

Reordering of St John's Church

Although there has been talk of reordering for some years, the PCC decision to explore taking action was born of a growing realisation that the current layout of the building is unsuitable for the ways in which we now use the church and the ways we hope to develop our mission. The current pews date from a period between 1840 and 1870, reflecting the layout required for the pattern of BCP services in the Victorian era. Our worshipping life and our engagement with the community in 2019 is very different.

Therefore, last summer the PCC appointed a small group to investigate the possibility of reordering the church. The mandate was to look at all options from doing nothing through to removing all the pews, at the same time investigating the historical significance of the current layout and looking at reordering projects undertaken by other churches in the diocese.

Having consulted groups who use the church for worship, outreach and social events, it is apparent that our present layout is a hindrance to nearly all of them. It is impossible to have any flexibility in arrangements for services, especially for non-traditional and small services. For community events like Little Lambs and the parish breakfasts, the available space is extremely inadequate, which means they cannot function as effectively as they should. In the case of Little Lambs in particular, there are also serious health and safety questions which cannot be ignored. What emerges from this preliminary consultation is that we need to make a choice between changes and limiting or even stopping some of our most important outreach work and engagement with families and the wider community.

The group is therefore recommending to the PCC that the wider congregation now be consulted on three options: removing all the pews; removing only the remaining pews in the North Aisle and a few at the back of the South Aisle; and doing nothing, with the preferred recommendation being complete removal (while leaving the chancel and choir stalls in their present state). Everyone is invited to submit their views to the PCC, either to me as chair or Liz as secretary, by Wednesday, 15 May. It is important to note that no decision has yet been taken and that this is only a recommendation. The PCC will take all views into account at its meeting on 22 May, when it will take a decision on whether or not to begin the more formal process of investigation and consultation necessary for any action.

I have said that everyone is invited to contribute their views and I would encourage everyone to do so. It is critical that all voices are heard and listened to in this process, but it is only possible to do this if people make those views known to the PCC. I would remind you that this is an emotive issue and that we need to debate it properly in a mature and Christian fashion, being willing to listen to one another and respect that other people may in all conscience have different views from our own. I would particularly urge everyone to have the integrity to own their views and not hide behind anonymity, and certainly to avoid gossip or secret whispering campaigns behind the scenes. While people's names will obviously be redacted beyond the steering group, it is important to know who is expressing which opinions and why, not least because only then can there be proper discussions with people about their concerns. Every voice will be listened to. Anonymous contributions will not be treated with the same weight as open ones, and it is worth noting that were it to come to the stage of objecting to a faculty further down the line, the DAC and the chancellor would ask serious questions about why an objector had not raised their concerns openly earlier in the process and tried to seek proper resolution.

Given that I have just urged honesty and openness, I must make my own position clear. While I must in some sense guide the process and represent all views, it would be dishonest to pretend that I am

neutral in this matter. It is not my decision and I cannot and will not seek to impose anything. However, it is my firm belief that removing all of the pews is the way forward if this church is to flourish in the future and fulfil its mission in the twenty-first century.

I do realise that some of you are very attached to the appearance of the church as it is now, and there are often arguments about preserving history. It is worth remembering how much this church has been changed over seven centuries. Originally, it would not have had pews, and it has existed for longer without them than with them. Even with pews, there were repeated alterations across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as congregations struggled to adapt to new realities and needs. Some of you will remember several of those changes. The appearance of the church in its current form only dates from 2005, when half of the North Aisle pews were removed. We are not preserving anything especially historic or coherent. Opting to preserve needs to be a positive choice rooted in the current and future needs of the whole church, not a negative reaction against change to the familiar.

Visiting other churches which have undertaken reordering, we have seen that there are many different ways it can be done, depending on the needs of the church. If we were to proceed, there would be many choices to be made about furnishings and using the space creatively. No real thought has yet been given to this question and I would encourage anyone who has thoughts or ideas to include these in their feedback.

We must be absolutely honest that a reordering project will come at a cost. A complete removal of the pews, along with the necessary changes to flooring and heating and the purchase of chairs, would obviously be a significant financial undertaking. There would need to be people willing to work on funding bids, deal with the legal processes, and engage with architects and interest bodies as the project developed. Even a partial removal of pews would require serious investment. However, it is important to note that doing nothing, while obviously free of financial commitments, would also come with a cost if it is done for the wrong reasons. That cost would be the future of St John's church itself if it ceased to have any relevance to the local community or younger worshippers.

We are, then, nearing a point of decision. The final decision is the PCC's, but they represent the congregation and need to hear the congregation's views; we can only proceed if that is the general will. I have deliberately spoken from a prepared text so that you can have a copy to take away and read at your leisure. If questions arise later on or you have concerns, ask or tell me or one of the group, as we can only address them (or find out the answer) if we know about them. All I would ask is that you reflect carefully and prayerfully on this issue before submitting your views. This is an important matter which affects the church and its future, and we need to remember what has been entrusted to us.