

UPDATE ON ST. MARY'S PROPOSALS

Discussion Evening

The purpose of the Discussion Evening is to provide another opportunity for all views in the village, both for and against the wider proposals for St. Mary's, to be fully discussed. It will be an opportunity for any misunderstandings to be corrected (for example, we are aware that some signatories were concerned that the proposals would require the removal of the bats, which is not correct). The meeting can also hear and debate any alternative possible solutions, including other possible locations for the shop.

The event will take place on Thursday, March 24th at 8pm at the Village Hall.

Why the Proposals are so important for St. Mary's Church, Tattingstone

Churches are possibly the most prominent structure in our villages but sadly, whilst people enjoy their visual prominence, most are under-utilised, increasingly marginalised, and funded by a small number of parishioners. The reality is that most villagers do not enter the building through the year. The Tattingstone PCC wants St. Mary's to be used regularly, rather than on some Sundays, key festivals and the few family services to mark life events.

One of the challenges for the wider Church – and for the PCC at Tattingstone - is how to 're-order' and re-imagine the buildings so that they can return to the heart of local communities and become an asset for the whole community. We see the incorporation of a community shop and café – run by and for the community - as part of a wider re-ordering of the church, as an exciting and effective way to place St. Mary's at the heart of the community.

However, many Church buildings – and St. Mary's is a prime example - are not equipped or designed to meet the needs of the wider range of activities that today's Church is involved in as part of its wider mission. The church needs to be warm, attractive, and provide flexible spaces with a spiritual heart and visible reminders of current church life and, of course, any church re-ordering must be carried out with sensitivity to preserve its atmosphere of peace and spirituality and architectural heritage.

We know that internal alterations to a church can be uncomfortable, but when weighed against the benefit of revitalising the Church as a regularly used building alongside worship, that emotional response can change. The proposals for St. Mary's have been carefully thought through with the support of the Diocese and the input of a professional architect experienced in the structural developments of ecclesiastical buildings. Our proposals incorporate actual experiences from other small rural churches across the country that have been adapted to incorporate useful areas such as toilets, kitchens, community shops and cafés and discovered that such initiatives have generated deeper relationships amongst and between the church and the wider community, and very importantly have not had a detrimental impact on worship.

Alongside the drive to make St. Mary's the heart of the village, the proposals also address the financial pressures on the church. Many churches are no longer financially viable. The traditional method of funding, by the weekly collection, is no longer proving sufficient funds to meet the needs of the building. Whilst churches creatively engage in fundraising, the burden of looking after the building and maintaining ministry falls on a small number of volunteers. If a church is to thrive it needs to secure new sources of revenue and to redefine its space in ways that enable it to function both now and into the future.

St. Mary's costs approximately £20k per year to remain open and our projections anticipate that the traditional methods of fundraising and individual collections will in time be unable to cover this operating cost. The proposed re-ordering of St. Mary's, with the shop and café as the first step, will create a space that can be used for a variety of uses alongside being a place of worship. The PCC can use these new spaces to generate additional income – whether from rent from the shop/café or direct income from other uses or events.

Responses to concerns

1. We understand that some residents are not aware that other locations have been explored. The Village Shop Steering Group has had discussions with the Village Hall and Playing Fields Committee to explore both permanent and temporary ('portacabin') possibilities, but the Committee felt that existing commitments and constraints relating to both sites could not be overcome. The Group was also informally approached with an offer of land for the shop/café, but the Group considered that the location was not ideal and was advised that it would be unlikely that planning permission would be granted. The Group are keen to find a central location in Tattingstone to optimise the opportunity for shop/café customers to walk rather than drive and did not formally approach either of the two pubs.

2. We are advised that "many of those spoken to are under the impression that the Church could, mid to long term, be converted into residential accommodation" if the shop/café project is not pursued. The PCC's view, based on wider experience of rural churches and given the current trajectory of church attendance and financial results at St. Mary's, is that without the proposed wider re-ordering there is a significant risk that St. Mary's will not be sustainable as a place of worship. The most likely projection is that it will become a 'Festival Church', open only for major services during the year, with the possibility of eventually becoming a 'Chapel of Ease' (where the church is no longer used for services) or a closed Church. Sometimes churches are converted for residential or other secular use.

3. We have been advised that most of the signatories felt that the Church was not an appropriate location for a shop and that "they feel this is a place of quiet, personal reflection and or communal gathering but not a place to be selling things and or having a café". The long-term proposals will actually increase the opportunity for communal gathering with the introduction of more flexible seating areas and we are also working to ensure that access for quiet reflection can be achieved.

4. We are advised also that there was a "level of concern around changing the look and feel of St Mary's" which is seen to "change the atmosphere, culture and historical aspects of the church". We understand that many in the village, even those who do not attend the church, value the traditional look and feel of the building. However, many churches across the country are adapting in similar ways and the longer-terms proposals for the re-ordering (as shown in the plans that can be seen on the Village website) will be done in ways that are acceptable to the diocese and PCC, and in keeping with the modernisation of church buildings seen elsewhere. We consider it important that any reordering of the Church maintains its atmosphere and feel as a place of worship. We understand that some are concerned over the loss of seating and pews in the Church to accommodate the shop footprint. In fact, the proposed removal of the mid-section of pews is not for the shop per se, but to create a flexible area for chairs and/or tables to serve both the café and other church organised activities. The removal of these pews is not expected to reduce the total seating capacity of the Church.

5. We understand that some are concerned by the relocation of the font. The proposed new location of the font in the long-term proposal is close to the North Door instead of its current position in front of the

door to the Bell Tower. We consider this a much better position from a religious perspective. The font's current position is not where it would have started. It will have been moved during a previous restructuring, possibly during the Victorian era to make room for pews. Originally the font would have been by the door, symbolising baptism as the entry point of Christian faith. Not only would moving it to the new position be theologically correct it would enable more people to gather around it for baptisms and other services.

6. We are advised that there are concerns about the reduced capacity for marriages, baptisms and funerals and other occasions such as Easter, Christmas services or school services and activities. Although in the first phase there would be a reduced capacity, the long-term proposals, encompassing a mezzanine floor above the shop, would create the same space as is currently available.

7. We are advised that several parishioners fundamentally feel that the location of a shop in a church is not consistent with the teaching of the Bible. We do not agree that this is a correct reading of the Bible. We stress that a community shop is non-profit making, run by volunteers as a service to the whole community. The shop and café are fully consistent with the mission of the Church because they bring the Church back into the centre of the community.

8. We are aware of current concerns with the levels of parking within the village, particularly at school pick up and drop off times and partly as a result of the new parking charges at Alton Water. Our market research in 2021 suggested that the majority of shop/café visitors would prefer to arrive on foot and the expected levels and frequency of use are unlikely to significantly add to the parking issues of which the Parish Council is aware.

9. We are advised that "there is concern over grave sites being walked on and also litter becoming an issue within the Church grounds / around the surrounding area". Access to the shop/café will be through the North Door and we do not expect high volumes of walking traffic to use the path through from the playing field. The PCC will continue to monitor levels of litter and the quality of paths within the Churchyard.

10. We have been asked whether alternative funding options have been investigated "such as the potential of a village / parishioner annual payment" of a suggested £50 per household and other charitable donations, grants and or fund raising activities. The request for financial contributions from the village has been made frequently over the past years and there have been some very generous donations. We would welcome on-going commitments from residents in the village of course, to supplement income from the re-ordering proposals, but do not feel that the contribution levels would i) provide sufficient, repeatable income or ii) address the ambition to bring new/more village residents into the Church building as part of St. Mary's wider mission.