

Report of the comments made at Acol Village Hall meeting, 8th August 2023 regarding the "Sustaining the Future" consultation document.

In total, 28 people attended:

Mark Ham, Priest in Charge

Lorraine Bant & Michael Little, Churchwardens

Sara Gower, PCC Treasurer

Tim Maakestad, PCC & Standing Committee member

Maureen Hudson, PCC Member

Paul Seymour, PCC Member

Tim Attride, PCC Secretary

Paul Webster, PCC Member

Jon Inchley, Acol Village Hall Management Committee Chair

Joan Gardiner, Angela Webster, Jo Willett, Alice Willett Green, Karen Ault, Lucie Godfrey,

Phyl Lawrence, Susan Northrop, Carol & Brian Hall, Roger & Sheila Crittenden, Christine

Walker, Gillian Woodbridge, Tina Seymour, Jim Barber, Vera George, Charlie George.

The meeting started at 15.05 with an introduction by Rev Mark Ham in which he stated that he had not expected, when he came to the parish, to be considering closing church buildings, but that it was one option due to the state of the finances. Various plans had been put in place previously (the Mission Plan and the establishment of the Friends of the Parish of Birchington), but none had made any significant financial impact to date that is required to allow the parish to clear its debts and to undertake the necessary building repairs on the churches & halls. Current income does not balance with outgoings.

The following points, questions, concerns etc. were raised during the open meeting:

Concern that a lot of the repair work has been ignored for a long time. The PCC had not seen previous Quinquennial reports to allow them to factor in the work required in a programmed way.

Is there an option to undertake partial repairs rather than complete overhaul?

Could St Mildred's be used as a Festival Church for occasional weddings, baptisms & funerals? Would the provision of worship in the Village Hall be viable, as it has been done in the past when work was being done on the church?

Who would attend if the Hall were used for worship? Rev Mark asked who would be in favour to use the Village for worship (13 in favour, 3 against).

The downside to allowing the church to lie fallow would be that it would fall into total disrepair and if used as a Festival Church, maintenance would still need to be completed and running costs funded.

The option of worship in the hall will be considered. It may not be on a Sunday but this could be an advantage with so many other things happening on Sundays.

Would the villagers miss St Mildred's if it closed? "Yes" seemed to be the predominant answer, even from those who rarely or never attended. One respondent said that,

although he didn't attend, it was comforting to know that the church would be there for his funeral.

One "visitor", who was born in the village, looks forward to attending when they come to the area.

What income is there to the parish from the farmland which it owns? This mostly belongs to St Nicholas parish, and there is a limited amount of land registered in the Parish Accounts. Loraine Bant mentioned the issue surrounding glebe land which was now the responsibility of the Diocese since 1976.

The land on which the hall is built is owned by the Church. A few years ago, the village asked to buy the land – which would have raised a fair sum – but was refused. Now the Church only gets a peppercorn rent.

Some documents are in existence which detail the history of St Mildred's which Phyl Lawrence has and will be given to the parish.

Why is St Mildred's being considered for closure? Sacrificial Lamb? No leaks in the roof etc.

The architect has confirmed that the front portion of the roof needs complete repair. This and other ongoing costs are just not being met by the community at present. In the Consultation document, it is assumed that St Mildred's are required to contribute at least 10% of the Parish Share (P.S.) which when applied to the £70k arrears from 2020 equates to approximately £7k. However, annual collections amounted to just under £700 last year – there is not even enough to pay the electricity bill (although this cost is met by a generous parishioner) let alone contribute to the P.S.

Would villagers consider paying directly to keep the building, even if they are not regular attendees? No good to say they want the church but not willing to pay.

Is there any chance of income from the "Chancel Repair" scheme?

Would the village consider fundraising? Much has been raised for various things in the past although insufficient to cover the costs of maintenance work.

Who could / would go / refuse to go to All Saints to worship? One or two said that they couldn't go without a lift. However, most people who come to St Mildred's do so by car, lifts could be provided.

Could the villagers collectively buy the St Mildred building and the parish supply Priest etc to lead worship subject to the agreement from the Parish and Diocese?

Maintenance would still need to be done if residents purchased the building, which under their ownership would not require the rigour of the Quinquennial inspection process. It was noted that although there are only 300 people living in Acol village they would still need to cover the full maintenance and running costs of the building.

Some villagers had seen no communications from the parish for a long time. Rev Mark, however, stressed that there were several communication outlets including the Facebook page, the weekly Church Newsletter available in church, the Church website and the Parish Magazine etc. The Church Newsletter could be emailed to people from the Parish Office on request. It was agreed that there should be stronger links established with the local Acol magazine.

No Parish Councillors were present, but Rev. Mark hoped that their next formal meeting would include a discussion of the St Mildred's situation.

The meeting closed at 16.20 and thanks were given to Rev Mark for the opportunity to express all the views given openly.