

*The Parochial Church Council of St Barnabas,
Stopford Road, Gillingham, Kent*

The Archdeacon,
The Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee
St Nicholas Church
Boley Hill
Rochester
Kent ME1 1SL

9th March 2013

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the Parochial Church Council of St Barnabas which met on Friday 8th March. One of the agenda items was the preliminary draft proposal which the DMPC had under discussion concerning the future of the benefice and parish of St Barnabas, Gillingham.

First of all the PCC unanimously agreed that there was nothing in the factual contents of the draft proposals that could be disputed.

However the PCC, following a lengthy discussion, agreed that strong representations should be made to the DMPC to reconsider its recommendations to the Bishop under the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011. The PCC voted and agreed unanimously that the PCC should register formally its opposition to the dissolution and closure of St Barnabas Church, Gillingham for regular public worship.

As Secretary and Officer with responsibility for the stewardship of St Barnabas Church, I am therefore writing in an official capacity to serve notice that the PCC of St Barnabas opposes the proposal for the dissolution of the benefice and parish of St Barnabas, Gillingham and therefore also the proposal for closure of its parish church for regular public worship.

In coming to this decision the PCC considered in turn the four reasons given to us for closure of the Church as follows:

- 1) We are told 'the Church is not financially viable' and that a Parish Church must have a priest part-time or full-time to comply with the legal requirements of the Church of England and provide a service of Holy Communion every Sunday or as advised in United Benefice or Team Ministry.
 - St Barnabas Church is not costing the Diocese anything and in fact it pays, and has done every year since the departure of previous incumbent, its Parish Share in full and is therefore positively contributing towards Diocesan funds.
 - While St Barnabas does not have a full or part-time priest, currently a service of Holy Communion is offered every Sunday and arrangements for this type of ministry for its spiritual needs is affordable and factored into its budgeting and accounting systems.
 - The Church could afford to support ministry as advised in United Benefice or Team Ministry and would be open to exploring this possibility which, in as far as we are aware, to date has not even been considered as an option, certainly not in discussion with us.
 - Given that we are now made aware that the Vicarage goes with the Parish Church of St Barnabas, a 'house for duty' solution has not been explored and to our knowledge neither has the possibility of having a non-stipendiary priest.
 - In relation to the unpaid debt of the previous Vicar's stipend and Parish share to the tune of £20,000 from 2007, our subsequent Treasurers inform us that the Diocese had agreed to write-off this debt gradually over a number of years and the Church was informed that it would not have to worry about this. Were we told that this would now be held against us, we would have budgeted to eradicate this debt over time with a payment plan. It is therefore unfair to hold this against the PCC. If the church remains open we will set up a payment plan to allow us to eradicate this debt rather than have this always held over the PCC.
 - We have at our PCC meeting this week approved and agreed to support a member of our congregation towards his lay ministry training to become a reader, a positive sign that we are doing our part towards future vocations within the Anglican Ministry. The Deanery Synod meeting earlier in the week also had as its theme 'vocations' and felt that the way forward for ministry within the Church of England was uncertain and at some point would need to consider ways of making more use of our lay

people. We feel we have made some in-roads into this way of working, but have the capacity to do more.

2) We are told 'The Diocese has no money to subsidise this Parish'

- As stated previously, St Barnabas Church is not costing the Diocese anything and in fact it pays its Parish Share in full and is therefore contributing positively towards Diocesan funds.
- The Church currently meets its own running costs and has undertaken repairs in relation to Health and Safety, and also for aesthetic purposes in repairing and restoring the stained glass windows vandalised before 2007 and establishing protective grilling for future generations to enjoy. This shows a capacity for making future maintenance and refurbishments happen and also optimism for raising the profile of our Church as being open. Furthermore the windows were repaired partly as a result of a legacy: how can it be right then that an elderly woman (who attended church every week and never lived outside of the parish) leaves a substantial portion of her life's savings to the church, and the diocese agrees for the money to be invested in restoring windows only to announce its intention to close the church a year later?
- A parish group has met each month to undertake maintenance and tidying tasks, which was recognised in the feasibility report as keeping the interior of the Church impressive.
- The Church has made Church House an income-generating asset.
- The Parishioners have shown themselves quite capable of generating greater amounts of funding through regular fund-raising and can generate further funding now we are aware of the expectations the Diocese has of us.
- The Church has plans to increase the usage of the halls to generate further funds.
- The PCC has no expectations of the Diocese in relation to 'money' – however we do have an expectation that the Diocese will do everything it can to ensure the cure of souls, and for pastoral care for all its parishioners and especially as these souls in this part of Gillingham happen to be in a deprived and poor locality. The reorganisation plan clinically 'shares' the roads within the Parish among other churches but it is unclear as to what it recommends for the people for whom this Parish Church is a community hub and built on long-standing friendships, trials and celebrations. It is regrettable and noticeable that no attempt has been made by those proposing these measures to put names and faces to the people, many elderly, who will be affected most severely when the church closes.

3) We are told 'The Diocese had a feasibility study carried out to see if it was possible for a developer to come in and develop the site to provide an income to make the Church viable – no such project was found.'

- From the report commissioned by the Diocese, one such project was found but the costs associated were deemed to be too high for the Parish to afford. This would have been, we imagine, the ideal scenario to make the Church sound in business terms with guaranteed funding streams. In our Church we see this as a starting point, not a limiting factor. We would use this to ask - what is possible, over what time frame and how we can plan for the project to be achieved in phases. We are not being afforded reasonable time to consider this. The PCC felt that as identified in the report the Church is 'in generally satisfactory condition' and that 'the interior of the building is particularly impressive', a good basis for investigating new possibilities. Such comments also affirm the responsible extent of premises maintenance that has been undertaken, and confirm that the structure and fabric of the church are in safe hands.
- The feasibility study identifies in at least two places 'the dwindling congregation'. This is we believe incorrect. Admittedly before the previous incumbent arrived the congregation averaged 80 and on her arrival this fell dramatically for a number of reasons, and with it we lost some high levels of funding. In the last five years new people have joined the church and congregation numbers have remained fairly static at between 30-40 people per Sunday on average in recent years. At this size, it is significantly larger than many other churches that are not under threat of closure. There is a perception that the average age at our church is increasing – this is also inaccurate. The average age is much lower than the 80 years it was some 10 years ago.
- The concluding paragraph of the feasibility report says 'we are of the opinion that the existing Property Holding has the potential for re-arrangement so as to provide a more appropriate small scale place of worship together with an improved multi-use facility.' It identifies this would require 'reasonably significant expenditure' and if pursued would need appropriate investigation. No such investigations have been completed.

- As for increased income this has been hampered as a result of a general perception over many years that our Church was going to be closed – and despite increasing outreach and community events and regular worship Sunday by Sunday, the myth has continued and a number of weddings, which should have happened here due to both parties in the couple being resident within our parish, have taken place elsewhere, without first having been directed to us. Despite such hindrances it is important to note that we have still opened for weddings, christenings and funerals when people have expressed their wish to have such ceremonies held at St Barnabas. Closing the church will take away the opportunity for people planning to hold an event at the church in the future being able to do so.
- The ‘feasibility study’ seems to reflect the opinions of one team of surveyors - this seems to be rather a narrow breadth of opinion when considering the future of such an important church community.
- The apparent lack of options to redevelop the site is not a valid reason for closure all the time the church is self-sufficient, paying its parish share and could afford to support on-going ministry that meets the requirements of the Church of England.

4. We are told ‘The Deanery Mission and Ministry Plan has for a long time stated that North Gillingham is over provided with churches - ... and St Barnabas is the least viable now, and in the long term.’

- The PCC cannot understand that simply believing that there are too many churches in any area is a good enough reason for closing a church, especially when it is not a drain on the Diocese.
- Gillingham and the Medway Towns are a highly densely populated area – The PCC would like to know on what basis it has been deemed that the area is over-churched.
- St Barnabas we believe is the largest building of all the churches in the Gillingham area big enough to house the children and their parents/families (thus requiring little if any limitations on those attending to celebrate key moments in their children’s lives) and hence is used by three large primary schools at key points in their school year. If a building is to close, it would seem to be imprudent to close the largest.
- St Barnabas offers a tea/coffee afternoon each week for all ages, but largely addressing the needs of the elderly, lonely and vulnerable (some of whom have been turned away by other local church groups, others who say that what makes St Barnabas special and preferable is the tangible care, kind acceptance and fellowship offered – no charge is made for refreshments, donations are requested but not demanded, no one is turned away); a very local affordable venue for children’s birthday parties, a weekly young people’s fun club, a monthly parish lunch, etc. Clearly there is a need for the services we offer – how is the Diocese proposing to meet these existing commitments?
- These groups are increasing in size and have brought new people into our church – some of whom now attend our Sunday services on a regular basis and are considering confirmation for themselves or baptisms for their children. We are a church that welcomes everyone and although small at this time, we are growing and if we remain open we expect to continue to grow as we believe we offer a different style of church and outreach to the other churches in our community.
- What advertisement is it for the Church of England if it has a boarded up Church, described in the feasibility report as located in a ‘prominent high profile position’? The PCC believes that the message would be a negative one signifying hopelessness, capitulation to the material world and a lack of concern and care for the spiritual well-being of the local community.
- The location of St Barnabas is such that many parishioners (the 85% national equivalent that go to Church once a year, as stated on C of E website) will be left without a neighbourhood church to go to in their hour of need – ours is not an affluent parish that people can drive over some distance to find a church. Many will simply not attend.
- No mention has been made of the core congregation (1% national equivalent, as stated on C of E website) attending St Barnabas over many, many years, who will be left bereft and unable to attend another church – what attempt has been made to find out what these people affected at grass roots think and feel and to chat through what plans have been made to meet their spiritual needs or even to welcome them into other churches.
- As a result of this strategy of closing around 100 churches in the UK and some cathedrals, church has been pitched against church and rather unsurprisingly the Christian ethos of supporting each other through team ministry and other ways to make things work has not been forthcoming. There is at least one church in the Gillingham area which has a high level of staffing needed for its congregation, but is struggling to meet its bills – St Barnabas could see a way to working with this church to fund a percentage of a clergy member’s wage in return for regular Sunday ministry.

- Has it been considered that the future could see an increase in the number of people attending Church, how could this need be met if the Churches have already been closed? Once lost, the Churches cannot be reinstated.
- Finally, St Barnabas, as things currently stand, is self-sufficient and is meeting the acute needs in the community in its own unique way, and the PCC can see that with collaborative and team working with other parishes especially through Team ministry it can continue to provide Christian fellowship to the local community and spiritual ministry for the regular parishioners and any itinerant visitors who turn up in moments of need and crisis for many years to come.

In conclusion, based on the reasons above the PCC would like the DMPC, taking into account in equal measure its financial, pastoral and spiritual responsibilities on behalf of the Church of England, to reconsider its draft proposal for the dissolution of the Benefice and Parish of St Barnabas, Gillingham, and for the closure of the Parish Church of St Barnabas to the Bishop pending a fully considered assessment of all of the possibilities given the proven capacity of the Church to be self-sufficient for a considerable number of years.

Yours sincerely,

BB, PCC Secretary