

St Barts, Otford – Parish Update on the Vacancy – Nov 23

The PCC met with Archdeacon Sharon at an extraordinary PCC meeting on 1st November to discuss the vacancy and the way forward. Following this meeting the PCC passed a resolution to agree to the suspension of the Patron's right of Presentation to the benefice of St Barts.

1. What does this mean?

In the Church of England, priests are appointed to a benefice. This is the basic unit of ministry and may be a parish or a grouping of parishes.

In previous centuries, each parish or group of parishes had a Patron who appointed and paid for a priest. Patrons retain the legal right of presenting a priest to the Bishop for appointment.

Each benefice has a Patron or Patrons. A Patron (who may be an individual or a body such as a university college) owns the right to present a priest to a vacant benefice. There are several variations of Patronage including sole Patronage (one person or body), joint, patronage by turns and special patronage boards. Our Patron is Westminster Abbey.

The priest appointed to serve in a benefice may be either an incumbent or a priest in charge.

Where the patron's right of presentation to a benefice is 'suspended', a priest in charge is appointed. Where the benefice is not 'suspended', an incumbent (either a vicar or a rector) is appointed.

2. Why is this happening?

When an incumbent leaves, it is important for everyone involved to think carefully about the future. If a new priest is to be appointed on a basis which is essentially 'like for like', the PCC compiles a parish profile and appoints parish representatives. The position is advertised and the Patron consults with both the diocese and the parish representatives and then 'presents' a candidate to the Bishop who would then appoint that person as incumbent. This is what happened when Richard left and David was appointed.

At times, the Bishop may feel that additional flexibility is needed to look at the arrangements for a benefice, and this is achieved by putting the procedure described above on hold. The Bishop may decide to take the legal step to suspend temporarily the Patron's rights and, instead, following consultation, appoint a priest to be in charge of the parish or parishes, thus they are licensed as priest in charge rather than vicar.

The Bishop is likely to seek to suspend the rights of presentation to a benefice when for pastoral, missional or financial reasons pastoral reorganisation is under consideration.

The Bishop is required to obtain the consent of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee and to consult the Patron, the PCC, the Area/Rural Dean and Lay Chair of the Deanery Synod concerned before deciding to suspend a Patron's right of presentation.

The meeting with Archdeacon Sharon was, in effect, the consultation with the PCC. She confirmed that because at least some of our neighbouring parishes are smaller and more fragile than we are, and because Kemsing & Woodlands have an interim priest who will leave in November 2024, the Bishop wishes to take the opportunity to consider whether any changes are appropriate to the pastoral organisation in our area.

Proposals for any change are always subject to a separate process of consultation. If the proposals are found to be appropriate, they can be made permanent by a pastoral scheme or order. Otherwise, there is flexibility to try different arrangements.

3. What is the difference between a Vicar and a Priest in Charge?

When the rights of presentation to a benefice are suspended, any new priest appointed to that benefice is licensed as a Priest-in-Charge operating under a Bishop's Licence rather than being incumbent of the Benefice. There are a number of technical and legal areas in which the distinction between an incumbent and a priest in charge is relevant (e.g. legal ownership of benefice property), but by and large, a parish will notice no difference between a priest in charge and an incumbent.

The selection process for a priest in charge is to all intents and purposes identical to that for an incumbent – the parish still need to put together a parish profile, advertise the appointment and appoint parish representatives to take part in the selection process.

Archdeacon Sharon advised that the priest in charge will be a full time post and that they will reside in the vicarage.

Once any pastoral reorganisation is agreed and the suspension is lifted, the expectation is that the priest in charge will be confirmed as the incumbent.

4. What are the timeframes?

Now that the PCC has passed a resolution to agree the suspension, it will take approximately a month for the suspension to be put in place. Once that has happened, the PCC will meet with the Archdeacon again to discuss the recruitment of a priest in charge. This meeting is likely to be in the new year.

In the meantime, the parish profile is being updated. As part of this update, consultation will be held with the entire congregation, via a series of questions between now and Christmas, to ensure the profile truly reflects who we are at St Barts.

The right of presentation to a benefice can be suspended by the Bishop for a period lasting no longer than five years. It is possible to renew the suspension, but again for no longer than five years.

Arrangements for pastoral reorganisation can be agreed and put in place within a much shorter period than this and Rochester aims to ensure no suspension lasts for more than 3 years. Once any new arrangements are agreed, the suspension is lifted and then a process is followed to seek the appointment of the priest in charge as incumbent, with the approval of the Patron, Bishop and PCC.

5. What form will the reorganisation take?

Whilst we don't yet have much idea what any reorganisation might look like, we do know some of the ground rules:

- A combined benefice can be of 2 or more parishes. The parishes do not need to be within the same deanery but must be contiguous – i.e. have a common boundary
- The parishes with which St Barts has a common boundary are: Shoreham; Kemsing & Woodlands; Riverhead and St John's.
- There is no set size for a viable benefice but as a rule of thumb they normally comprise a population between 4,000 and 18,000 people. (We are currently above 4,000)
- Within the combined Benefice, it is likely the parishes would retain their own identity and PCC but share an incumbent. If more than 2 parishes combine, it is likely to become a Group Ministry, with more than one priest.