

Regarding the Proposed Closure of St Mary's Church, Marple Bridge

From Denise Ead and Jim Howell - keeping Parishioners informed

Dear Parishioners.

To recap-

Parishioners sent in their concerns, and together with a covering letter, these concerns were sent to our Bishop. The reply should now be available on the website. In brief -

The Bishops in his letter says, "At this stage, no final decision has been made regarding the future use of St Mary's church building and land"....."Any process of de-consecration, when it proceeds will follow the necessary canonical procedures with full transparency".

The end of the letter gave dates for a meeting with the Vicar General and Chief Operating Officer.

This meeting was arranged for Friday 14th March 2025
The notes below were made by Jim Howell and David Lawes).

The meeting opened with a hymn and a prayer

Fr. John Kyne (FJK), the Vicar General and Mr David Lawes (DL), Chief Operating Officer represented Nottingham Diocese.

There were 73 parishioners present and a number of apologies by people who were not free because of work obligations.

Mrs Denise Ead MBE, (DE) Chair of the Parish Council and Mr James Howell (JH) Member of the Council chaired the meeting. They opened with some background

- Founded 1856
- conservation area
- Beautiful church
- Cemetery
- One parish with New Mills
- Much loved-big part of people's lives
- Given only 10 weeks' notice

DL gave a summary of the background to the decision to close (cease Mass provision) emphasising that nobody was happy about the decision.

There are now too many churches for the clergy available to cover properly. Compared to the 1980s, Mass attendance has halved, the number of clergy has reduced by two thirds but eight out of ten of the churches open forty years ago are still open.

We cannot maintain [and service] all these buildings any longer and the present average Mass attendance at St. Mary's Marple Bridge of 35 is too few for maintenance of Masses at the building. There are a number of nearby churches which could accommodate these numbers. The diocese needs to switch from a parish maintenance and preservation mode to a missionary focus.

FKJ followed up by pointing out that he was very aware of the pain engendered by the decision to close having had to close two churches within what is now his own parish.

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He added that this is not a case of MB's being singled out as there have been and will be more churches closing. For example, the Annunciation NM is staying open but a merger with another parish is not excluded.

Peter Moore (PM) replied on behalf of the parish with a statement of objections gathered and ordered over the last month. This statement is available as a separate document.

One issue is that closure of a church must follow the procedure of Canon Law 1222 & 1214, that the diocese has not followed this procedure so the bishop's letter of 28th January is not valid and should be withdrawn.

PM added that it appears that an irrevocable decision to close the church has already been made and that this too is invalid.

The statement will be distributed to parishioners next week.

DL replied that the action taken now is not a canonical closure but only a cessation of Mass services and that there will be further consultations about the future of the buildings.

Six Listed questions were then put to the representatives. These too are available as a separate document.

The notes below give some of the exchanges but are not complete

DL mentioned that use of retired priests is not a long-term answer to the shortage of priests and that there are now only around 43 or so active diocesan priests in the diocese with average age over sixty trying to cover 130 churches.

It was also stated that older people are valued but there are not enough young people who are active Catholics so the diocesan focus must be on them for outreach

Joe Harvey raised the issue of the need to bring more young people into church and this was followed by a number of interventions about the effect of the closure on our schoolchildren. This included comments by Mr Nish, headteacher and other staff members who pointed out that St Mary's school has the highest percentage of baptised Catholic children (80%) and Catholic staff (75%) in the Academy. It was also mentioned that every Wednesday children come from school to Mass and this means that each child attends Mass at least monthly. This would not be possible if the church and school were not nearby.

Canon John Kyne advised that in many schools, priests come to say Mass in the school hall.

The comment was made that the parish priest of Holy Spirit Marple would not be able to come to say Mass in the school hall because Holy Spirit is in a different diocese.

Marion Thompson, representing Churches Together in Marple suggested that the best solution might be for Marple Bridge to become part of Shrewsbury diocese so that Holy Spirit and St Mary's would be in the same parish but the response was that changing diocesan boundaries is a lengthy and complex process.

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In response to a question on finance by JH, DL answered that the decision to close the church is not primarily a financial decision and also confirmed that the balance of the set off account which exceeds a quarter of a million pounds belongs to the parish.

The meeting was then thrown open for questions from the floor. These were wide ranging and included a suggestion for a weekly Mass rota.

A question by a representative of Hollins Wood Nursery who pay rent to the church and have a long term lease expressed surprise at the short notice of closure, the lack of a long term plan and and apparent lack of consideration of the closure's impact on community life in Marple Bridge.

One of our oldest parishioners queried the authorisation of the diocesan representatives and stated that the notice given is far too short and that at least six months should have been granted.

DL gave some initial comments on the questions raised and confirmed that a functioning cemetery is to be retained though it is not yet known if new plots can be sold. He also stated that there are procedures to prevent unsuitable use of the church buildings and that other parishes all know about the decision to close and will support transferees.

PM closed for the parish mentioning that we request details of mediation and appeal procedures.

The meeting closed with a hymn, a prayer and a blessing

After the meeting Canon John and David Lawes spoke with several parishioners individually. During one of these conversations, David was asked why Bishop Patrick had not come to the meeting. David has asked that we make it clear that Bishop Patrick had very much wanted to visit the parish himself. However, this parish meeting needed to be held as soon as possible, and sooner than the Bishop's very full diary could allow. The Bishop therefore asked Canon John, who, as Vicar General, represents the Bishop, and David Lawes to meet with parishioners at the earliest opportunity.

Update. Since the meeting on 14 March 2025 a letter has been sent to our Bishop reiterating our concerns and asking that St Mary's church remain open.

We are awaiting feedback.