

Message to Congregation, December 3rd, 2017

Janet & I have been trying to keep you informed about the interregnum. You may have noticed that in September we were working on the *Parish Profile* but have said nothing about it recently. I can now explain what has been going on. To make this clear, I think it will help to start from the beginning.

When Mark resigned, we talked to the Archdeacon who was then Clive Mansell. He spoke of the need to assess the parishes (the diocese has a “assessment tool”) but he advised us to carry on with the process of *Finding a New Vicar* which meant, first of all, preparing the *Profile*. Clive retired about a month later but his successor, Julie Conalty, was not collated until September 24th. Two weeks later she asked to meet us. At the meeting she told us that she had decided to “put us in suspension”. The proper phrase is “suspend of the right of presentation at St Luke’s.” However, this was confidential – secret – and we could not tell anyone.

Our PCC were told about it by the Area Dean at our meeting on November 13th, but they were also bound to keep it confidential. This secrecy has been uncomfortable and I urged the Archdeacon to let us inform you, the congregation, as soon as possible. Today, December 3rd, is the day that she allowed us to explain.

Why has this had to be a secret? What she wants is that the congregations of St Luke’s, St Mary’s Riverhead, and Kippington to think strategically about the future looking forward 7-10 years. She wanted to tell the other PCCs about this development herself, rather than them hearing about it first from us. All three PCCs have now been told about it and are free to inform their congregations today. The topic can now be discussed openly.

Janet and my reactions to being told of the suspension was disappointment: I expect most of you will feel the same. We had put a lot of effort into the Profile, we had very nearly reached the final draft, and now it is in mothballs, six months after Mark resigned and we are no further forward. It might be said that we were misled by Clive Mansell but I think we were simply unfortunate that Mark’s resignation happened just before Clive’s retirement and there was a hiatus during the summer. The decision had to be made by the new archdeacon.

I think we should take the opportunity to thank those who contributed to our Profile, particularly Jacquie Martin and Peter Fleming. We also wanted our website to be up to date, ready for those thinking of applying to be our vicar, and we are very grateful to Peter Ashwell and Jonathan Bourne for doing this.

Why can’t we just have a new vicar? The strongest argument in my view is this: that half the clergy in the diocese are due to retire in the next 5 years but there are not enough ordinands to replace them. Our population of our parish is ten times smaller than some, so one can see that the bishop would think that he must distribute the remaining clergy evenly.

Message to Congregation on Dec 3rd - Continued

What are the alternatives to having a new vicar? The first point is one which Julie Conalty wanted to emphasise, that **they do not want to close St Luke's**. She recognizes our importance in the town and hopes that we can flourish.

However, there are several other arrangements besides having one vicar per parish, and she wants us to consider which would work best: a Team Ministry, a Group Ministry, a Multi-parish Benefice or a United Parish. Undoubtedly, the stipendiary clergy are more thinly spread in all cases.

Her plan is that there will be a meeting on January 24th 2018, with clergy, wardens and two others per parish at which these ideas will be discussed. I imagine it will be the first of many such meetings.

Is this all bad? Members of our PCC have expressed a range of reaction to the proposal. Some do not like it, and it is understandable to want to continue as we have been. But some are quite positive about it. You may remember our initiative last year to share a youth worker with other local parishes. That did not happen, but was it optimal to continue with three vicars and no youth worker? Would we serve Sevenoaks better in future with, for example, two clergy and one youth worker? This is surely the sort of question that we should be asking.

What next? The archdeacon is coming here next Sunday to talk to the PCC. I hope that the situation will then become clearer. We will have many questions for her, I am sure. One will be to get a clearer idea how long this uncertainty about the future will continue. She was insistent that the meeting next Sunday will only be for the PCC but, if you are not a member of the PCC and have an important question or opinion, you may want to ask a member to represent you.

I hope this explanation of the situation makes sense to you. Janet and I will be in the hall for coffee, so please ask us if you have further questions. The interregnum is suspended but nothing else is due to change.

I also want to thank Anne Bourne for all that she is doing for us. Now that I am a church warden I see the huge amount of administrative work that is needed to run a parish. Janet and I do some but Anne is doing most of it, supported by Ian, and I think, at the start of the new church year, we should show our appreciation of all that she is doing for us.

Nick Donaldson & Janet Bates, Church Wardens.

Message to Congregation: December 18th, 2017

We are here, reporting to you again, because last Sunday afternoon the PCC met the Archdeacon of Tonbridge. It is the Archdeacon who has put us in *suspension*; has interrupted the process of appointing a new vicar. We had a discussion with her that helped us all understand better what the Archdeacon is trying to achieve, why she wants to do this, and how our congregation feel about the situation.

We now know that the parishes of Kippington and Riverhead will both need new pastoral arrangements soon and that the Archdeacon wants us to consider whether we can work together. She hopes that we will come up with a plan for a shared ministry with those parishes. There will be a meeting in January at which clergy and lay people from all three parishes will discuss the possibilities: what we are doing to serve God in our parishes in Sevenoaks, what is difficult, what we might be able to do better together, but also what is important and special to each of the churches separately. The new plan is not something that the Archdeacon is imposing upon us but will be something which we create. If it is to work, we need to be enthusiastic about it because it is ours.

Unfortunately, we do not know how long this will take: the other parishes may be against it but, even if they are in favour, we have no idea yet how many meetings will be necessary to formulate a plan. If you want more information, please ask us or a member of the PCC.

I am sure that you all know about the message being passed along the line sometime in the First World War, which started as “send up reinforcements, we are going to advance” and emerged as “send us three and fourpence, we are going to a dance”! Something like that seems to have happened concerning our situation at St Luke’s. So it may be helpful to refute some scare stories that may be going round.

1. The diocese is NOT trying to close St Luke’s
2. The diocese is NOT trying to move us to another parish
3. The diocese is NOT trying to take away our buildings
4. The diocese is NOT trying to change the way we worship
5. The diocese is NOT trying to deny us clergy to preside at our services
6. The diocese is NOT trying to amalgamate our PCC with the others
7. And finally Anne is not moving into the vicarage

I think is true that we are unlikely to get our own full-time vicar: there just are not enough clergy to go round. It is up to us to keep St Luke’s a thriving church that will grow in the future.

Nick Donaldson & Janet Bates, Church Wardens.

Message to Congregation 7th Jan 2018

This is an update on what the Archdeacon calls “possible pastoral reorganisation”.

Her proposal is that the parishes of St Luke’s, St Mary’s Kippington and St Mary’s Riverhead should have some sort of combined ministry. She has invited people from all three parishes to a meeting on Wednesday, January 24th to discuss this possibility. Specifically, she has invited one member of the clergy, two church wardens and two others to attend from each church.

Janet, I and Anne decided that the best way was to choose two others who could represent the range of opinion in the PCC about pastoral reorganisation. We are glad to report that Tim Pearce and Rob Gaut have agreed to join us at the meeting.

I have had some friendly correspondence in the past fortnight about whether we should hold one or more preparatory meeting at St Luke’s to prepare *our case*. But I think we really do not know enough yet to make an appropriate preparation. We probably have to go along mainly to listen to what those from the other parishes and the Archdeacon have to say.

My expectation is that we will want to arrange discussion meetings with you after 24th.

Janet and I have been trying to keep you informed about the interregnum and then suspension by these occasional announcements after the 10.15 services. Of course, that means that those who are not present do not hear the message and I have heard some complaints of inadequate information. If you want more information please ask us after this service, leave us a letter or send an email message.

Janet Bates & Nick Donaldson