

Fr Paul's Confession

Fr David Paul arrived in 1985. There had been a long period without a priest. The churchwardens were not going to take the first person offered to them by the Bishop. Eventually, they found their man. Fr Paul, single, good humoured and always appreciative of an offer of some home cooking, was warmly welcomed after the shock of Fr Theo Cunningham-Burley's death and the long period without a permanent priest. He arrived, however, with a confession to All Saints'. The Diocese had not been entirely candid with the church; things would have to change.

The days when the income from nurseries and social groups hiring the ageing parish hall would help keep the church afloat were over. The buildings were now a drain on its resources. It was, he said, time to make All Saints' fit to face the next 100 years.

One of the options was to turn the church into flats and build something new and easier to heat. That was quickly turned down but the debates were lengthy. The future of the church and its religious tradition were at stake. If something had to go, it would be the buildings around the church but whatever they did it would permanently change the character of All Saints'.



In the end, the land around the vicarage, which had been carved from Coldfall Wood a century before, was sold off for housing. The grand old vicarage also went, so too did the parish hall. The nave of the church was reduced in size to reflect the smaller modern congregation. The money raised paid for a new social space and kitchen at the entrance to the church, new heating and many long overdue repairs. The rood screen was moved to the back of the nave and the organ was restored and removed to a new organ loft. The project meant that, in addition to the daily sacramental duties, the new priest had to oversee a huge transformation of the church which involved a certain degree of business acumen. New chairs were needed and the view was that the old seating was probably headed for the tip; however, Fr Paul managed to find a buyer.



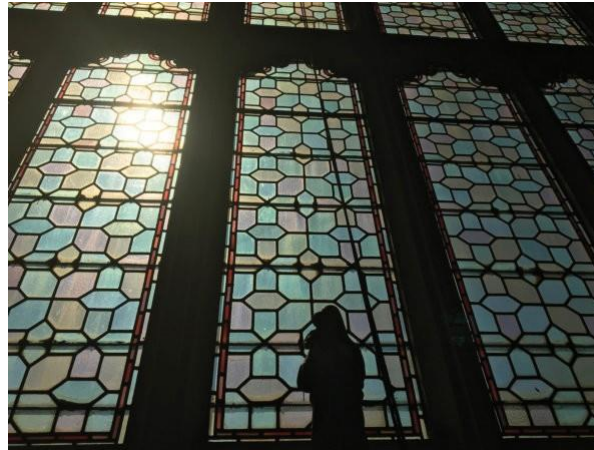
The new church was smaller, more intimate and less formal. The pulpit went, so too did the dark sooty walls. It was brighter, warmer and cheaper to run and the congregation rallied to its support with gifts. The book cases in the new meeting area were from the churchwarden Alan Toms, the heraldic paintings on the organ loft were the work of local artist, Reg Munt. However, it was also an acknowledgment that much of the old social life that had drawn people into the church's grounds had gone. The parish hall was more than a place for scouts and shows. East Finchley's Conservatives had met there, Margaret Thatcher opened fêtes and rallied local supporters in the years before she took up residence in 10, Downing Street. The hall had been a dance school, a nursery, a venue for talks and slide shows. The reconfiguring saved All Saints' from closure but it was also a change in direction.





However, other changes were brewing that would be even more challenging for All Saints' and these had nothing to do with PCCs or ageing central heating systems.

All Saints' Catholic tradition had long made it a slightly exotic cousin in the Church of England's broad family of worship. Services on Durham Road were almost entirely free of Protestant innovation. It is one of the glories of Anglicanism that it can accommodate such a wide variety of Christian expression but this toleration of difference was about to be tested. One key element of Anglo-Catholicism is hope. There is within it a feeling that just as we should be prepared for the Second Coming, we should also be in a position to embrace the unity of Christendom if the opportunity presents itself. There are frequent glances to Rome to see if the wheels might come into alignment.



Subtle shifts of doctrine or even a few emollient words from a Pope can offer hope that the divisions might be overcome at some time in the future. However, there is also anxiety that the Church of England might drive off in to a Protestant cul-de-sac which would make the long desired coming-together impossible. And for some, that is exactly what happened in 1994.

The ordination of 32 women as priests in March 1994 was both a moment of joy and crisis for the church. The celebration of female celebrants was an outpouring of emotion after years of often bitter debate. The simple argument of justice and equality seemed unarguable but for those who believe in the apostolic succession, and wanted to remain within touching distance of Rome, it felt like a canyon.





The gap seemed too wide to ever close and so members of the congregation had to decide which side they were on. There was a moment when some in the All Saints' congregation wondered if dozens of members were about to leave. Fr Paul looked set to go and others were discussing it. In the end only a handful actually left.

Fr Paul's final day at All Saints' was an emotional one. The churchwarden, Graham Summers, made a short speech of farewell. There was, he said, no ill feeling, just sadness and quietly afterwards a few tears. Twenty-five years later he said he still missed the place. All Saints' meanwhile became part of Forward in Faith, a semi-detached Catholic wing of Anglicanism that has its own separate Bishops.

All Saints' future was settled, it just needed a new priest.





