

Changing the Parish of Wimbledon into a cluster or group of Parishes

Introduction

Recent difficulties in recruiting volunteers and staff to key roles in the Parish have raised questions about the long term future of the Parish of Wimbledon. Working out together what the best way forward is for all our churches will take a lot of thought and careful analysis of the consequences and costs of any changes. This paper sets out the history of the team explaining how we come to be where we are. It looks at one possible option, the benefits and disadvantages. Any changes will be ones that are the result of decisions made by the Parish and PCC with the support of others such as the Diocese of Southwark.

How did our churches come to be a Team Parish?

The Parish of Wimbledon began before the Norman Conquest with the establishment of St Mary's church. As London grew in the 19th Century and absorbed Wimbledon; the population of the parish grew. The lower part of the parish became a separate Parish, but the churches north of the new railway line continued to be one parish. St Mary's set up a series of chapels of ease and daughter churches to offer worship to those living further away from the mother church.



The Clergy of the Parish of Wimbledon 1908-10 Canon Bell and nine curates.

By the end of the 19th Century the parish had five places of worship: St Mary's, Christ Church, St Johns, St Marks and St Matthews. These churches would all have been run by the Vicar of St Mary's and PCC with the assistance of a considerable number of curates. There is a lovely photograph, shown on the previous page, of the vicar of Wimbledon with nine curates taken in the early 20th Century. Most of the curates would have lived in a large clergy house on the Ridgway. The houses that now belong to the Parish would have been bought to house senior curates who would have been in charge of the individual churches with others assisting. All of them would have been paid considerably less than the vicar of St Mary's.

By the mid 20th Century the number of curates in the parish dwindled and the churches were running their own finances. Christ Church became independent of the Parish of Wimbledon in 1961 becoming a parish in its own right.

The injustice of the difference between the pay of the curates running churches and the vicar and the gradual reduction in the number of clergy lead to the formation of the team on 31st July 1978. The Pastoral Scheme set up a team of a Team Rector and two Team Vicars for the four churches. The curate houses nearest St Matthews and St Marks became the vicarages for these vicars.

In the last seven years we have agreed with the Diocese a staffing level of one team vicar for each of our four churches and an Associate Vicar of St Mary's. We do not have suitable housing for the Team Vicar of St John's or the Associate Vicar of St Mary's.

Why change our current structures?

Teams in the Church of England make sure ministry is provided where churches cannot have one vicar each. They are essentially a cost cutting strategy.

Now that each of our churches has its own Team Vicar we need to ask ourselves whether the team serves our churches well or a different structure would support our mission and ministry better. The smaller churches of the parish were originally set up as daughter churches. To develop this family metaphor; at the moment we are all living in the same house with the necessary limitations and costs that come with that. Is it time for the smaller churches to leave home and set up on their own? We would still be family, but with different obligations to each other and responsibilities than when we are all under one roof.

There are two things that make this question pressing now. The first is that it is becoming more and more difficult to find the volunteers that we need to run the parish. This means that the burdon on those who do serve is getting ever greater. The amount of administrative responsibility is also growing because of increasing regulation.

We have not had a Parish Treasurer for over a year and in the last five years the two we have had have found the task extremely burdensome. We have had more than two years in the last five with no treasurer in post. We have tried to address this by

employing someone to take on the role but this has not worked. We are now looking at contracting the role and work of the treasurer out to an accountancy firm.

The PCC Secretary resigned in October and it has taken us until now to recruit a replacement. In May we will need a new parish warden from St Marks Church. As St Marks have had only one Church Warden over the past few years, I am expecting that finding someone to take on the parish role will prove difficult. If we cannot find people to take on these key roles the parish stops being viable. As it becomes more challenging to find the volunteers we need to run each of our churches finding additional volunteers to run the team as well becomes less and less viable.

Secondly, the administration cost of the parish is high. It costs a lot of money and takes a lot of clergy, staff and volunteer time to keep the parish functioning. As each of the churches has the clergy and money to be self-sufficient, the high cost is hard to justify. If we did not have the team we could spend more time and money on the primary mission of the Church and our churches. By disbanding the team we would be removing a whole layer of management from our churches.

Why are we having this conversation now?

As well as the issues outlined above now is a good time to have this conversation because we are shortly going to have two clergy vacancies in the team. If we decided on such a change we would be recruiting new people to become vicars of the independent churches. It is easier to make the change at this time and it may also make the roles more attractive to potential candidates for the role of vicar.

We have not started the housing project or centralising our financial administration. If we decided not to continue the parish it would be easier to do before these projects have been begun.

We have the support of the Diocese of Southwark in considering this question. The Bishop of Kingston has said he can see the logic of our moving to a Cluster or Group from the Dioceses point of view.

What is a Cluster or Group ministry

What is being proposed is that the team cease being one parish and become a cluster or group of separate parishes. We would continue to have a relationship with each other, but we would each be financially independent and self governing. The relationship between the churches would be rather similar to changing from a family all living under one roof to adult children leaving home to set up their own households. They continue to be family, but in a different way.

We would explore together what this might look like for us. It would involve the clergy still meeting together to pray on a regular basis. It could mean that we continue to hold services like Ascension Day together. The Church Wardens would meet three or four times a year to discuss the mission of the churches together. We may want to agree to share resources like the photocopier.

What would be the benefits of doing this?

- It would save money. It is not easy to say how much money would be saved as there are some costs that would be borne by the individual churches instead of the team. The cost of the team are also defrayed by owning our clergy housing and the income from the property we rent out. However, we have planned in this budget to spend £44,000 on a Head of Finance. We would not need the services of Caladine and the three smaller churches would not need to have their books audited. They would just need to have them looked at by an independent examiner. Audit would also be cheaper for St Marys as we wouldn't need to pay an external accountant to put our accounts together with the other churches and the audit process would be faster and cheaper.
- The Team Rector role would disappear and I would be able to give all my time to St Mary's.
- There would be fewer meetings: Just PCC meetings for each church instead of DCC and PCC meetings.
- The risks to the churches would be reduced. If one church ran into trouble the others would not be liable for their costs as they are now.
- Each church would be free to make its own decisions and run things in its own way.

Disadvantages of the proposal:

- The most difficult thing to work out will be what to do with the assets of the parish. We have about £30,000 in cash reserves and we own about £9 million of property as a Parish.
- How would we decide where the boundaries of the new parish would be? The parish boundaries would be straightforward as we already have an agreed map of the areas of the parish each church is responsible for. I would expect these to become the new Parishes boundaries.
- We would need to negotiate with the Diocese over the vicarages. Usually the Diocese owns the parsonage of a parish and maintains it and part of the assessment for the Cost of Ministry is a set amount across the diocese for the maintenance of a vicarage is £10,500 this year. It would probably be better for the Diocese to own all the vicarages and be responsible for maintaining them.
- The other property would be a matter for negotiation. A simple solution would be to say that the other property belongs to the church of the parish it stands in.
- We do not have suitable housing for the Vicar of St Johns or the Associate Vicar of St Mary's and individually we may not have the resources to remedy this.
- Some costs that are now covered by the parish would have to be covered by the individual churches: clergy expenses.
- Some costs that are reduced by the advantages of buying as a large organization might disappear: insurance and photocopying.

- We would need to work out how this change would affect our relationship with our Church schools. It would be obvious for St Matthews Church to take on St Matthews school. The relationship between Bishop Gilpin, St Marys and St Marks would need to be worked out.
- The process would be a lengthy one. It would probably take up to three years to complete and would involve a lot of work.

I was very surprised when the idea was first suggested to me by the archdeacon, but having reflected on it over the last couple of months I think it is the best way forward because it would reduce costs and time spent on administration and would mean we could put more of our resources into ministry.

However, the process of getting there would not be quick or simple and has the potential to be acrimonious. My hope would be that if we were working towards not dissolving the parish but creating a new structure that recognises our common past and allows for greater independence we would have an incentive to work together well for the benefit of all our churches and the people of Wimbledon.

This is primarily our decision. It will not happen if we do not want it to, however if we do not think this is the right way we do need to work out how to manage our life together to make it viable, sustainable and meets our legal obligations.

Mandy Hodgson

Team Rector

17th Jan 24