

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF COVENTRY

ST. LAURENCE: LIGHTHORNE

JUDGMENT

- 1) Although it has much older origins the current structure of the church of St Laurence, Lighthorne derives principally from a restoration of 1875 – 1876. It has a Grade II listing. In March 2017 the Archdeacon Pastor granted a licence for a temporary minor reordering. This involved the removal and storage of four pews and one pew frontal from the west end of the north side of the nave.
- 2) Gillian Jones is a churchwarden and petitions with the support of the Parochial Church Council for a faculty authorising those works on a permanent basis. The petition is put on the basis that the church has no church hall or equivalent facility and that the removal of the pews has created space which can be and is used for activities with children during services; for the taking of refreshment after services; and for the positioning of wheelchairs.

The Procedural History.

- 3) The Diocesan Advisory Committee has recommended approval of the proposed works certifying that they are unlikely to affect the church's special significance.
- 4) Shortly after the end of the public notice period Mrs. Catherine Wood wrote a letter of objection. There was no other response to the public notice. I extended time enabling Mrs. Wood's letter to be treated as a letter of objection. Mrs. Wood has chosen not to become a party opponent but provided a short supplement to her letter. The Petitioner has provided brief submissions in response to Mrs. Wood's comments.

The Submissions.

- 5) Mrs. Wood expresses concern about a lack of consultation about the proposed changes. Mrs. Wood is not a regular worshipper at St Laurence but she is a parishioner and attends services there on occasion. I note that she is sufficiently

involved in the life of the church to be on the church's cleaning rota. Mrs. Wood said that she first learnt of the removal of the pews in November 2018 and believes that there ought to have been wider consultation with the local community. Mrs. Wood's main concern relates to the effect of the removal on the appearance of the church and she describes the pew removal as "spoiling the feel" of the church and creating a hole at the back of the church. Mrs. Wood says that Messy Church already takes place in the village hall in the neighbouring parish of Lighthorne Heath. She contends that it would be better not to replicate that activity in St Laurence (where she doubts that there is a demand for this) but for those wishing to engage in services of that kind to do so in Lighthorne Heath. Mrs. Wood points out that in Lighthorne Heath Messy Church takes place in the village hall and suggests that if need be there could be a similar arrangement using the village hall in Lighthorne. She believes that there is already ample space in the church for post-worship coffee and the like. In short Mrs. Wood says that the alleged benefits of the change are not sufficient to justify the impact on the appearance of the church. In her supplemental note Mrs. Wood drew attention to the possibility of the pews being put on castors and expressed a concern that if removed the pews should be stored safely enabling restoration in due course. Throughout her submissions Mrs. Wood expressed herself in moderate and restrained terms emphasising her willingness to engage in dialogue about these matters.

- 6) In her short submission in response the Petitioner explains that the pews are currently stored securely and that it is intended that this arrangement should continue if the petition were to be granted. Mrs. Jones points out that the temporary licence was granted some time ago and that the proposal followed discussion by the Parochial Church Council and consultation with the congregation. She notes that although the current arrangement has been in place for some time Mrs. Wood's has been the only voice raised in objection. Mrs. Jones points out that the space formerly occupied by the pews has now been carpeted; says that it looks "excellent"; and argues that it does not diminish the attractiveness of this church. She explains that the space has proved valuable as a way of promoting fellowship after services.

Analysis.

- 7) St. Laurence is a listed church but it is the considered view of the Diocesan Advisory Committee that the proposed changes would not harm its special significance. On that footing the question becomes one of whether a sufficiently good case for a change has been made out to overcome the ordinary presumption that in the absence of a good reason a change should not be permitted. Even if the view were to be taken that the removal of these pews would have an impact on the church's special significance such impact would clearly be a modest one given that it is the removal of a small number of pews at the rear of the church.

- 8) Mrs. Wood's concern is genuine and expressed with moderation but I am satisfied that a good reason justifying the proposed change has been shown. The following factors are of particular note:
 - a) The provision of facilities for children is of real importance in the life of any church. St Laurence does not have a church hall and so if there are to be activities such as Messy Church or a creche/children's area they must be provided in the body of the church building. The suggestion that such activities could be undertaken solely in the neighbouring parish close though that is or in the Lighthorne village hall does not meet this important need.

 - b) Similarly and again in the absence of a church hall the provision for an area for post-worship fellowship is an important benefit in the life of the church coupled as it is with the provision of a place where wheelchairs can be sited during worship.

 - c) The proposal involves the removal of a relatively small number of pews at the rear of the church. I have been provided with a photograph and a plan showing the interior of the church. The majority of the pews will remain in place and the church will retain the appearance of a pewed church.

 - d) It is of note that these pews were initially removed on a temporary and experimental basis and that the Parochial Church Council now support making the arrangement permanent. That is a strong indication of the level of

support for what is proposed – support based on practical experience of this arrangement. Despite Mrs. Wood’s feeling that there has been a lack of consultation I am satisfied that there has been proper consideration of the proposal and that it has the support of the worshipping community in Lighthorne.

- e) Mrs. Wood’s alternative suggestion of putting the pews on castors does not in my judgement address the need which has been shown. It is not clear to me that these pews could in fact readily be put on castors but even if they could the reality is that they would have to be moved on most occasions of worship in the church and such moving aside and repositioning of the pews would run the risk of creating a cluttered appearance at the rear of the church.
 - f) Finally, the pews are to be retained and the proposed changes can be reversed if in due course a different view were to be taken by the successors of the current Parochial Church Council.
- 9) In those circumstances I authorise the grant of the faculty sought subject to a condition as to the safe storage of the pews.

STEPHEN EYRE
HIS HONOUR JUDGE EYRE QC
CHANCELLOR
20th June 2019