[2016] ECC Bri 4

In re Christchurch, Hengrove

1. This is a petition to remove and dispose of the front 5 pews on the left side of the Nave, the front 4 pews on the right side of the Nave, 3 pews from the right side aisle, 1 pew from the coffee area and 1 pew in storage. The petition originally included the removal of the organ. It is important to note that the removal of the organ is not currently being pursued.

2. The petition has a curious rider, one unique in my experience. It reads: *Members of the congregation will be offered the opportunity of arranging a suitable place to store them at no cost to the church, before being put up for sale, buyer to remove from church and take away.*

3. There have been spirited objections in the past from members of the congregation to an earlier petition to remove all the pews from the church. In refusing that petition I raised concerns about the replies that the objectors had received, as well as the correspondence that was sent to me. I will deal with the most recent correspondence below.

4. I have seen fresh letters of objection from the Twentieth Century Society, Mrs Joan Down, Mr Ken Down, Mrs Jill Harris, Mr Bob Hough and Mrs Jan Hough (all collectively) a further letter from Mrs Harris, and further letters from Mr Gillard, Mrs Morgan, Miss Morgan and from Mr and Mrs Young. None of these wished to be parties opponent and all have asked me to take their letters into consideration.

5. The church itself, which is unlisted, was built in 1934 and the interior, according to the photographs I have been sent shows a plain, warm interior with a 'boat-like' feel to it. The interior is as the architect designed it with a pleasing symmetry and a consistency in the colour and look to the walls, the pews and all other interior fixtures. The Twentieth Century Society helpfully identify the architect as Walter Rudman and describes the Church: *"It has distinctive architectural features such as dormer windows in the roof of the nave, and an unusual ribbed barrel vaulted concrete roof structure. The panelled oak pews, which we believe are original fittings of the church, compliment the wooden ceiling panelling which contributes to its distinctive character."*

6. I will deal with the letters seriatim.

7. The letter from the Twentieth Century Society states:

   The Society strongly urges the church to re-assess its plans to dispose of the pews which are an integral and important fixture of this 1930s building. The pews form part of its distinctive character which would be harmed if they were removed. We understand the church's desire

for more flexibility, but we also note that the hall adjacent to the church, which is currently let for part of the week to a playgroup, could be more fully used for a number of different groups and meeting uses. We are not convinced that all other options such as these have been exhausted, and therefore feel that the presumption against the loss of historic pews in this instance, as stated in the Church Care guidance, should be upheld.

8. The 'group letter' state that they do not, in fact, object to the removal of the pews:

   We still believe the pews are integral to the distinctive character of Christ Church-an interior which is loved by many and does not lend itself to modernisation. We believe the church will be detrimentally affected by the change, which we have agreed to in order to allow the congregation to move on from this damaging issue

   The letter objects to the removal of the organ, part of the petition which is no longer pursued. It deals at length with what might be best described as 'pastoral breakdown' and a perceived lack of communication within the parish.

9. Mr and Mrs Young write:

   We are strongly against this as it would affect the whole of the Church. Christchurch is such a beautiful Church and the pews are part of it.
   We have attended many weddings, funerals and christenings at the Church and even got married there it would be such a crying shame if the Church is altered in any. (sic)

10. Mr Gillard states that his understanding is that:

    A compromise of replacing the front five pews on the left-hand side and four pews on the right-hand side has been agreed for a trial period, with those pews kept in storage during that time.

    This is plainly at odds with the curiously phrased petition noted and might well evidence a lack of communication within the parish. He goes on to say:

    My 'main' concern remains, in that the attractive interior décor will be significantly diminished. The pews, wall panelling and organ surround, in their well-chosen, well-crafted, aesthetically pleasing hardwood, contribute greatly to the overall ambiance of this holy worship area.
    To illustrate this point, please find enclosed two photographs of another well-known place of worship which had trodden this route.
    The plain, inferior, light coloured, straight-grained furniture can be seen to be 'not in-keeping'.

    I should emphasise that there has been no petition for the introduction of any furniture to replace these pews. In the past, when the petitioners applied to remove all the pews it appears that matters had gone quite far towards the purchase of chairs

to replace the pews. Those chairs, the DAC advised, were to be stained the same colour as the existing woodwork. I have seen no plans for what is to replace these pews, nor that whatever is to replace them is to be stained appropriately.

11. Mrs Morgan, in a beautiful manuscript, stated:

    The removable (sic) *of the pews discussion has upset me greatly but this compromise is acceptable, but the ORGAN-AWFUL!*

    She will be reassured that there is no longer a petition to remove the organ.

12. Miss Morgan stated:

    After many meetings about the removal of the pews in the church it has been suggested only 9 pews should be removed.
    This is good news, and I would like to thank all people included in coming to this decision.
    But now people want the organ to go and a kitchen out in its place!! I wonder if they do not see the church as a place of worship?

    She, again, will be reassured that there is no longer a petition to remove the organ.

13. The 3rd petitioner, the Church Warden Mrs Biddle identifies the need for the pews to be removed on the basis that there have been three occasions when chairs would have enhanced the experience; during a Lent group, for a safeguarding training event and to develop 'Community Coffee'. She also identifies the need to bring the un-churched physically into a church rather than a separate building. The Hall, she notes is used by a Play School 3 days per week, by a lunch club for the over 55s one day a week and a 'Mums and toddlers' group one morning a week. It is used for 'children's parties etc.,' at weekends. There is no available free time to use the Church Hall as suggested by the Twentieth Century Society.

14. Her response to the 'objectors' was to write, in a paragraph headed '*The Compromise*' *'The original faculty asked for the removal of all pews. Over a period of three years a number of consultation meetings were held, also visits to other churches. A meeting was held in September between four PCC members and those church members who objected. The result of this meeting was that with the reduced number of pews to be removed there would be no objection from these church members. We were disappointed to see that this agreement had been broken by the five church members'*. This remark is surprising bearing in mind the content of the letters of objection that have been filed. She goes on, in a paragraph headed 'Eligibility of Objectors' states: *'It should be noted that 3 of the letters are from people who live in the Parish but do not attend church. We understand their right to object. However, one lives outside the Parish and very rarely attends and is not on the Electoral Roll. Our understanding is that they are not eligible to object.'* She declines to identify any of these parties. Her understanding is also incorrect. I note that remarks like these

comes immediately after a paragraph headed '*Church Growth. The congregation at Christ Church has been declining over many years.*'

15. No response is made to the 'group' letter's proposal to store the pews in the 'skittle alley' (an unusual feature for a parish church). This seems to me to be a sensible compromise in all the circumstances.

16. I take the view that this petition scrapes past the threshold. I note the 'statement of need' from the petitioners and also the fact that the earlier objectors have now withdrawn their objections and support the petition. This church is not listed and whilst I note the measured and sincere objections from the Twentieth Century Society and others, I am satisfied that a sensitive reordering should deal with their concerns and achieve the flexibility the parish wish to have.

17. I want to add one concern. As part of their letter of objection the 'group' state that the initiative for compromise came from them and not '*the leadership*' of the Church. They state that '*control of finance,s fabric and worship rests in the hands of a small lay leadership team, with few (if any) checks and balances, and no minutes of their meetings shown at PCC meetings. The Churchwardens have held their roles for around 20 years and others are never invited to stand for office.*' Importantly they go on to say '*We mention this not to criticise the post holders, whose dedication is exemplary, but to highlight an ongoing culture. Unless this culture is acknowledged and addressed it is difficult to see how removing the pews can result in the church growth everyone would like to see*'. It is not necessary for me to make any findings of fact on this point in relation to this petition, and I do not do so. The concerns raised may be more apparent than real, nevertheless I copy the Churchwardens Measure 2001 section 3 and the Church Representation Rules Appendix II para 12 without comment.

3
Disqualification after six periods of office
Without prejudice to section 2 above, a person shall be disqualified from being chosen for the office of churchwarden when that person has served as a churchwarden of the same parish for six successive periods of office until the annual meeting of the parishioners to elect churchwardens in the next year but one following the date on which that person vacated office at the end of the last such period:
Provided that a meeting of the parishioners may by resolution decide that this section shall not apply in relation to the parish concerned.
Any such resolution may be revoked by a subsequent meeting of the parishioners.

Minutes
12. (a) The names of the members present at any meeting of the council shall be recorded in the minutes.

(b) If one-fifth of the members present and voting on any resolution so require, the minutes shall record the names of the members voting for and against that resolution.
(c) Any member of the council shall be entitled to require that the minutes shall contain a record of the manner in which his vote was cast on any resolution.
(d) Minutes of meetings of the council shall be available to all members of the Council. The members shall also have access to past minutes which the Chairman and Vice-Chairman jointly determine to be relevant to current Council business.
(e) The independent examiner or auditor of the Council's financial statements, the bishop, the archdeacon and any person authorised by one of them in writing shall have access to the approved minutes of council meetings without the authority of the Council.
(f) Other persons whose names are on the church electoral roll may have access to the approved minutes of Council meetings held after the annual parochial church meeting in 1995 except any minutes deemed by the Council to be confidential.
(g) Other persons may have access to the minutes of Council meetings only in accordance with a specific authorization of the Council provided that, where minutes have been deposited in the diocesan record office pursuant to the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978, the authorization of the council may be dispensed with.

18. There are clearly some pastoral issues in this case which I draw to the attention of the archdeacon in the hope that matters can be rectified.

19. I grant this petition for the removal of the pews as prayed on the condition that they are to be stored in the skittle alley whilst the reordered church is used, with liberty to apply for them to be removed permanently if the experiment proves successful. I await proposals for the introduction of any chairs, mindful of the recommendations of the DAC in the original petition with which I concur.

7th April 2016

The Reverend and Worshipful Justin Gau

Chancellor and Vicar General of the Diocese of Bristol