

Future of the Parish of Stoke Gabriel



From the earliest days of Christianity, the English parish evolved from a geographical area containing a church, a resident priest and a sufficient number of people to support the priest who provided a ministry in return. At the Reformation, the parish became a unit of local government and thus it remained through to Victorian times, a visible expression of the C-of-E with the parish priest at its helm. Towards the end of the 19th century, the lay and ecclesiastical responsibilities of the parish were divided between newly established Parish Councils and Parochial Church Councils (PCC), which endure to this day.

Within the Diocese of Exeter, the parish and church of Stoke Gabriel were both established in the early 13th century. From this time and throughout its history, the parish has always had both a resident priest and local governance for ecclesiastical affairs.

Resident Parish Priest

With falling numbers of church members and clergy, many parishes have had to relinquish the traditional model of a parish having its own resident priest and join a community of neighboring parishes to share a priest¹. In contrast, Stoke Gabriel is blessed with a part time priest (0.3 headcount) who is resident in the parish and leads its parish ministry. A financially sustainable parish, Stoke Gabriel has been able to pay its substantial common fund in full and on time for many years while ensuring that its much cherished Grade 1 listed church building has been kept in a good state of repair². Indeed, its common fund contributions not only cover the cost of the parish priest but also provide for a significant surplus to the Diocese³. This is entirely acceptable if it is used to support less fortunate parishes and not the Diocesan bureaucracy⁴.

In January 2014 the parish joined the Totnes Mission Community, at which time the allocated clergy headcount was increased from 2 to 2.3 to allow a part-time priest to reside in Stoke Gabriel. The balance of the mission community headcount is used for two full time priests, the Team Rector and Incumbent, Rev'd Jim Barlow, and the Team Vicar, Rev'd Deborah Parsons, both of whom reside in Totnes.

In contrast to the decline in church members and priests, the number of diocesan bishops and archdeacons (including those of the Diocese of Exeter) has doubled⁵. Over the same period, the head office bureaucracy of the Diocese of Exeter has ballooned with the creation of posts of questionable justification. It is a remarkable fact that, of the total spend of £13.7m by the Diocese of Exeter in 2020, only about 70% was allocated to clergy and even less to parochial clergy.

Local Governance

Since the establishment of the parish of Stoke Gabriel, its church affairs have been governed by the parish priest and churchwardens, the vestry of householders and, since the early 20th century, the PCC. Since joining

¹ The number of people attending church has fallen from 5.2m in the Victorian era to less than 1m today. Over the same time frame the number of clergy has fallen from 25000 to 7000.

² The common fund assessment for 2021 is £46,038 and the parish is fully up to date with its payment. It is the highest assessment within the Deanery of Totnes save the parish of Dartmouth. The last architectural survey in 2017 reported that the church building "is well maintained and clearly well loved", all the essential and advisory repairs identified by the architect having been made. Over the last five years, the parish has also paid for the re-development of the south porch to equip it with a kitchen galley and WC at a cost of £162,000 and has also recently committed to the restoration of the tower clock at a cost of about £25,000, having raised the sum earlier this year during lockdown.

³ According to the Diocese of Exeter, the cost of a full-time stipendiary priest is £61,000, which includes an allowance for training, housing and pension. Accordingly, the cost of 0.3 clergy headcount for Stoke Gabriel's part-time priest is about £18,300 thus resulting in a surplus to the Diocese of about £28,000.

⁴ The cost of the three bishops is funded directly by the Church Commissioners but the other diocesan staff, numbering some 70 posts (55 full-time positions), are funded from diocesan income, the major source of which is the common fund.

⁵ The number of dioceses has increased from 26 in the Victorian era to 42 today. Before 1876, the Diocese of Exeter covered both Devon and Cornwall with one bishop (the Bishop of Exeter). It was then divided into two with the Diocese of Exeter having one bishop and three archdeacons (one each for Exeter, Totnes and Barnstaple). Over the next half-century, the diocese created three new senior posts, two for bishops (Crediton (1897) and Plymouth (1923)) and one for an archdeacon (Plymouth (1918)).

the Totnes Mission Community, the PCC has efficiently co-existed with the Totnes Mission Community Team Council allowing the parish to operate semi-independently within a flexible community framework. Today, the PCC comprises 14 members in addition to the incumbent, parish priest and two churchwardens, and meets every two months.

What is the Future of the Parish?

Self-evidently, the parish has been able to sustain itself for centuries. But its future sustainability is now at risk, critically depending on two key decisions in the hands of the Diocese of Exeter:

1. The resident parish priest is due to retire within a few years but the Diocese has decided not to replace her⁶. The Mission Community clergy headcount will be reduced to 2 and the parish will become dependent upon the priestly resource at Totnes, 4 miles distant. The Team Rector and Team Vicar are already over-stretched providing a ministry to six other parishes and it is unrealistic to expect them to devote significant time to Stoke Gabriel. Moreover, there will be no compensatory reduction in the parish's common fund assessment! The parish is clearly able to pay its way, but the short-sighted deprivation of headcount by the Diocese will put its sustainability and common fund contributions at risk to the detriment of all.

Meanwhile, the C-of-E's vision for the next decade includes a strategic priority to exploit options for worship in different settings (a so-called "mixed ecology"). Contemplating the establishment of tens of thousands of lay-led churches in venues other than a church building, many worry that traditional parish church worship is being side-lined. What is clear is that diocesan spending will be aligned with the vision and the different options for worship will compete for funds from the same pot. The parishes are the largest contributor to the pot and it is inevitable that they will bear the brunt of the cost⁷. The diocese already plans significantly to reduce the numbers of stipendiary clergy⁸.

2. The Diocese has also decided that multi-parish mission communities should work towards a single Team Council for local governance, thus dispensing with parochial governance. The PCCs of all seven members of the Totnes Mission Community would become redundant while each parish would have only a minority vote on the Team Council. The Diocese has said that this change from PCCs to a single Team Council is due to be accelerated⁹.

The inevitable consequence of a single Team Council for the Totnes Mission Community will be an increased centralization of clergy, financial and other resources and the creation of a bureaucracy to provide some sort of ministry to the remote parishes. It will also undermine the sustainability of Stoke Gabriel parish and extinguish any hope of turning around other parishes that could become sustainable with help.

If these two decisions are implemented, they will have the most profound impact on church life in our parish since the church was built and the parish established over 800 years ago! The PCC of Stoke Gabriel is working to save the parish and supports the national campaign to do the same nationwide.



⁶ The diocese has however advised that a replacement can be obtained if the parish pays for the full housing cost of about £15k per annum in addition to its common fund contribution of about £46k, a total of £61k, which is a completely unfair proposition for a part-time priest.

⁷ The common fund contributions from the parishes account for over 60% of diocesan income.

⁸ According to the Exeter Diocesan Board of Finance, the number of stipendiary clergy will be reduced from 168 to 130 over the next decade.

⁹ By the Archdeacon of Totnes at the online Next Steps Vision and Strategy Event for the Totnes Archdeaconry which was held on the 7th October 2021.