

Minutes of the Meeting of St Etheldreda's Parish Forum Held on Thursday 24th March 2022 at 7.30pm

Those Present

Fr David Finegan, Michele Seidler (Chair), Jonathan Skerrett (Minute-taker) and 11 further parishioners. Specific apologies were sent from 4 parishioners.

Michele Seidler welcomed parishioners and introduced the purpose of the Forum: to update the parish on pertinent news and to raise/discuss any questions or thoughts about parish life. This was felt to be particularly pertinent as we move forward from pandemic restrictions.

The Meeting officially opened with a prayer led by Fr David.

1. Synodal Pathway

Paul Raynes gave a summary of progress with the Synodal Pathway. Parishioners met across three weekends to discuss a series of questions proposed for the 2023 Synod. Our parish's Report has now been submitted to the Diocese (available on the parish website along with minutes from each of the meetings).

Paul underlined that this is not the end of the process for us and highlighted four distinct takeaways from the meetings: 1. Practical ideas for 'welcome' to the parish, both literal (at the church door) and figurative (to involvement with parish life); 2. A real discernible desire to come together more as a parish (e.g. through Scripture groups); 3. The challenge to involve more young people in parish life; and 4. Opportunities for engagement with the wider community.

Several parishioners who had attended one or more of the meetings spoke warmly about their experience of them: of the opening up to opportunities, potential for growth, enthusiasm for action, and how comfortable everyone had felt to share their faith, ideas, and thoughts. Fr David encouraged all parishioners eager to see something happen in the parish to feel free to do so.

2. Stewardship

Michele introduced parishioners to a new Diocesan initiative under the rubric 'Stewardship: Time, Talent and Treasure'. Over three Sundays, parishioners at all Masses would be invited, through a structured programme tailored to our parish, to reflect on their role and responsibilities in parish life, and what they can offer in terms of time, skills and financial support. Parishioners will hear much more about this as preparations begin before the initiative could launch in our parish. Sandra Portas from the Diocese has already met with Fr David and the Finance Committee to talk about the resources and support she can offer. We will likely want to recruit a small team/committee to help plan, prepare and tailor this to our parish.

It was highlighted that this would respond to the need for a parish census, archive or database of parishioners' specialist skills and experience which we are sorely lacking.

3. Financial Report

Tony Grzybek gave an update on the Parish finances. Offertory income decreased sharply in 2020 due to lockdowns (£52,000 -> £34,000), resulting in a deficit of around £14,000 for the year. Contributions have rebounded slightly in 2021 (£41,000), leading to a small surplus of around £1,600 for 2021. Diocesan levies were reduced in 2021 to compensate for the drop in Offertory contributions: it remains to be seen what the yearly financial picture will be once Diocesan levies return to normal (as is anticipated).

Alive in Faith funds available for use by the parish have reached around £65,000, with about £4,500 already claimed for completed projects. This leaves around £60,000 available at present.

3. Spending, Heating and Alive in Faith

Fr David gave a report on repairs to buildings fabric undertaken since his arrival, such as replastering/redecorating in the parish rooms, replacement roof tiles and gutter clearing, wall repointing, boundary maintenance, replacement boiler for the house, repair of the Sacred Heart statue, among many other jobs. Repair to the church roof ridge tiles and guttering following Storm Eunice is also booked in (awaiting scaffolders to become available).

Fr David explained that various options had been explored for restoring heating to the church. Following advice from the Diocese, we have two quotes for a replacement boiler which would use the existing radiator system, costing in the region of £30,000-£35,000. The system would also be compatible with alternative energy supplies in the future (such as a hydrogen-powered boiler) when such technology is available for large spaces such as the church.

The cost of this could come from Alive in Faith funds; we are in the process of exploring making this an official 'Parish Project'. Those present supported the motion to do so.

4. Open Discussion

Michele Seidler opened the floor to parishioners in attendance.

1. Would church works be eligible for grants, such as Lottery Heritage funding? Paul Raynes has been exploring various funding bodies and Sandra Portas (of the aforementioned Stewardship project) has experience with grant funding and could be a good future contact.

2. Ben Thompson updated on the ongoing redevelopment of the website: he is open to any ideas parishioners might have for making the website a useful tool. He explained that live-streaming was not likely to be an option for us, but that recording of Mass would continue.

3. Ben also informed the parish that there were 44 children currently preparing for First Holy Communion and a programme for Confirmation classes is being drafted, hopefully ready for October. It was hoped that more servers might become available from these groups, and that this might also form a possible nucleus or launchpad for a Youth Group.

4. There was further discussion about the appetite for a Bible study group, such as one following Fr Henry Wansbrough's 'Wednesday Word' programme. We already know of a parishioner (not present) keen to use previous experience in leading such a group, and this should be pursued.

5. Stella Fox gave an update on our twinned parish in Cambodia, where the pandemic has struck hard. Fr Totet provided the names of candidates for reception into the Church this Easter which Stella will share for prayer intentions. She was also able to send £1,500 from parish donations.

6. Fr David alerted parishioners to two upcoming anniversaries: in 2023, the 1350th anniversary of St Etheldreda's founding of the monastery at Ely and, in 2029, the 1350th anniversary of her death. Initial discussion has begun with Canon James Reveley at Ely Cathedral about ways to mark this – watch this space. A question was also raised about whether we could involve other parishes dedicated to St Etheldreda (such as in Newmarket and Ely Place, London).

7. Stella Fox informed parishioners that Churches Together in Ely had resumed meetings following restrictions ending, with a small working party exploring how we can help Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. An ecumenical prayer meeting for peace at the Methodist Church was mentioned (which subsequently appeared in the parish newsletter). Fr David mentioned Pope Francis's intention to consecrate the world, Ukraine and Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary on 25th March, the Solemnity of the Annunciation (the prayer being available online).

5. There being no further issues raised, the Forum closed at 9pm with a prayer.

The date of the next Parish Forum is yet to be set.