It is easier to maintain, cheaper to heat, easier for people to get to, you do not need to go along a worn out slippery Grade 2* listed path to find the front door, it has kitchen and toilet facilities, I think you can see the attraction.

St Petroc’s Church has the larger congregation but that means more people to share the workload. But could we work together?

Locally it was a no-brainer – we already work together on a regular basis on lots of things, we hold joint services, and importantly are friends together – so why not join together every week. I know it could be seen as arrogant, but we knew it would work but we needed to prove this to others. That is why we started a trial period of working together some 10 months ago.

I think the trial period surprised a lot of people – it was far more successful than they or indeed even we expected.

Whilst the clergy of both Methodist and Church of England could only commit to provide one service each a month, we made an important local decision – we would hold an act of worship in our village every week, if clergy were not available we would lead it ourselves.

We think it has been really successful:

- It is an equal partnership between the two churches, recognising that both are as important as each other.
- The number attending church each week is increasing and is greater than we used to see in the two separate churches. Average attendance is about 27 people, although we often exceed this figure.
- We have over 24 people involved in the running of the church through the various rotas – Leading services, reading, prayers, flowers, coffee, cleaning, etc. It is most definitely OUR church.
- We have held a weekly act of worship every week since August last year.
- Recognising a need in the village and surrounding area we agreed and started a new group meeting on a Monday morning – Tea & Tots, to support new mums. Whilst we average 16 mums & tots, if everybody turned up we would have over 30 in a very noisy school room.
- Our bell ringing team is now ringing at Shebbear, Langtree and Peters Marland and has grown in number; we now have 22 ringers, which include 7 children.
- Importantly we are looking forward together to the future – what else can we now do.

So at the end of December, the end of the 6 months trial, it was of no surprise that both churches approved making the merger of the two churches more permanent. We have now come together under our new name - Petrockstowe Community Church and, if you haven’t tried one of the new services I would invite you all to come along to see how we are doing – we feel that it is a church for the whole community and you would be made very welcome.

I know there has been some concern over the future for Weddings, Funerals & Baptisms in the village. Our partnership and successful church mean that these will be protected and will still be held in the village. The church service will be held in the Methodist Church building, but either a Church of England or a Methodist service can be requested. If it includes a burial this will still take place in the churchyard as before.

The legal process to form a Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnership is going to take a long time, probably another 18-24 months. We are told that in some respects we are breaking new ground with this partnership and particularly our insistence on the equal status of the two denominations. Once legally formed we will be both Methodist and Anglicans, each member will be a member of both denominations. In reality all this work will be behind the scenes as our new church has already been formed. We are Petrockstowe Community Church and you will find us under this title on Facebook, our Website, Village Newsletter, our pew Sheet and increasingly anywhere else we can use it. We are Petrockstowe Community Church – Your church here in Petrockstowe.

Which now takes us to the third part of the talk - what is going to happen to the old Church Building?

I, like everybody involved in this decision, am extremely saddened that we are being forced to close the old church building. It does have a lot of history, many memories have been created or celebrated within the building, the prayers of generations have been said together from the pews, it is sad that we are bringing this to an end within this building, although I am sure that we will continue to create memories, celebrate special occasions and fill our new home in the Methodist Church building with prayer.

I must stress that does not affect the churchyard, as this is planned to become the responsibility of Petrockstowe Community Church and its use will go on as it is now.

As you are aware our original fears over the condition of St Petroc's have now turned into reality. I think if you asked some of the parents of our young bell ringers, who saw the water pouring over the light switches, they would only be surprised it has taken this long for us to close the church building.

What is clear, and in reality has been for some time, is that we as a small rural village cannot afford to repair and then maintain a Grade 2* listed building as a place of worship.

Ironically its closure as a place of worship may well give it a better chance of survival. For if an alternative use can be found, there would appear to be a greater number of grants available for buildings being used for non-religious activities than a church can access.

So what will happen and what is the process to be followed.

Whilst we have been talking about this for some time the first real step was taken only two days ago. At the Annual & subsequent Church Council meetings held last Sunday (24th), approval was given for a request to be made to the Church Commissioners via Exeter Diocese to formally close the church building for worship. This is required as legally a consecrated church can only be closed for regular public worship by a 'pastoral church building scheme' made by the Church Commissioners. This involves local and national consultation and usually takes 3-4 months to be approved.

At the point of closure "ownership" will then pass to the Diocesan Board of Finance in Exeter who become responsible for the care, maintenance, insurance & safekeeping of the building until the buildings future is sorted out. They, through the Exeter Diocese Church Buildings Strategy Committee, will assist parishes and communities to find appropriate uses for church buildings which are no longer needed for public worship. This means that if we know of an alternative use or someone who wants to use the building they have a few months to prepare their case. Discussion between the interested party and Exeter prior to the point of closure is welcome, but cannot really be advanced until the decision to close has been formally made. The "use –seeking period" usually lasts up to two years, but can be extended for a further period when "ownership" and responsibility passes directly to the Church Commissioners.

When (if) a suitable use is found the Commissioners prepare and publish a “pastoral church buildings (disposal) scheme”, which is subject to a 28 day public consultation before approval is given. If no suitable use is found during this period the Commissioners will decide on what action is to be taken. Let’s have a look at some examples of what they might do; If the church is considered to be of particular historic interest or architectural merit they could vest the building in the Churches Conservation Trust. However this trust has limited funding and only 2-3 churches are vested in this way each year.

Demolition may be considered, but only a small number of churches are demolished each year, this is thought to be an unlikely course of action for a Grade 2* listed building. If demolition was to be proposed and there were objections then the Government could hold a statutory public enquiry. Alternatively the building could be secured and the use-seeking period be extended until an alternative course of action is found.

So in conclusion let me try to summarise where we are;

In reality, whilst the closure of the building is sad, it is not a viable option to continue to host a small rural church in the building. Even if the building could be repaired the ongoing maintenance costs are higher than the available resources of the congregation and if future maintenance is delayed it would just create larger problems for future generations as the building ages.

We do feel that closing the building as a place of worship may well provide the best opportunity for saving the building. Whether it is right or wrong, non-religious organisations have access to a greater pool of grant money than a church does, which could well finance a new venture and life for the building. If any community groups / local businesses can identify an alternative use and obtain the finance, then we would actively encourage them to do so and, now the process of closure has started, approach the Diocese of Exeter to commence discussions over what an alternative use and offer could look like.

Let me finish by just reminding everybody just how close we were to losing both St Petroc’s Church and the Methodist Church in the village. We, the two Church Councils, took the decision that we needed to move fast to make sure that we retained at least one church building here in Petrockstowe, looking back I believe that we were only just in time – if we had delayed I really think we would be holding this meeting and talking now about the closure of both of our churches and their respective buildings.

Instead we are talking about the potential future use of one building and a thriving church in the other. I am going to stop at this point but would be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

Thank You.