

# **Update on the uniting of the benefice of Penshurst, Fordcombe and the Chiddingstone Churches**

As you probably know, we are in the process of recruiting a new Rector who will minister in newly formed Benefice of Penshurst, Fordcombe and the Chiddingstone Churches. The PCCs of these parishes are working together to align the governance of the church in these parishes with the ministry.

We want to keep you up to date on how this process is going. Much of the detail below is about the machinery of governance or finance - but it is people who will make the churches in the benefice succeed or fail. We are lucky that many friendships and a good deal of trust already exists between the villages - we are not starting from scratch and we are enjoying a truly collaborative approach. We value support from everyone in the community, so please do ask any questions and have a look at the information. You will find contact details below.

## **Where are we now?**

As matters stand, the new Rector would find his or her benefice divided into three separate PCCs, each its own legal silo. Each PCC is a separate and formal corporate body in law and a charity. That means there are three constitutions, three sets of trustees, three annual reports and accounts, three sets of bank accounts, three sets of accounting systems, three sets of safeguarding policies and practices, three different sets of insurance policies.... The average turnover of each PCC is less than £60,000 a year and yet it has to support all this legal, regulatory and financial compliance. This consumes volunteers' time, energy and money, detracting from our real aim: Growing our church to be at the heart of our communities.

## **A new structure**

For the first time last year, the Church of England introduced new rules that allow parishes joined in a benefice to pool the legal and financial affairs of their PCCs in a single new body called a Joint Council. This works in law as though it were a combined PCC and can register as a charity. The rules are attractively flexible and the Fordcombe PCC is seeking to take advantage of them. They give us the opportunity to modernise our governance and align it with the ministry of our new Rector.

So, we have been working out the details of a new constitution and finances for this Joint Council with our neighbouring parishes. The discussions have also covered a long list of subjects like pattern of services, care and condition of buildings, membership records, websites, communications, safeguarding and Gift Aid. We have found new ways that we can work together more creatively, more efficiently and at lower cost. The combination will reduce overhead charges from the Diocese and bring economies of scale - for example, we have already found sizeable savings by co-ordinated purchasing of insurance.

We are aiming for the benefice to operate from the start as a single financial entity to the greatest extent possible. The financial profiles of Penshurst and Chiddingstone churches are very similar (in reserves, annual income and spending), while Fordcombe is about half the size of each neighbour. Therefore contributions to the starting benefice financial reserve will be made at a ratio of 40:40:20. Once each parish has made this contribution to the starting reserve, it will keep any extra historic reserves under its own control and use them for repairs of or improvements to its church (with benefice resources also available to help). There will be a single benefice pool into which all income or expenditure falls,

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although we will respect the wishes of any past, present or future donor who tells us in writing that their gift is to be spent only in their local church. Each parish will keep a mini-PCC to control its surplus reserves and each parish will also have a representative on the Joint Council.

## **The next stage**

We are now in a position to be able to put forward detailed proposals in the early autumn. These plans will need to be approved by a majority of 2/3 votes in each parish at a special meeting called for the purpose.

Church Wardens Peter Waghorn and Mike Gilbert are Fordcombe PCC representatives who have been working towards the joint benefice and they are happy to talk about this with anyone who has any questions.

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