

**House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests
Stony Stratford with Calverton, Diocese of Oxford**

Report by the Independent Reviewer

Introduction

1. On 10 May 2024 I received notification from Mr Peter Eales, formerly Vice-Chairman of the PCC of Stony Stratford with Calverton in the diocese of Oxford that he wished to formally register a concern about the handling of processes leading to a vote on a Resolution in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration. His concerns were received on 13 May 2023 and are appended as Appendix 1. Mr Eales's submission related to various resolutions considered by the PCC and advice given to the PCC prior to the various votes.
2. Mr Eales submitted further correspondence on 24 May following his receipt of a letter from the PCC in response to his request for information about the motives underlying a vote taken by the PCC.

Application of the Regulations

3. It is the clear intention of the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests (the Declaration) Regulations that a matter relating to a particular parish would normally be raised through the grievance process under Regulation 8. No such grievance had been raised by the PCC, although Mr Eales did invite the PCC to consider such a move before he wrote to me and raised his concern.
4. The PCC having declined to raise a grievance, the matter was raised as a concern under Regulation 27. The guidance notes issued in December 2015 make it clear that the Independent Reviewer has discretion whether to conduct an inquiry into a concern raised under Regulation 27 and, although the issues raised by Mr Eales relate to a particular parish, my first consideration had therefore to be whether it was appropriate for the matters he raised to be considered as a concern under Regulation 27.
5. The correspondence centred on resolutions put to the PCC which requested that arrangements be made under the Declaration, and which also invited the PCC to bear in mind maintaining the unity of the parish. Advice in relation the various resolutions was taken from several sources, including diocesan officers and another parish within the diocese. This advice was not always consistent.
6. Due to the complexity of the resolutions, most of which were not voted on, I took legal advice in relation to whether there were matters which merited further consideration from the perspective of legal clarity. I considered this advice alongside the other aspects of the submission.
7. As a result of those considerations, I concluded that the matter warranted review and contacted various of the parties involved with the parish and its

governance inviting them to make submission to me about the processes and information which had supported and informed the PCC's considerations.

Background to the Parish

8. The parish of St Mary's and St Giles, Stony Stratford, under Fr Cavell-Northam, passed resolutions A&B under the Priests (Ordination of Women) Measure 1993 in that year and established a relationship with Forward in Faith. The parish became vacant on his retirement and Fr Ross Northing, a Forward in Faith priest, succeeded him as Rector of All Saints' Calverton and Vicar of St Mary & St Giles Stony Stratford. Fr Northing served the parish for 24 years.
9. In 2012, therefore during Fr Northing's tenure, the parishes became the Parish of Stony Stratford with Calverton. The creation of the new parish and the passing of the Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure 2014 necessitated revisiting the question of women's ministry. In 2015, the PCC passed a new resolution under the provisions in the Declaration.
10. Following a long and protracted period of illness, it was agreed that Fr Northing would take medical retirement. The long tenure of both Fr Northing and his predecessor and the strong style of leadership to which the parish had become accustomed under their leadership had not prepared the parish for an open debate, in particular debate about developments in ministry. It is also worth noting that, prior to the vacancy, there had been controversy in both congregation and community in respect of a safeguarding issue connected with the school, but which had impacted the parish in that one of the Churchwardens had to step down from office.
11. Planning for the interregnum began in 2021, at the point his retirement date was initially agreed. The first stage in this planning involved the Archdeacon, Churchwardens and PCC Vice-Chair. The question of reviewing the resolution, as is recommended under paragraph 21 of the Declaration, was raised at this early stage to identify the point in the process at which a vote might best be taken and how the outcome of that vote might interface with the election of Parish Representatives. In fact, Fr Northing did not actually retire until 2022.
12. The Parish Development Adviser (PDA) met with the PCC in late 2021 to explain the process for the vacancy and was invited to lead a PCC awayday in early 2022. The aim of the awayday was to help the PCC, which was almost evenly split on the issue of the ordination of women, learn to work together across their varied theological positions. The PDA was tasked with continuing to support the parish with the preparation of a parish profile.

The concerns

13. Mr Eales described his concerns in his initial submission. They can be summarised, using his terminology, as follows:

- Lack of ongoing support for the PCC after the initial meeting at which the advice was given to hold a fresh vote on a Resolution.
 - Involvement of the two 'experts' to co-Chair the Section 11 meeting which was not permitted under the Church Representation Rules, delaying the meeting and enabling the membership of the PCC to be changed to the extent that it could have influenced the outcome of the vote on the Resolution.
 - Failure of the PCC to understand the consequences of the vote on the Resolution and that, under the Declaration, the bishop would have been required to consult with the parish to assess its needs. If the PCC was content with the present arrangements, it could decide not to support the new Resolution. The impression was given that a vote against was required to rescind the Resolution.
 - Misunderstanding about the process. PCC members did not fully understand the working of a Resolution. Does this invalidate or cast doubt on the outcome of the vote?
 - The Archdeacon's words were appended to the notices of the resolution which gave them added weight as they appeared to be part of the resolution.
 - People believed that the vote was a vote for or against the Ministry of Women, not understanding that this was a given under the 5 Guiding Principles. If that was the case could the vote be deemed unsafe?
14. In following up this final point, Mr Eales sought information from the PCC about the voting motives of PCC members. He had written following the Resolution vote on 12 March because he was concerned that members had been 'voting against the unity of the parish'. He was advised that members voted according to their own consciences and that it was clear that the majority did not wish to retain the 2015 Resolution. He concluded that this clarification negated some of the concerns he had initially expressed in relation to PCC members being misled by church officers.

The process for passing and rescinding resolutions

15. The matter being investigated concerns the passing and rescinding of resolutions under the Declaration. Before considering the application of that process in this particular case, I therefore set out what is currently in the Declaration and related documents, in particular the Guidance Notes for Bishops and Parishes issued in June 2014. The processes for passing and rescinding resolutions are identical and are set out paragraphs 18 and 19 of the Declaration. Paragraph 20 relates to the passing of a resolution and paragraph 21 the rescinding of a resolution.

16. Paragraph 20 reads as follows:
20. *The recommended form of the resolution to be passed by the PCC is as follows:*
- “This PCC requests, on grounds of theological conviction, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops’ Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.”***
- A PCC which has passed a resolution should send a copy of it to the diocesan bishop, archdeacon, diocesan registrar and registered patron.*
17. Paragraph 21 of the Declaration reads as follows:
21. *Parishes which have passed a resolution may rescind it at any time. The same procedures as are set out in paragraphs 18-19 should apply in relation to a PCC meeting which is to consider a motion rescinding a resolution. Parishes which have passed a resolution should review it from time to time, especially when a vacancy in a benefice arises.*
18. These paragraphs are subject to the procedures set out in paragraphs 18 and 19:
18. *The responsibility for signalling that a parish wishes to take advantage of arrangements available to those whose theological conviction leads them to seek the priestly or episcopal ministry of men rests with the relevant parochial church council (‘PCC’).*
19. *A meeting of a PCC to consider a motion seeking arrangements of this kind should either be one held under Section 11 of the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 or one for which the secretary of the PCC has given members at least four weeks’ notice of the place and time of the meeting and the motion to be considered. Given the importance of the issue such a motion should have been passed either (a) by a majority of those present at a meeting at which at least two-thirds of the members of the PCC who are entitled to attend are present or (b) by a majority of all the members of the PCC.*

My review

19. My review centred on the recorded actions and discussions which took place between the Autumn of 2021, the point at which it was agreed Fr Northing would be retiring on medical grounds, and the meeting of the PCC held on 21 May 2024.
20. Having reviewed the correspondence from Mr Eales I requested further information in the form of documentation and personal statements from others. I received the PCC minutes and copies of Interregnum News for the period concerned, the output from the congregational survey, the documentation relating to the passing of Resolutions A&B in 1993, and copies of the letters

sent following the PCC vote on 12 March 2024. It was from this document review and the information provided by the Archdeacon that I assembled the timeline in Appendix 2.

21. I requested information from a number of individuals involved over the period under review. I am very grateful for the replies I received from Fr Oliver Coss, Revd Cassa Messervy, Revd Tim Norwood (Area Dean until February 2023), and the Archdeacon of Buckingham, whose submission helpfully provided information about meetings which had taken place in the diocese which were relevant to the situation in the parish. This was of particular assistance in assembling the timeline (Appendix 2).

Reflections from my review

22. The very protracted nature of Fr Northing's retirement was unhelpful in that the process of planning for the interregnum began some 12 months before he retired and the parish actually entered interregnum. During that interim period it was not possible to make significant actual progress towards a future appointment, but it did prove to be a time when relationships came under strain within the parish and the PCC, as is not uncommon.
23. In this particular case, the focus of that strain was the Resolution and the change which had taken place in the Church of England during the years of Fr Northing's incumbency such that, as the congregational questionnaire showed, the majority of those completing the survey were now happy to open the post to both men and women. The repeated attempts to vote on a resolution, which were postponed (according to the minutes) due to the divisions within the PCC, the desire for unity and, to a lesser extent, divisions within the congregation, heightened the focus on the resolution to the extent that behaviour deteriorated and concerns, of a safeguarding and bullying nature, were officially reported. These concerns were promptly addressed.
24. Mr Eales questioned the level of support received from the Diocese given the pressure points in the parish. The submissions I received as part of my review, including the detailed document from the Archdeacon, indicated that the Diocese had worked hard to support the parish, the Archdeacon himself playing a key role in that support. Clergy from the Deanery had been willing to provide support in covering services during the vacancy though, as only Society priests were allowed to preside at Communion, there were limits on the practical support which could be given week by week.
25. The Archdeacon had been keen not to allow his views on the ordination of women, which were public, to influence the Parish's decision making process around the resolution so he offered support to the PCC from 'both sides' of the debate. This support came from two priests, one, Fr Oliver Coss, representing the Society view and the other, the Revd Cassa Messervy, a female priest from within the diocese. The Archdeacon also stipulated that, because of the fragile

relationships and vulnerability arising from the concerns outlined above, the Resolution should not be discussed by the PCC without the support and guidance of the facilitators. Although this was articulated more than once, discussions continued to take place without the facilitators present and further concerns about the culture of the parish were expressed, eventually leading to the resignation of one of the Parish Safeguarding Officers.

26. Nevertheless, the two ‘facilitators’ supported a positive informal meeting of the PCC in October 2023, providing information on the background to the present situation in the Church of England, encouraging the parish to look to its future mission and to act in the interests of the parish as a whole, not just those attending church. There was also an emphasis on adopting more positive language and culture, which valued members of all opinions on what was, for the parish at that time, the crucial issue.
27. The original arrangement with the Archdeacon was that the facilitators would co-chair the meeting to consider Section 11 business¹ so that the meeting would be a safe space for those of all views. In trying to fulfil this commitment, the facilitators faced several hurdles, all of which combined to result in another protracted process. The first hurdle was whether it was in fact legal to have co-chairs of the meeting who were not members of the PCC or, indeed, the church. This question was not answered before the meeting took place but became irrelevant as it was not possible for logistical reasons to find a date on which they could both attend. The meeting therefore actually took place without either of them being present. Other factors which delayed the process and increased the stakes for those involved included:
 - Voting methods to ensure all PCC members were able to take part
 - Disagreements and disputes over notices and notice periods
 - Allegations about the competence/capacity of some church officers
 - High volumes of email correspondence.
28. Amidst these factors the PCC was considering, as was appropriate in a vacancy, its position in relation to the Declaration. There was recognition that the majority would welcome either a male or a female incumbent but a significant minority who would only welcome a male priest remained. The parish did try to find a middle way, respecting the minority whilst moving away from the restriction of a Society priest. These considerations contributed to the delays due to postponement of votes, the outcome of which would inevitably formalise the division within the PCC, and those delays fed the tension and anxiety which expressed itself in the damaging culture which culminated in the reports of bullying and a sense that the PCC was not a safe place.

¹ The timescale for a Section 11 meeting had expired by this point, hence reference to Section 11 business. See also the footnote to 12 March 2024 in the Timeline (Appendix 2).

29. In the desire to hold the PCC and the church together, the need to pay attention not only to the present expression of the church's position but also to the already agreed foundation, the 2015 resolution, was lost. The focus was on what would be presented for the future and not on what remained and would be carried forward from the past unless attended to. Hence the 2015 resolution was not explicitly rescinded as required. Not passing something new did not rescind the resolution from 2015, it left that unattended.
30. Although the Declaration sets out the process for passing and rescinding resolutions in paragraphs 18-21, what this means in the context of rescinding a resolution does not appear to have been fully understood by the parties involved. Although this is not listed as one of Mr Eales's concerns, it is fundamental to the current position of the Parish in relation to its governance and the making of a new appointment.
31. The proposal from the sub-committee in the January 2023 issue of *Interregnum News* begins '*we propose that the existing Resolution and Statement of Need be rescinded and a new Resolution and Statement of Need drafted...*'. This suggests that the 2015 resolution requires to be specifically rescinded. However, the document *Questions for the Archdeacon and Advisors about the vote situation* suggests that the Archdeacon's understanding was that '*by voting against a new resolution, the existing (2015) resolution would be rescinded*'. This understanding was reinforced in the agenda for the 12 March PCC meeting to conduct the Section 11 business, including voting on the resolution where, under the text of the resolution there is the following note: *[NB for clarity, a vote in favour of the resolution would be a vote to continue the present arrangements under the Bishop of Oswestry. A vote against would be a vote to rescind the existing resolution]*.

Recommendations

32. **Recommendation 1:** This is the second review I have undertaken where the rescinding of a resolution is under consideration. Such situations may well be increasing in number due to changes in circumstances and pastoral restructuring. Although the Declaration indicates that the process for rescinding resolutions is the same as that for making them, the need for an explicit motion proposing the rescinding of an existing resolution was not understood. I therefore **recommend** that the House of Bishops Standing Commission on the House of Bishops Declaration consider assembling a short guide setting out the steps required to rescind a resolution. Such guidance in relation to making resolutions is readily available but is not mirrored to reflect the circumstances where a parish is reviewing its Resolution and might either pass a new one or want to rescind the old.
33. **Recommendation 2:** The diocese sought to support the parish, and that support was evident. However, for whatever reason, some crucial questions asked by the parish were not answered from a position of expertise.

Furthermore, it was not clear that the necessary expert advice was available and had been sought before responses were given to those questions. The simple guide suggested in Recommendation 1 would, hopefully, have provided the necessary information in relation to the rescinding of the resolution, but it is also important that there is a culture within which people in authority are comfortable seeking advice, and take it, and that there is a body of advice readily available to Archdeacons and others. I **recommend** that the House of Bishops Standing Commission reviews and consults on what information is, and needs to be, available.

Conclusion

34. As I have already indicated, my main conclusion, supported by the expertise of the legal office, is that the 2015 resolution remains in place as there was no motion to rescind it in March 2024, as required under paragraphs 18-19 of the Regulations. It is perhaps tempting to regard the distinction between passing a specific motion to rescind a resolution and not voting for a new resolution as a technical point, however I would suggest it is more than that, especially in the context of a divided PCC. The Declaration requires the PCC to make a positive decision to rescind a resolution, that is to remove something that has, in this situation, been in place for many years. Deciding to vote for, or to vote against, putting something new in place is a different decision. Some members of the PCC might be more comfortable voting against putting something new in place (retaining the status quo) than they would be voting to remove something that is already there, or vice versa.
35. Should the parish wish to open their vacancy to both women and men, as would appear to be their intention given that they believe the 2015 resolution to have been rescinded and have written to the relevant parties to that effect, it would be necessary for them to pass a specific motion rescinding the 2015 resolution at a meeting convened and held in accordance with paragraph 19 of the Declaration.
36. Mr Eales raised a number of other concerns. In considering these I have taken account of his submission and the information received from others. Considering these together I have concluded that:
 - There was ongoing support for the Vice-Chair of the PCC after the initial meetings prior to the actual start of the interregnum. Some of that support was delivered directly through meetings and engagement with the church by the PDA, Area Dean, Diocesan Safeguarding Team, the two facilitators and the Archdeacon. However, there were occasions when the PCC did not avail itself of the support that was being offered, in particular the support of the facilitators during discussions on the resolution.

- Mr Eales asserted that the involvement of the two facilitators in the meeting to consider Section 11 business was not permitted under the Church Representation Rules and that this delayed the meeting, enabling the membership of the PCC to change to the extent that it could have influenced the outcome of the vote. Other input suggests that there was no definite decision on the use of the facilitators at the meeting, but also, and importantly, that there were other issues which contributed to the delays. These other factors included difficulty in agreeing dates and the ongoing PCC culture of intimidation, bullying and power struggles.
- It is possible that some PCC members might not have appreciated the full consequences of the vote on the resolution though, as has already been established, the vote did not do what Mr Eales believed it had done in respect of the 2015 resolution. From the enquiries that Mr Eales made after the March 2024 PCC vote, it would appear clear that the PCC was looking to be open to the ministry of men and women and they understood that the resolution had to be defeated if they were to pursue that desire. The fact that the vote against did not rescind the resolution from 2015 was incidental. The proposed new resolution had to be defeated if the post was to be open to both male and female applicants.
- Mr Eales was concerned that members of the PCC did not understand the workings of a resolution under the Declaration and that they believed they were voting for or against the priestly ministry of women. Primarily it is the responsibility of a Trustee to ensure they are appropriately informed before a decision is made. In this case, the PCC had several opportunities to gain that understanding and information. The Archdeacon had appointed the facilitators and intended them to be present at all PCC discussions on the matter. They led the half day PCC session in October 2023, which was after the significant change in PCC membership. However, material had also been provided prior to that session via Interregnum News which had included several articles outlining the position of the Church of England and also how that had worked out in the context of the parish.
- The final concern was that the Archdeacon's words had unduly influenced the outcome of the vote. In this regard, Mr Eales emailed me in May to explain that he had written to the PCC to question the motives of PCC members who voted against the resolution which called for the 'unity of the parish'. In his email he explained that the PCC had responded to say that each member of the PCC had voted against the resolution for their own reasons, and he was now led to believe that the PCC had not been misled by church officers, negating one of his concerns.

37. In summary, a number of factors have combined in this case which led to a lengthy period of tension in the parish which generated some poor behaviour within the PCC as it began to develop a different style of leadership and started, with help, to consider its mission to the whole parish. It is my hope that the new incumbent, when appointed, will be able to lead a PCC whose members appreciate the views of those with whom they disagree but come together in the name of Christ to work positively across the parish.

Maggie Swinson

August 2024

APPENDIX 1

Mrs. Maggie Swinson, Independent Examiner

Personal background and involvement

Until 23rd March 2024, I was vice-chairman of the Stony Stratford with Calverton PCC, having been elected at an emergency PCC meeting, following the resignation of the previous post holder.

I was born and raised in the parish and have worshipped here for most of my 63 years.

Brief historical background

Our parish has only had 2 incumbents over the last 50 years or so, each serving more than 25 years. Both were strong characters and undoubtedly caused some friction in the parish, the deanery and probably the diocese relating to their traditional Anglo-Catholic conviction. The parish passed a Resolution under the House of Bishops Declaration about 8 or 9 years ago.

Current Interregnum

Fr Ross retired in 2022 following a prolonged illness and the PCC was ill prepared to face the prospect of filling the vacancy.

In the early days of the interregnum we met with the PDA, Area Dean and Archdeacon who advised that we should vote afresh on the Resolution.

A questionnaire for the congregation was distributed and a discussion meeting was arranged permitting speakers from "both sides" to present their cases. It became evident that the congregation held diverse viewpoints.

The PCC was due to vote on a new Resolution in November 2022

"For the sake of the unity of our parish, this PCC requests, on the grounds of theological conviction set out in the statement appended to this resolution, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests".

There had been an indicative vote taken the week before which suggested that the Resolution would be passed by 8 votes to 7 against. This led to heightened tension and anger within the PCC and a proposal to postpone was accepted in the hope that a solution could be found which accommodated everyone's wishes.

A sub committee was formed which put together a "Middle Way" Resolution asking the bishop to make episcopal oversight arrangements best reflecting the makeup of our current congregation.

"To maintain the unity of the parish this PCC requests, on grounds of its several theological convictions, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the Statement of Need set out below and with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests."

This new initiative (supported by 15 out of 16 PCC members) was due to be voted on in May 2023 but at a PCC meeting preceding this, a paper was tabled which sought to call an Emergency Parish meeting, this led to the Vice-chair's resignation.

Ignoring the PCC's stated decision to schedule the Resolution Vote, the standing Committee instructed the Secretary **not** to post the required Notice - consequently the vote was not taken at this time.

An emergency PCC meeting was called at which some procedural irregularities were resolved including the constitution of the Standing Committee and the election and co-option of a new Vice-chair.

An oversight by the Diocese in failing to inform us that the number of Deanery Representatives had been reduced from 4 to 3, meant that we had elected too many at our APCM. Feelings were still running high and resignations from the PCC occurred amidst allegations of bullying. A Safeguarding issue was raised and the PCC were promised 2 independent experts who would lead our discussions and co-chair the Section 11 meeting.

Following a successful recruitment campaign, the vacancies were filled, representing 1/3 of the new PCC.

A meeting was eventually convened at which the PCC heard from the 2 experts.

The PCC sought advice regarding the possibility of postal, on-line and/or a hybrid meeting format which would allow all members a vote on the issue.

Notice of the Section 11 meeting was due to be given but failed because the issue of chairmanship being delivered by persons not on the PCC was still unresolved.

The Notice was finally published when it was revealed that chairmanship belongs to the PCC and that our experts were not permitted to fulfil this role.

The Section 11 meeting voted on a new Resolution

“For the sake of the unity of our Parish, this PCC requests, on grounds of theological conviction that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops’ Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.”

There were 5 votes in favour, 14 against and 1 abstention.

In the days following several resignations occurred, including our associate minister of 14 years and the other clergy covering services on a casual basis.

Cover of services was facilitated by support from the Deanery. This has been substantiated by the installation of a new Associate Minister coming to the end of his Curacy in Oxford.

Areas of Concern

After an initial surge of support, it feels as though that the PCC has been abandoned and left to work out the way through the Resolution issue which appears like “lighting the blue touch paper and retiring to a safe distance”

The promise of 2 experts to co-chair the Section 11 meeting proved false when it was disclosed that it is not permitted under CRR. This led to the delays which allowed the makeup of the PCC to be altered, potentially affecting the outcome of the Resolution vote.

The statement from the Archdeacon:

“NB for clarity, a vote in favour of the resolution would be a vote to continue the present arrangements under the Bishop of Oswestry. A vote against would be a vote to rescind the existing resolution.”

.....fails to acknowledge that under the Declaration the bishop would consult afresh with the parish to ascertain its current needs – if the PCC wanted to continue with the present arrangements, it could decide **not** to vote on the Resolution.

This misleading statement gives the impression that an against vote is *required* to rescind a Resolution. According to the Declaration a Resolution must receive the support of a majority of the PCC. The PCC had debated the wording of the Resolution and some

disliked the inclusion of the phrase “*for the sake of the unity of our parish*” observing that an against vote would imply that they were against the parishes unity as opposed to wishing to just rescind the Resolution. Had they understood the process required to pass a Resolution they could have opted to abstain, which would have had the same outcome and would not have declared themselves to be opposed to the unity of the parish.

This potential lack of understanding the process, suggests that members did not make their decision in full comprehension of the working of a Resolution under the Declaration of the House of Bishops – this might invalidate or cast doubt on the outcome of the Vote.

Such was the belief in the Archdeacons statement, that when the official Notification was published, those words were appended to the Notices as if they formed an integral part of the Resolution.

It is apparent that many if not most of the congregation/PCC believe that the Resolution Vote was in fact, an expression on whether they were For or Against the Ministry of Women. The Declaration is quite explicit in the 5 guiding Principles, that the Church of England has made its decision on this issue – it is not necessary for PCC’s to confirm this.

If the PCC had been misled into believing that the House of Bishops declaration served as a requirement to ratify this decision on the Ministry of Women, then the result of the recent vote could be deemed unsafe?

APPENDIX 2

TIMELINE

This timeline is drawn up from the submission ([Appendix 1](#)), the copy PCC minutes and Interregnum News provided, and the submission from the Archdeacon of Buckingham.

Date	Event/meeting	Other notes
1993	Resolutions A&B passed	
2012	New parish of Stony Stratford with Calverton created.	
2015	The PCC passes a resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration.	
2021	In view of the pending ill-health retirement of Fr Northing, planning began for the vacancy. The PCC was advised to review its position in relation to its resolution.	
Early 2022	The formal vacancy had not yet been declared and Fr Northing remained in post on sick leave. The Archdeacon sought to support the parish through a process of co-facilitation and encouraged the greater engagement of the Bishop of Ebbsfleet personally or through a trusted representative, to advocate for the Society position.	Fr Northing eventually left the parish in September 2022
27 April 2022	Annual Parochial Church Meeting At the APCM, those attending were advised of the interview process and need to appoint two Parish Representatives.	
August 2022	The Archdeacon and Parish Development Adviser (PDA) met on two occasions with representatives from the parish to discuss a meeting at which the Parish would consider a Resolution under the House of Bishops' Declaration.	
18 September 2022	Interregnum News: Presented background information on the church and noted that there would be an open meeting on 8 th October 2022 at which parishioners would be able to hear from Forward in Faith/The Society and Anglo-Catholic priests who supported the ordination of women.	
20 September 2022	The PCC discussed the timetable further. The Section 11 meeting was scheduled for 29 November and a vote on the resolution would take place at that meeting. The meeting also discussed the plans for the Parish meeting on 8 October to discuss the matter of the ordination of women to priestly and episcopal orders. The PCC minutes record some dispute because both speakers expected to speak on the resolution were women. There was an instruction to ensure the Chair of the meeting noted that this did not indicate that the next incumbent would be female.	

	The parish profile was awaiting the decision on the resolution. The Parish Representatives would be chosen after the decision on the resolution. The contents of the questionnaire which would be distributed after the 8 October meeting, were discussed.	
25 September 2022	Interregnum News: Repeat of the notice of the 8 October 2022 meeting and factual information about the history of the ordination of women in the Church of England.	
2 October 2022	Interregnum News: Further repeat of the information about the 8 October 2022 meeting alongside an indicative timetable for the interregnum.	
8 October 2022	The Parish meeting on the Resolution took place. Those invited to attend and present the various viewpoints were unable to do so due to rail strikes and illness. The PCC rejected the suggestion that the meeting be postponed and invited the SSM Priest from Stony Stratford and a retired SSM priest to present alongside two female Deanery clergy. The PDA was asked to chair the meeting. At the end of the meeting questionnaires were distributed to attendees. These were to be returned by 16 October 2022.	
Date?	Notice given of the S11 meeting to be held on 29 November 2022 and the resolution to be presented to the PCC for voting. <i>For the sake of unity of our parish, this PCC requests, on the grounds of theological conviction set out in the statement appended to this resolution, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests</i>	
15 November 2022	An indicative vote conducted by the PCC suggested that the vote on the resolution would be remarkably close (8 for, 7 against)	
20 November 2022	Interregnum News: This edition presented a summary of the questionnaire responses. The conclusion notes that <i>The data and comments in the report indicates that many more parishioners in both congregations are in favour of the ordination of women and rescinding the resolution, than are against doing so.</i> It also reported back on the discussion on 15 November as follows: <i>The discussion at the 15 November meeting indicated that the PCC vote outcome might not be the same as the findings of the report indicates about the wishes of the congregations.</i>	
29 November 2022	In light of the indicative vote, the following was presented to the PCC and passed with 14 in favour and 1 against.	

	<p><i>Following the Indicative Vote conducted on 15th November the PCC hereby postpones the Resolution Vote scheduled to take place on 29th November until a suitable later date to be agreed by the PCC.</i></p> <p><i>The PCC agrees that to proceed with the Resolution Vote under the current circumstances would be detrimental to the unity of the Parish. We wish to allow time for further reflection and discernment, possibly to include external mediation, to establish if a more widely acceptable consensus can be reached before the rescheduled Resolution Vote is taken.</i></p> <p>As part of this item, PCC received the feedback on the questionnaire which suggested that those responding would support the ordination of women and that they did not mind whether the President at the Eucharist was male or female.</p> <p>An action for a steering group to move things forward was noted, which should include the offer of mediation through the Archdeacon.</p>	
4 December 2022	<p>Interregnum News: Reported that the PCC had not voted on the resolution but had postponed the vote and established a sub-committee which was at work exploring mediation for the sake of parish unity.</p>	
December 2022	<p>The Vice-Chair, also Chair of the Resolution Working Group, approached the Archdeacon who met with the Bishop to reflect on the desire for a 'middle way' to be found.</p> <p>The parish was put in touch with St Barnabas, Jericho. They had agreed to leave the Society but would still have male priests.</p>	
10 January 2023	<p>PCC meeting: The vacancy working group had studied the profile and background of St Barnabas, Jericho and had met with Fr Christopher Woods. The minutes record extensive discussion on the model from St Barnabas, discussion about the parish and its relationship with the Society, and whether the new appointment would be fixed term of Common Tenure.</p> <p>The PCC agree that the working group should continue its work 15 in favour and 1 against.</p>	
22 January 2023	<p>Interregnum news: This edition focused on 'finding a middle way for parish unity' and reported back to the parish on the conversations with St Barnabas, Jericho.</p> <p>The proposed resolution to rescind the 2015 resolution and pass a new resolution opening the post to priests outside the Society was presented.</p> <p>The paper set out the actions from the 10 January PCC meeting relating to the gathering of information</p>	

	<p>about future working models and the legal implications of the middle way. Supporting documents were included.</p>	
15 March 2023	<p>PCC meeting: Noted that one of the PSO's had resigned and thanked them for their work. A replacement would be sought. The vacancy working group reported further. The parish profile (Statement of Needs) was discussed. A member of the PCC suggested that the document needed to be re-written to say that the parish would accept male or female priests. This would necessitate leaving the Society. Another member asked whether it was possible to leave Forward in Faith and the Society but remain within the House of Bishops' Declaration and receive sacramental teaching from both male and female priests. This was not possible.</p>	
18 April 2023	<p>Concerns of bullying and strong language at PCC meetings were formally reported. These took place during discussion of the resolution, especially when indicative votes were being planned or taken. The Archdeacon proposed external facilitation for all PCC discussion on the resolution</p>	
25 April 2023	<p>Interregnum News: The action taken since the 22 January 2023 meeting was reported. This included the possibility of leaving The Society and Forward in Faith and the consequences of doing so. It set out what might be possible with a resolution in place, noting that female priests might provide pastoral and teaching ministry, but not sacramental, and that although the majority would be happy to invite both men and women to apply, they recognised the need for provision to be made to accommodate the minority.</p>	
16 May 2023	<p>PCC meeting: A discussion paper was presented. The author highlighted that the proposed resolution did not reflect the majority view in the parish and that the post should be open to both men and women. Concern was expressed that there had not been discussion with the Diocesan or Area bishops and requests for discussion had not been successful. The slow process had been commented on by the Bishop of Buckingham. The overwhelming support for the working group approach was emphasised. The meeting noted that comment from the Archdeacon on the proposed wording of the motion and for the full Statement of Needs. Notice would need to be given by 23 May 2023 for a vote at the</p>	

	meeting scheduled for 20 June 2023. Processes to ensure all members could vote were discussed.	
16 May 2023	The Archdeacon received a call indicating that the PCC Vice-chair had resigned due to the failure of the PCC to move forward with the 'middle way' proposal.	In the PCC minutes of 11 July the resignation date was noted as 22 May 2023
22 May 2023	Email sent to Archdeacon and Churchwardens about the decision not to vote on the resolution despite notice having been given.	
23 May 2023	Report back from Acting Area Dean on listening meeting with women from the PCC confirmed the concerns about bullying and inappropriate language.	
24 May 2023	Meeting re perceived homophobic language from the pulpit. Attempts to resolve the matter failed and the matter was escalated. The Bishop of Buckingham, in discussion with the Acting Area Dean, agreed that PCC meetings must be facilitated.	
25 May 2023	Letter from Archdeacon to all who had written to him offering Fr Gary Eccleston and Revd Cassa Messervy to co-chair the PCC and to chair the S11 meeting.	
30 May 2023	Emergency PCC meeting – email notes received The meeting 're-did' post AGM business electing officers, this time electing a different Vice-Chair. There had been issues about the constitution of the Standing Committee. There had been an email 'vote' to delay consideration of the resolution. Some members were reported to have been unable to vote due to the short timescales. The notes received indicated that the writer thought the meeting should have stopped at this point as the Standing Committee had not had the opportunity to discuss the offer from the Archdeacon, as requested by the Archdeacon. Some questions were raised in the meeting about the process required. Members were encouraged to send their questions to a central point for collating and sending to the Standing Committee. These questions were later responded to by the Archdeacon (6 June meeting) and are reproduced as Appendix 3.	The email notes record the election of Vice-Chair taking place here not on 11 July 2023
6 June 2023	Meeting of the Archdeacon with new Vice-Chair to discuss the appointment of the facilitators and to answer questions submitted about the process. These are reproduced as Appendix 3. It was noted that Fr Eccleston had declared an interest and withdrawn.	

7 July 2023	Further meeting re the above at which Fr Oliver Coss was offered to represent the Society position.	
11 July 2023	<p>PCC meeting: The resignation of the Vice-Chair on 22 May 2023 was recorded alongside the election of a new Vice-Chair.</p> <p>Correspondence had been received from a member of the congregation suggesting that PCC members were voting on their own preferences in relation to the gender of clergy. This had been circulated to the Standing Committee.</p> <p>The PCC noted that a date for meeting with Rev Cassie Messervy would be arranged. The vote on the resolution was postponed until after this meeting, though some asked whether the delay was really necessary.</p> <p>The PCC voted to cancel their subscription to the Society.</p>	<p>The resignation and the election are recorded elsewhere with slightly different dates</p> <p>Although this decision was made, the Standing Committee later decided not to take this action yet as it had resulted in the resignation of 2 PCC members who left the church immediately</p>
8 August 2023	<p>Email from one of the two Parish Safeguarding Officers to PCC regarding the conduct complaints which had been raised with the diocese.</p> <p>The use of facilitators was outlined alongside the need for the PCC to develop a new way of corporate working and a healthier culture.</p>	
13 August 2023	<p>Interregnum News: This edition noted the issues with PCC membership since the Annual meeting and the need to rectify these issues before proceeding to a vote on the Resolution and appointment of a new priest.</p>	
16 September 2023	<p>Archdeacon wrote to the two PSOs confirming the identity of the facilitators, and that the PCC should not have further discussion on the resolution without the facilitators present.</p>	
17 September 2023	<p>Introduction of facilitators to the Vice -Chair of the PCC.</p>	
19 September 2023	<p>PCC meeting: There had been issues in relation to elections to the PCC and Deanery Synod. Elections therefore took place at this meeting resulting in 7 new members being elected to the PCC</p>	

	<p>The PCC received a report back on the PSO's investigations and were advised that the clergy facilitators must be present for discussions on the resolution.</p> <p>The Vice-Chair reported back on his meetings with the Archdeacon and the facilitators. It was agreed that the PCC should have a discussion and prayer meeting with the facilitators before a vote took place.</p>	
27 September 2023	<p>PSO reported to the Archdeacon that allegations of bullying were continuing. The need for facilitation during discussions was emphasised.</p>	
8 October 2023	<p>Interregnum News: Updates on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the elections to the PCC which took place in September and the 10 new appointments to the Council • the appointment of the facilitators and meetings that had taken place with them • arrangements for a meeting of the PCC with the facilitators on 14 October to consider the resolution. 	
14 October 2023	<p>PCC facilitated afternoon session with Fr Oliver Coss and the Revd Cassa Messervy.</p>	
30 October 2023	<p>Planning meeting for the forthcoming meeting of the PCC with the facilitators.</p>	
14 November 2023	<p>PCC meeting: The Vice-Chair reported that it was hoped the S11 meeting would take place on 15 January 2024.</p>	
16 January 2024	<p>PCC meeting scheduled per 14 November list of dates. This meeting did not take place.</p>	
26 January 2024	<p>One of the PSOs resigned due to the culture in the parish.</p>	
10 March 2024	<p>Mr Eales attempted to contact the Independent Reviewer via the online contact form.</p>	
12 March 2024	<p>PCC meeting to conduct s11 business² (out of time for a real S11 meeting) including a vote on the resolution.</p> <p>The facilitators were not present.</p> <p>The resolution: <i>For the sake of the unity of our parish, this PCC requests, on the grounds of theological conviction that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the ministry of Bishops and priests.</i></p> <p>The vote was taken and the resolution lost</p> <p>The meeting agenda noted that 'a vote in favour would be a vote to continue the present</p>	

² Under the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 the section 11 meeting must take place 'before the end of six months beginning with the 'start date'. The start date is defined under section 7(4) of the measure. This time period had expired prior to the parish holding its formal section 11 meeting.

	arrangement. A vote against would be a vote to rescind the existing resolution.	
17 March 2024	Interregnum News: Update from the PCC on the Section 11 business undertaken at the meeting held on 12 March 2024 and the resolution passed at the meeting. The update included reporting that the 2015 resolution had been rescinded by the vote and that the Parish would have to leave The Society and Forward in Faith. The next steps in the appointment process were set out.	
13 May 2024	Mr Eales wrote to me as Independent Reviewer.	
21 May 2024	PCC meeting: The Vice-Chair had written to the PCC raising questions about the reasons behind the PCC's votes in the context of the word 'unity.'	
24 May 2024	Mr Eales made further contact having received a response from the PCC to his letter of 21 May asking about the motives of those voting against the resolution.	

APPENDIX 3

Questions for the Archdeacon and Advisors about the vote situation

CONFIDENTIAL

Parish of Stony Stratford with Calverton PCC

Questions for the Archdeacon and Advisors about the vote situation

1. Thank you to Archdeacon Guy for the offer of two independent priests, one on either side of the debate, to help us sensitively through the next stage of this process so we can fully understand the implications of the options. Please can we work with two priests who are as yet unknown to us, to prevent any conflict of interest and safeguard the needs of one of the priests offered, who is well-known to us?

Yes, I am happy to find someone, although please bear in mind that someone based further away may be more difficult to pin down for meetings, however I realise this is important and will find someone.

2. Please can we arrange for the two independent priests to attend a Zoom meeting with as many of the PCC as is possible sometime within the next week so the notice can be issued which is meaningful and plausible for all the PCC?

Yes, albeit probably unlikely to be that soon as 2.1 I will need to find a replacement for Fr Gary and 2.2 I will need time to meet with Fr X and Rev Cassa prior to the meeting with PCC via Zoom.

3. Does the wording of what is voted on need to be listed in full on the 4 week notice of the vote? Or does the notice simply say: "The PCC plans to vote on the resolution at its 11th July meeting and is currently working with the Diocese to ensure the motion(s) for voting upon are fully considered and understood in advance of the meeting"?

Yes the wording of the resolution should be given on the notice. Please see GS Misc1077 which sets out the regulations for this vote. The relevant wording is as follows: "*Under paragraph 19 of the Declaration a resolution should be passed at a meeting held under section 11 of the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986 or at a meeting of which the secretary of the PCC has given members at least four weeks' notice of the place and time of the meeting and of the motion to be considered."*

4. If the notice has to include all the motion(s) to be voted upon, can the wording of the motion(s) be amended between the time of notification and the time of the vote?

In light of the above, on reflection, I believe that the motion(s) to be considered cannot be subject to amendment or variation from that/those in the meeting notice. This is unusual – but that seems to be what is implied.

5. Where do we publish the notice of the vote in the 4 weeks before the 11th July meeting?

Church doors etc as for notice for the Annual Church meeting etc.

6. How can we hold a vote to ensure that all three options are available to vote upon – retain, 'middle way' or rescind?

An excellent question and this gets to the heart of the difficult place you find yourselves. Perhaps I could give my response but please hear this in the knowledge that Rev Cassa and Fr X may be able to suggest “a more excellent way” (1 Cor 13)... My own reading of this is as follows:

6.1 The PCC already has in place an operative “Resolution” and is therefore under the oversight of the See of Oswestry.

6.2 A vote will take place at your Section 11 meeting. This should be a vote on “the Resolution” ie that the PCC requests the Bishop of Oxford to make arrangements for oversight from The See of Oswestry. If this vote is not passed then the “Resolution” is no longer operative and oversight returns to Oxford i.e. there is no need for two different resolutions.

6.3 Such is your desire for unity that there will surely be a desire to accommodate the needs of the “losing side”, whichever way the vote goes – and in that sense, whichever way the vote goes, you will be seeking something of a middle way, albeit that is an oxymoron given the binary nature of the choice, however, a Resolution might contain a conditional element whereby, were the Parish to remain under Oswestry, certain provisions could be made for those who are not in favour and vice versa.

7. A PCC that has passed a resolution seeking such arrangements is *“expected to review it from time to time especially when a vacancy arises in the benefice”*. In the light of this should the PCC of Stony Stratford and Calverton review its past fifty years of men only priests before voting on its new resolution, by allowing a motion to rescind its present Resolution?

See GS Misc 1077, regular review is indeed needed, however the form of the Resolution recommended in the regulations is a Resolution to make arrangements for “alternative oversight” – and it is by voting against this Resolution that the rescinding of the present Resolution is achieved.

8. Can we propose a motion for the 11th July meeting *“to rescind the existing Resolution completely and open applications to everybody regardless of gender then make provision within the parish for those who could not accept the sacraments from a female priest (if one had been appointed).”*

See 7 above and also my note on a conditional element at 6.3 above.

9. If the vote on the middle way was taken and defeated, what assurance could the Bishop (presumably of Oxford) give that the statement of needs might guide him in providing the support that we need? [assuming that voting against the ‘middle way’ also rescinds our current resolution]

Your existing “Middle Way” is a vote for oversight from Oswestry with the “conditionality” referred to above in 6.3, 7 & 8 encoded in the Statement of Needs. This is a reasonable way of achieving this end. The Statement of Need forms a key part of the parish profile. I (Archdeacon Guy) will be chairing your Section 12 meeting and your selection panel on behalf of the Bishop of Oxford and the Statement of Needs/ Parish Profile form the core of the search process for a new Priest and can in no way be ignored in the process. Your Parish Reps are there also as a guarantee of this.