

Extract from the Draft Minutes of the APCM in relation to the appointment of a Priest-in-Charge for the Parish of St. Bartholomew.

Circumstances for a new appointment

0.1 Mark Holmes explained the context as to why the vacancy was going to be advertised as an opportunity for a Priest-in-Charge rather than for a replacement Vicar.

0.2 He said that the Diocese of Rochester was facing a time of change. In common with much of the Church of England, it had seen declining attendance numbers over recent decades and since Covid. It had become harder to sustain the conventional model of ministry in which every parish had a full-time Vicar or Rector, and new models had developed – including some in the local area. Different dioceses had approached the challenge in different ways. Where some had set numerical targets for reducing the number of clergy by a given date, Rochester had adopted a flexible approach that was based heavily on local needs.

0.3 Mark explained that the parish of Otford was part of the Shoreham Deanery, which included about 10 benefices and stretched as far as Farningham, Vigo and Shipbourne but included no towns. All of those benefices had only about half the population that was considered necessary, as a rough rule of thumb, to sustain a full-time incumbent. Over the next five years quite a number of the clergy in the Deanery were expected to retire or leave, so it was necessary to look at new ways to structure ministry in the area with fewer clergy in total. St. Bart's was a vibrant parish – with a thriving youth ministry in particular, for which the parish could be very thankful – so looking at St. Bart's in isolation, there might be a case for appointing a replacement full-time Vicar on the same terms as before. But looking at the wider area, it was clear that new models needed to be explored instead.

0.4 So when the vacancy arose, the diocese had suspended the living in Otford – preventing a new Vicar from being appointed, and instead the position of Priest-in-Charge would be advertised. Mark explained that the roles were practically almost identical: a new Priest-in-Charge would play just the same role, including leading the parish in thinking about the longer-term future. The main difference was in keeping options open for pastoral reorganisation, because Vicars were appointed for life. If a proposal for pastoral reorganisation were opposed by a Vicar, the proposal would not be able to move forward and the diocese would be unable to do anything about it.

0.5 The Priest-in-Charge would also have an additional role to work with the people of the parish and neighbouring parishes in developing possible future models of ministry and thinking through what would work best. There was no pre-determined plan for pastoral reorganisation – the Archdeacon had said that explicitly on at least two occasions – so it would be for the relevant parishes, with the new Priest-in-Charge, to develop suitable proposals.

0.6 Mark went on to explain the PCC's role and his own role in this process. The PCC had met the Archdeacon, Ven. Sharon Copestake, to discuss the suspension of the living and had asked her questions. The PCC had been keen to engage constructively, with a view to leading and shaping the future of ministry rather than waiting for change to be imposed on the parish. For some years Mark had been a member of Deanery Synod, which brought together representatives of parishes across the Shoreham Deanery. It now found itself with rather more substantial issues to discuss. Mark had been elected Lay Chair of the Synod in the Autumn – and sent some reflections after the meeting to the Area Dean (Rev. Dr. Chris Noble, Rector of Stansted with Fairseat and Vigo) on what might be needed to engage parishioners in change effectively. That appeared to prompt the Area Dean to propose Mark as the Deanery representative on the Tonbridge Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Working Group, to which he had now been appointed. The Working Group consisted of the Area Dean and one lay member from each of the six deaneries in the Tonbridge Archdeaconry, as well as the Archdeacon, and its role was to consider the shape of ministry and proposals for pastoral reorganisation across the area. He had joined two meetings and found them very encouraging: there was a spirit of honesty and openness to challenge, sensitive and prayerful consideration of the needs of different places, and collegiality straddling differences in background.