

**The Sacred Heart Church, Wadhurst and St. Peter's Rotherfield**

**Minutes of the Parish E.G.M. on Sunday 13 December 2015  
In the Sacred Heart Annexe at 11:40 hours**

| <b>1. WELCOME</b>   | <b>ACTION</b> |
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| <p>The Chairman, Jon Elsby, welcomed 60 members of the Parish to the meeting.</p>   |               |
| <b>2. OPENING PRAYER</b>  |               |
| <p>Fr. Martin opened the meeting with a prayer.</p>   |               |
| <b>3. PURPOSE OF MEETING</b>  |               |
| <p>Jon Elsby briefly outlined the purpose of the meeting which was to allow parishioners to express their own views on the proposed plans for restructuring the school, since those attending the AGM had already heard a detailed outline of the views of the school from Hilary Blake. Since that meeting the PPC had received considerable feedback which revealed a wide range of views being expressed, some being held very strongly. The PPC therefore felt it important to communicate to Bishop Richard what parishioners think and feel. It seemed fair to say that the initial reaction of most parishioners was one of shock; he pointed out that although some want to scrap all the plans and start from scratch, keeping the presbytery the PPC did not feel this would be an option as the Bishop had accepted the possibility of moving the presbytery. Equally the school's initial preferred plan was also no longer an option. Hence the PPC felt that it was important to come to a joint agreement between school and Parish rather than having a plan imposed which might be less favorable for all.</p> |               |
| <b>4 VIEWS OF PARISHIONERS.</b>   |               |
| <p>Jon Elsby invited parishioners in turn to express their views.</p> <p>Margaret Anderman said she had been a member of the Parish for over 50 years, and her parents and baby are in the graveyard. She expressed her thanks to the PPC for all their hard work over the past difficult year. She felt shocked and saddened by the Bishop's proposal and after prayerful consideration had come to the conclusion that the idea of demolishing the presbytery was immoral, a house in reasonable condition and our priest's home. She suggested that out of interest people should stand behind the church on the proposed site for the presbytery on plan 7, look around and see how they would feel if they had to live there. However she accepted that it is a good school with around 1/3 Catholic pupils and she did wish to move things forward. She therefore proposed that the Parish consider appointing their own surveyor/architect, which she would be happy to contribute towards, to look at</p>   |               |

alternative plans that would include road access to the graveyard and parking but keep the house “in situ”.

Ann Glenney said that she had been born in the parish and remembers the year when the first little school was built. She said she found it appalling that for the first time the church and school have fallen out. She pointed out that the Parish had gradually lost all the land accessible to them in the past but they had used the Presbytery garden for social events. These had been put on hold while funds had been raised for building the annexe and refurbishing the presbytery but it was important to be able to have an outdoor green area to resume such events. She pointed out that we are a Parish family and need each other. She felt it wrong that talks had been going on for one and a half years in secrecy without consulting parishioners who might have come up with alternative ideas. She said it would cost a lot to demolish the Presbytery and that it was important to consider alternative ways than this of ensuring the safety of the children.

Chrissie Sturgess pointed out that the logical way to go would be to extend the school upwards rather than bulldozing the presbytery and asked if such a plan had been considered. She pointed out that parishioners had raised £40,000 through a lot of fundraising work and the presbytery should be left where it is, that there was a need for a new architect with a fresh pair of eyes to produce further plans that for example might involve building upwards. This has been successful at many primary schools including Burwash where she had worked.

Aisling Brattle commented that she had a young family, her children had been baptized in the church and that she feels part of the community. However she pointed out that the presbytery is not sacred and there is a need to look at the growth of the parish as a whole for she sees it as one community. She later pointed out that the main issues were access to the graveyard and safeguarding.

Niamh Murphy pointed out that the plans involved looking at demolishing the presbytery only to benefit a narrow section of the community, a small privileged group of people who could afford to send their children to a private school; she also felt it was setting an example for children that if something is the way, bulldoze it. She felt that children should be taught to look at sustainable means of improving things.

Rowena Bennett commented that she didn't want to see the presbytery destroyed and would like to see the school consider building upwards.

Lucy Welbourn remarked that she couldn't understand why being a private school should influence any decisions.

Kate Purcell commented that change is difficult, that we need to ask the question: do we want a good school “yes” do we want a vibrant parish “yes”;

hence there is a need to work to find an equitable solution to suit everybody. There now seemed to be the opportunity to have a new team to look at solutions rather than having the Bishop impose his own, but pointed out that the time scale needs taking into account as no one wants to live on a building site for 10 years. It was important that any new presbytery be at least as good as the present one, and be a comfortable place that could be considered "home" for future priests.

Margaret Curran commented that she used to be a teacher and spent many years where there was no catholic school. She felt the presence of the school must bring many people in contact with our dynamic parish which did need younger people coming through and she expressed the hope that we would find a way to work together. She thought it would be a great idea if the school could build up. She thought the idea of squeezing the presbytery between church and hall looked "horrible" and hoped that a positive way forward could be found of building upwards.

Blaise Cardoza spoke as both parishioner and chairman of the board of school governors. He explained that the buildings were falling down and badly in need of repair and that the school had wanted to create a master plan for the whole site, that there was not a huge amount of money available as it was a nonprofit making school. He pointed out that the school definitely did not want to expand as wanted to keep the catholic ethos of a small school and keep the loving spirit that was found there. He pointed out that demolishing the presbytery was not part of the initial plan, but that it was just found to be in a very inconvenient position; the school's view felt this was a once in a generation opportunity and involved a 20 year plan.

Len Ketcher queried whether we would be prepared to lose the value of the presbytery which was worth around half a million.

Niamh Murphy raised the point that although the school would be providing as good a house in return they would be getting an interest free loan from the Diocese so in effect parishioners would still be paying for it.

Amos Brattle expressed the view that churches in the diocese are generally in decline and that if the school were taken away the parish would diminish; hence he felt school and parish should work together or die together.

Len Tudor pointed out that the point of the present meeting was to hear views of parishioners and not just hear the views of the school again; he felt that there had been no secrets from the parish as it was not possible to have a Parish meeting until it was known what was being considered. He felt the school had gone about things in the wrong way, presenting "demands" rather than proposals and that it was important to start again and have an architect appointed by the parish.

Susan Micall introduced herself as a newcomer to the parish without children but was interested to know if the Bishop would consider our appointing a new architect.

Nick Bagshawe voiced the opinion that we must all be careful to find a Catholic solution to the issue, and that school and parish needed to send this message to the Bishop; he noted that each side should recognize the other position, the school considering the parish to be obdurate about the presbytery and the parish wondering why the school so obdurate about not building upwards or using minibuses.

George Micallef also raised the issue of why the school could not build up 2 stories instead of out.

John Burlison enquired as to whether any building application had yet been put in and Blaise Cardoza advised that this would not happen until they had an acceptable plan. Hence Jon Burlison expressed the view that new plans could be drawn up from scratch, and that it was not right to grab land from others to expand.

Daphne Bagshawe pointed out that the PPC had considered that Plan 7 formed a basis for negotiation with some amendments and had therefore made this their recommendation for moving forwards. She further commented that the parish does contribute somewhat to the school as there are significant bursaries supporting catholic children and the schools do not pay any rent or rates.

Ken Shaw drew attention to Hilary Blake having said a few words at the carol service about a long term plan over 20 years. He pointed out that the house had not been refurbished for many years while Fr Kevin was living there and the £40,000 raised could actually be attributed to an accumulation of work that had needed doing previously so should not be looked at as money lost. He felt there was a good opportunity to work together and to remember that "the children are the future".

Antonia Ogilvie expressed her gratitude for the presence of the school and agreed that parking poses a danger for the children and is a problem for the school.

Daphne Bagshawe commented that although the school had a long term plan they had made it known that they wanted to get going as quickly as possible, but that it was important for the parish not to feel rushed. She gave the assurance that the PPC had never been opposed to the school improving facilities but were concerned about the needs of the whole parish. She said that it was important to live out the faith, to be charitable to the needs of others and respect each other.

Kim O'Higgins commented that she felt it was important to have the presbytery

in the centre among the children as it was important for them to grow up with the presence of the priest in their midst, hence it would be important to keep a home for him, but she said that it would not be satisfactory for him to be marooned in an island in the midst of a roundabout.

Jay Knower agreed that it was important to have a priest in the grounds of the school and mentioned how the children used to see Father Kevin gardening and sweeping and would comment on this.

Jon Elsby reassured parishioners that the advantages of plan 7 were that the presbytery would not back onto a noisy playground, would be separate from the church, quieter, a little larger, have a screened off garden and for the school would allow them to keep a substantial part of their existing plan. He felt that it was not perfect but provided a basis for negotiation. He also pointed out that the Bishop did say that an extended period of uncertainty would not be good for school or parish.

Michael Gabriel commented that if plans to build a school and church were now being made from scratch the presbytery would not be placed in its current position as it is in the wrong place.

Margaret Wise asked if plan 7 included any scope for expansion of the church and Jon assured her that it would and there was currently a plan to have an extra room for children's liturgy.

Simon Dunn again emphasized the importance of recognizing a solution that will be acceptable to the whole community or the Bishop would impose a solution that might not be liked by school or parish.

Richard O'Farrell also noted that all the plans so far showed the school developing outwards and not upwards.

Blaise Cardoza commented that the summer holidays would not provide sufficient period of time to allow upward growth and furthermore planning permission for this might not be given.

Colleen O'Farrell suggested that there should be a show of hands in order to determine the overall majority opinion going forward.

Daphne Bagshawe agreed that this should be a straw poll of those in favour or against accepting plan 7 as a basis for negotiation, but not a representative vote as the meeting could not be said to capture all parish opinion.

Greg O'Higgins commented that he felt the straw poll should include a third option, in regard to other alternatives being investigated, as having listened to the views expressed at the meeting, the idea of the school considering building upwards had appeared to him to be the most frequent or popular suggestion from the floor. He further made the point that should any investigation into

alternatives prove unproductive, the next step would be a default to Plan 7 and not a default to a 'no change' or to a 'no development' position as he felt the case for some form of 'change' had been made.

Daphne Bagshawe therefore proposed voting on 3 options.

#### **5. Strawpoll of parishioners views on 3 options.**

**Option One** : No change: No one voted for this option

**Option Two**: Is there an option of exploring other possibilities such as building up or using minibuses as basis for further negotiation? There was strong support for this option with a majority view of hands.

**Option Three**: Is plan 7 a basis for negotiation?: There was some support for this plan with a good show of hands but much less than for option two.

Therefore it was concluded that all agreed that some change was essential. Jon Elsby proposed writing to the Bishop to update him regarding the outcome from this meeting with the majority favouring exploring a new plan.

**Jon Elsby**

#### **6. CLOSING PRAYER**

Father Martin closed the meeting with a prayer.