

Minutes of AGM of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Thames Ditton – June, 30 2015 8pm

Fr. Rob and 49 parishioners attended, with apologies received from several others.

Opening Prayer: The Gospel for the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana (Jn 2.1-11) was read as part of our opening prayer. Fr. Rob invited all to consider what is the “best wine” that this parish has received after its first 50 years and to reflect on Mary’s instruction to the servants: “Do whatever he tells you”: What are we being called to do now? Our *Jubilee Prayer* was prayed by all.

Review of the Year: Fr. Rob offered a quick snapshot of the last year in figures and snippets from the parish newsletter: an average Mass attendance in October of 513; 1 adult Baptism and 25 infant Baptisms; 45 First Communions; 25 Confirmations; 1 Marriage (+ 7 prepared for celebration elsewhere); 10 funerals (+ 4 celebrated solely at a Crematorium). There had been moments of great sadness (including the death of Stephen Lodge, who did so much for the parish over so many years; the tragic early death of Lawrence Lumb; the recent death of a three day old baby), but also moments of great joy (including conferring of a Bene Merenti medal on Jeff McCormack and the recent Golden Wedding of Helmut and Margaret Wagner).

Much effort had been focused on preparations for our Golden Jubilee (with a Coordinating Committee, Fund-Raising Committee, Events Committee, Spiritual Jubilee Group, the stitchers working on our wall-hanging) as well as the continuing efforts of our Re-Ordering Committee. A Facebook page has been launched.

Other groups range from *Musical Tots* and the Nursery, via the Youth Group (now jointly run with Holy Name parish) to the *Surrey Songbirds* and the *Women’s Prayer & Share Group*, with a Grandparents’ Group and a Bereavement Support Group also meeting monthly. Although the majority of the many social events (wine-tasting, quiz, ball ceilidh, Sri Lankan Supper, Poetry Evening, Tapas & Tunes, Auction of Promises, Come Dine With Me lunches and suppers ...) had been in aid of our Jubilee Buildings Fund, we had found space also for strawberry teas and Christmas teas, our annual outdoor mass, mornings of recollection for both Readers (June) and Eucharistic Ministers (September), a concert in aid of Iraqi Christians in Need, two talks by Geoff Wheaton SJ on Caravaggio and the Gospel, the diocesan Jubilee programme (on what it means to be Church); and we finished our spectacularly successful fund-raising for the street children of Kumasi (yielding £45,079.99 in 2 years).

Meanwhile, with the other parishes of Weybridge Deanery we have begun the process ‘Looking to 2020’, preparing for a future with fewer clergy and the need/opportunity for parishes to work more closely together to fulfil our mission. And we have both survived the sad loss of Bishop Kieran and welcomed Bishop Richard.

Renewal Works Progress Report: Fr Rob outlined (in response to a question from Jeff McCormack) where we have reached and reasons for delays in getting started: the initial impetus was Fr. Bernard's bequest and a desire to reorder the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. But a review showed the poor state of decor, the state of existing furnishings and poor functionality (seating in the ambulatory area, intended for circulation, lack of hall emergency exit, lack of access to toilets during nursery school sessions, poor lighting), as well as liturgical reasons for making change (the altar and ambo [reading desk] should both be permanent and related one to the other, the 3 levels of the sanctuary don't work well in services, pillars obscure both tabernacle and statue of Our Lady as seen from the door). With the prospect of only one Sunday morning mass within a few years we also need to boost seating capacity.

After a false start with one architect and a proposal from another to try to make the 'Round Church' square, Brian Quinn was appointed as architect and gave a presentation at the 2014 AGM. The process had not been without complications – the need to negotiate with the Diocesan Finance Committee and the Art & Architecture Committee, even an application to English Heritage for 'listed status' (refused), in order to free us from the restrictions placed on us by being seen as 'potentially listable'. Lastly, we got offered the glass from the now closed Whyteleafe church (also in the Dalles de Verre style and by Pierre Fourmaintraux, who made our own windows).

Unfortunately, the tendering process was delayed until just before Easter, 2015, and 3 of the 5 contractors approached withdrew, presumably because their summer works schedule was already full. Both the two tenders received were far beyond our budget but one we think can be brought back to within our scope through direct negotiations. However, the delays rule out a 2015 date for the works, which will have to be pushed back to May, 2016; and the Narthex (porch) will probably have to be excluded (and the Whyteleafe glass not used), unless a further £200k of funding can be obtained. Similarly, painting the ceiling had been excluded (though it would be cleaned to remove the effects of condensation caused by the old heating system) because this is finished in self-coloured render: painting it would have to become a regular expense. Jeff McCormack expressed his view that it would be possible to reduce current quotes by £50k+. Fr. Rob explained that we are already negotiating such reductions.

Finance: Eoin Connaughton presented the accounts, beginning by expressing his gratitude and that of the whole parish for help received from Shelagh Lodge (Gift Aid) and Leonie Elliott in other financial administration, including the complexities of our Jubilee Building Fund and people's fund-raising efforts.

Headlines from the accounts include a surplus of £72k, increase in Parish Funds of £50k, Offertory giving down 4% - with further losses in prospect while church is

closed for work – and fewer general donations. Diocese is to increase levy next year. Also, in the future, we shall probably have to pay more people to do some of the jobs that are currently done voluntarily. Faced with the Jubilee target of £250k (£135 by October, 2015), £107k had been raised by the end of May and he reckoned this might rise to say £190k to end of 2017.

Maeve Hughes asked whether the Diocese would let us borrow – to which the answer is that a loan repayable over 5 years (with interest) would be allowed. Fr Rob reminded the meeting that the parish had been in debt before - £100k in 1965 (£3.3m in 2015 prices!) and had been kept afloat by a loan of £5,000 from a parishioner at the time of his arrival in 2006.

Fr Rob suggested that we need a cultural shift towards professionalism and paying the costs of this through people's contributions. The way celibate clergy are funded means Fr. Rob's services come at a relatively low cost to the parish. It may be necessary to pay people to do some of the work currently done by volunteers or some of the tasks currently carried out by Fr. Rob. Most younger people work full time and have less capacity to volunteer. Eoin Connaughton also pointed out that when Sr. Faith eventually retires there would probably be significant cost implications for the parish.

Frank Hughes suggested that, while we need to get it right and be patient, we also need Parish 'buy in' to the vision of the future, so we need to communicate a clearer and more definite plan as this is finalised. It was suggested we use the Bishop's Visit on November 1 as an opportunity for launching this. We need to communicate the necessity of the planned works and to underline that this is not a 'vanity project'. New publicity materials should be prepared on this basis. Fr. Rob agreed to take this proposal forward, working with Brian Quinn and the Reordering Committee and Jubilee Steering Committee. Greg Michalczyk suggested that we should attempt fundraising at the highpoints of the liturgical year – Christmas and Easter – as we could target the "twice a year" Catholics.

Chris Mapleton felt that installation of the **stained glass from Whyteleaf** to create an enlarged porch/narthex was vital, since the porch was probably the worst area of the church and the change would be the most obvious part of the work. Fr Rob advised that the windows would become available in July but the work to take them from their present site was time consuming and expensive. However, he believed that preserving the windows was a condition in the planning consent for redeveloping the Whyteleaf site - and the purchasers may well have to pay for some or all of that work to be done. It was possible for those windows to be stored here and to be installed at a later date. Chris also felt that relatively few parishioners actually were actually aware of the proposals for the porch.

Looking To The Future: Fr Rob stated that the focus on fund-raising had inevitably meant neglect of other areas of parish life and we would need to rebalance things in the year ahead and set our priorities for the years beyond 2016. As Pope Francis told vowed Religious in launching the *Year for Religious Life*, we need to look to the past with gratitude, live the present passionately and look to the future with hope.

The need to form a **renewed parish pastoral team** once the Jubilee Coordinating Committee had run its course (and to advertise widely its function and membership) was raised and accepted.

We also need to seize various possibilities and initiatives presented by the wider Church. On December 8, 2015 (50th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council) the **Year of Mercy** declared by Pope Francis will begin. How can we be a parish of mercy? How do we minister to the broken and the broken-hearted? We have had more family breakdowns and separations in the last year than we have prepared people for marriage. How can we make the Church more welcoming for all? (One parishioner commented that she found the parish very cliquey.) This might be a major focus in the autumn. [There are diocesan plans, not yet finalised, to this effect.]

Fr. Rob announced plans for a **Pilgrimage to Rome** in late May, 2016.

We also need to engage fully with the **changes across our (Weybridge) Deanery**, which has 12 churches, served by 11 priests (and 3 deacons), with clergy numbers to fall significantly in the next few years. We shall need to work with other parishes but should see this as opportunity more than threat. Fr. Rob suggested that the future of our own church was fairly assured, because of the adjacent school, but that we should not adopt a ‘territorial’ mentality, eyeing the assets of other parishes as though we might take them over. All communities must work together.

Although we deliberately brought to a conclusion our aid work in Kumasi in order to clear the way for our Jubilee Fund-Raising, we shall need to adopt a new project from 2017 to help us to look out beyond our own needs to those of the poor of the world. John Donovan mentioned a Canadian scheme whereby parishioners have funded for a year an Iraqi/Syrian refugee family, with the government then taking on responsibility for them thereafter. Fr. Rob pointed out that this scheme probably couldn’t be implemented in the same manner due to our own country’s stringent immigration rules, but it was an example of the sort of initiative we might explore.

We also need to engage fully with Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*, on Care for Our Common Home and help the whole parish to rethink lifestyle and to seek greater environmental responsibility. This will be explored during the autumn.

The meeting concluded at 9.40pm with the reading of the final prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Pope Francis’ letter, *The Joy of the Gospel*.