

## **Announcement 10<sup>th</sup> September 2017**

As the Secretary of the Select Vestry (SV) I have been tasked by my colleagues to make this announcement. Two initial points – firstly although it may be a little challenging it's nothing terrible. It's all to do with parish property and the reason for this unusual announcement is that we feel it's very important that you - the parishioners - are fully informed at the outset of what's happening since this is your parish and your property. Secondly this announcement comes at the end of a long period of thought and work which has had its roots in a problem extending over many years. For that reason we must emphasise it is purely coincidental that it happens to be occurring not very long after the arrival of our 'new' Rector. To be absolutely clear he has played almost no part in this matter apart from facilitating it and being very generous in his approach to our problems.

As you know the SV is responsible for looking after the material side of the parish. This is often referred to as looking after the '3 f's' – i.e. finance, fabric & furnishings. Our duty is to keep parish property in good order, such as for example in having the recent painting of the side chapel undertaken. We carry out the maintenance and repairs to the parish hall, parish room etc. But today's announcement is specifically in relation to our responsibilities in looking after the Rectory.

Curiously the parish doesn't actually own the Rectory - the title deeds are held by the church's governing body, the Representative Church Body (RCB). In a sense the RCB is like a landlord and we are the tenants of the Rectory. But like any landlord the RCB insists that we keep the property in good repair and over the years we have spent many thousands of pounds in trying to do just that. Our Glebe Wardens over the years have done a magnificent job dealing with the maintenance issues involved. Every 5 years the Diocese (on behalf of the RCB) carries out what is called the Quinquennial Inspection just to check how things are, and we are then

obliged to follow their recommendations and put right any defects they find. They also carry out a very comprehensive inspection during a Vacancy, when we have a change of Rector.

Over my 30 years as a member of the SV of this parish it's difficult to remember a time when we were not dealing with some issue concerning the Rectory. It's not that it came up every month at our meetings but always in the background there has been a concern about the condition of the Rectory. We are very aware that its condition is slowly deteriorating no matter how much money we spend on it.

It is obviously a lovely building which is much admired, sitting as it does in beautiful surroundings. But there is a slightly darker side to it. It was built in 1895, has no proper damp proof course as we know it nowadays, is not of cavity wall construction and damp is a constant issue. It's hard to heat with an old-fashioned oil fired system, and has inadequate insulation as much of it simply cannot be properly insulated. Much of the pipework and fittings are past their useful life, and the ceilings are of the old 'lathe & plaster' type with many internal walls having areas of 'boast' plasterwork. Outside, the bricks are beginning to 'spall' (or crumble), areas require repointing and the roof is very difficult to maintain. In fact we know from the recent Vacancy Report that the roof will shortly need to be completely replaced.

In a nutshell this is an expensive and difficult house to keep in good order. We have always been aware of this, and over the years have done our best and spent as much money as has been affordable. However, the most recent Quinquennial Inspection, coupled with the Vacancy Inspection in 2016, have put the matter into much sharper focus and things have become more urgent. Following last year's Vacancy Inspection Report the Diocesan Surveyor indicated that in order to bring the property up to acceptable Diocesan specifications, repairs were required which were estimated to cost in the order of

£180K. These repairs should in fact have been carried out prior to the arrival of our new Rector.

Whilst the SV were not completely surprised by this outcome we were very disappointed at just how much it was all going to cost. The result has been that for the past year the SV has been considering this matter as a priority knowing that something radical had to be done.

In the meantime we entered into an arrangement with the Diocese and RCB that we would make sufficient repairs to the Rectory to ensure it was safe and as comfortable as possible for our new Rector to take up residence in November 2016. The Rector has been more than accommodating in this respect and has very amicably accepted a standard of living which is less than that which he could reasonably expect. For this the SV is very grateful.

As part of the SV deliberations we formed a smaller working group under the guidance of our Glebe Wardens Jim Wilson and Billy Robinson, with Jim in the Chair. This group has for just over the past year been trying to decide what to do and to consider the various options. We have had numerous meetings, and have consulted with professional advisers. We have also met with the Diocesan Glebe's (or property) committee who are in fact very sympathetic to our difficulties. After much deliberation and a great deal of thought we presented a range of options to the full SV in June of this year as to how best to deal with this issue.

These options covered a lot of ground starting at one end of the scale with actually repairing the Rectory, and ending up at the other with knocking it down and starting all over again. In devising these options, we took lots of advice.

We are in fact quite constrained in what we can actually do. The property sits just outside the Belfast Metropolitan Plan area so there are numerous planning restrictions which would not

necessarily be the case if the Rectory was a few hundred metres nearer Doagh. In addition to planning constraints we are required by the RCB and the Diocese to make sure that any dwelling we provide conforms to their specifications - these include house size, number of rooms, facilities, parking and similar. There is virtually no flexibility in these specifications.

Our initial thoughts, and indeed those of some professionals, were to sell off the Rectory & site for development and build, say, 6 houses on it, in which case we would have been financially very well off. But sadly, we now know that is not even a remote possibility because of planning regulations. The most we can do according to our professional advisers is to have a maximum of two dwellings on the site.

To cut a long story short the option chosen by the SV was the one which the working group favoured as being most likely to succeed and also which was most cost effective, although in reality we don't have a lot of room for manoeuvre.

That option requires us to put aside any thought of bringing the Rectory up to the required specification. Our view is that because of the age and condition of the building we would simply be putting off the day when something more radical would have to be done and that faults - of which we are currently unaware - could develop in the future. Our preferred option is to apply for planning permission to split the site in two, sell off the existing Rectory on its half site complete with all its faults— i.e. sold as seen as a development project to someone who is prepared to spend a lot of money on it. Our intention would then be to build a new Rectory on the remaining half of the site. What we need is a low maintenance modern building suitable for whoever is Rector of this parish. Whilst we want and hope our Rector will be with us for many, many, years to come there will inevitably be the day when there will be a new Rector. He – or indeed she – may be young, or in middle years, or not so young, may be single or married, have a young family

or no dependants. But whatever the situation we must be prepared to have a decent Rectory suitable for all possibilities.

The decision to sever links with the current rectory was an incredibly difficult decision for us to take as it meant we would be losing a building which has been part of this parish for over 120 years - almost all of the time this parish has been in existence. There is undoubtedly a very strong sentimental attachment to the building and its relationship to the parish, but based on the professional advice we have received our reckoning is that by being hard headed and opting for a new-build we can save the parish perhaps as much as £80-£100K by going down this route.

Our first step is to apply for outline planning permission. We have no guarantee that this will be granted although we are hopeful that the planning processes of the newly formed Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council may be sympathetic to our position. But assuming we are successful in obtaining planning permission and can go ahead with this project to replace the Rectory it is still going to cost a very substantial sum of money, perhaps around £100K. This sum is the difference between what we would raise in the sale of the existing Rectory and the cost of a new rectory.

There may be those who are reluctant to do this and who feel we will never be able to finance it. But if we think back to the late 1980's when we proposed building a new parish hall at a cost of £120,000 that seemed then an incredible sum of money - which indeed it was at that time - and one which we could never raise. But we did and have never looked back. Or similarly in the late 1990's when we completely gutted the interior of this church and totally overhauled it at a cost of some £100,000, there were those who said it could never be done. But again, we did it and you only have to look around you today to see how worthwhile that was. So as far as financing this project is concerned we have to go forward in faith, confident that we will succeed in financing this project. Clearly we will

need to raise funds and that will involve considerable effort and work on all our parts but our experience of being involved in former projects is that such activity is a wonderful tool in bringing the congregation together and giving us a sense of community. And it can even be fun! In due course we will need to think about means of raising finance to carry out this project and all and every suggestion and offer of assistance will be gratefully received. Maybe we should even think of this project as an integral part of our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations and our confidence in the future of the parish.

You won't see much happening quickly. At most in the next few weeks you might see an application for planning permission in the press. That process could take several months and after that - assuming success - we will be liaising with the architect, valuers, builders, the Diocesan Glebes Committee and others. It could be next summer or even later before you might see any physical activity around the Rectory. And of course we will need to find suitable interim accommodation for our long suffering Rector while the new dwelling is being constructed. It will mean considerable upheaval for him but he has very gamely agreed to all this. We do have to wonder whether he factored in such a possibility when he agreed to come to us!

Thank you for your patience in listening to this rather long account but we felt it really important that you should be kept informed of what we are doing. We would of course intend to update you as matters develop, and keep you abreast of developments. And finally, we appreciate that this particular set-up is not an ideal forum in which to ask and answer questions. So there are present this morning a number of members of the Select Vestry who would be very happy to remain behind and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you again.

Ivan Topping - Secretary of the Select Vestry