

The Rectory
Rhos Common
Four Crosses
Powys
SY22 6RW

To all members of the Mission Area Conference

Dear friends

In his pastoral letters to the diocesan family, Bishop Gregory has written of the fact that as we come out of lockdown, we cannot simply return to life as normal. Lockdown has taught us to think about Church in a different way, and the time has come to face up decisively to challenges which have been confronting us for a long time.

Attendance in the Church in Wales has halved since 1990 and decline continues at about 3% per year. A similar picture is evident in the diocese of St Asaph. The decline in attendance is particularly evident in the rural churches in the southern half of the diocese, where some of our congregations are struggling. In those cases the process of decline has placed an increased burden on a small number of people who are valiantly trying to maintain their church buildings and churchyards, often at great cost. It has also made it increasingly difficult to find people who are willing and able to take on roles of responsibility at both church and Mission Area levels. Furthermore, it has become extremely challenging to raise sufficient funds to pay for the share that helps maintain a clerical presence in each community.

This situation has, of course, been made much more challenging with the spread of coronavirus: the long-term impact of which has yet to be established. To help our churches to survive this period the Church in Wales has already offered the diocese £1,000,000 to cover ministry costs for the second and third quarters. But we are yet to see if similar support is available for the final part of the year.

As one of our more fragile Mission Areas, the future of Penedyrn was a matter of concern before the lockdown, and following consultation with members of the MAC, I asked our diocesan team to review the physical condition of each of your buildings, the financial situation of each church, and the attendance patterns over a ten-year period. My intention was to use this information to facilitate a discussion about your future as a Mission Area; the number of clergy you will be able to sustain; and the number of church buildings that should remain open.

I am now able to provide a copy of that report for you. Please check to see that it accurately reflects your situation. I am happy to make any amendments that seem appropriate. I have also detailed below thirteen recommendations that I would like you to reflect on as we begin to address the challenges faced in your area:

Recommendation One

The Mission Area does not have the financial resources to sustain the current pattern of stipendiary ministry. This will require further configuration and redeployment to find a sustainable pattern, with support from the lay Mission Area Leader and Evangelist and lay worship leaders, in the short term.

Recommendation Two

Penedeyrn Mission Area is no longer viable in its current form. A merger with a neighbouring Mission Area or Mission Areas is therefore inevitable.

Recommendation Three

Fresh Expressions and Online Worship are both demonstrating a real opportunity for growth. These initiatives should be continued and extended wherever possible.

Recommendation Four

The Community Mapping Exercise should be continued to ensure a sustainable future for Eglwys Crist Bala. The long-standing pattern of drawing on reserves to cover costs is not recommended and needs to be addressed.

Recommendation Five

If the community and Church congregations at Cerrigydrudion is supportive, the interior could be remodelled to become a lighter, more flexible space that evokes the medieval period of its history rather than the Victorian. The location at the heart of village gives the church the potential to be a precious community asset and visitor centre. This could be an ecumenical community project: it is believed that there is the talent and the enthusiasm in the local community to develop an exciting and innovative scheme.

Recommendation Six

In Cynwyd, Church services and activities should be relocated to the Church Hall, next door, all year-round. Attendance is higher during the winter months when services are held in the hall and people appreciate the warmth and the hospitality after the services. The Church building should be closed and handed back to the RB to find a constructive new use for it.

Recommendation Seven

St Derfel's Church would make an ideal Pilgrim Church and could be open daily. It would be a very good candidate for simple 'pilgrim-type' accommodation, and discussions should be pursued with the RB about the options. A series of carefully planned special services throughout the year would provide a different offer to that provided in the Community Centre.

Recommendation Eight

St Trillo's Church should be developed further by completing plans to install a WC in the grounds to facilitate additional activities and outreach.

Recommendation Nine

St Michael's Church Llanfihangel GM should continue as a Pilgrim Church, in partnership with the local community/Friends group, with a series of special services each year.

Recommendation Ten:

St Catherine's Church Maerdy has limited missional potential. It should be closed and returned to the RB for sale.

Recommendation Eleven

The Maerdy cottages should be sold and the funds used by the Mission Area to further mission and growth at the discretion of the Mission Area Conference.

Recommendation Twelve

The funds currently held at the RB from the sale of Pentrefoelas Church should be used by the Mission Area to further mission and growth.

Recommendation Thirteen

The Mission Area should develop a plan to move the majority of its regular giving online with support as required from the Diocesan Director of Resources.

I know how painful some of these suggestions are, but they reflect the challenging reality of our current situation. Once you have had time to reflect on what I have written, I would appreciate your comments. I am expecting some difficult responses, but it will not be enough just to say "No". With our current financial constraints and the limited number of clergy and lay leaders available, it is difficult to see what other courses of action are available. If you have any realistic alternatives, we would love to hear them.

I would be grateful, if you could send your comments to me by the 10th October. Once these have been received, I will report to the Bishop and his staff team, the Board of Finance and the Property Board. The outcome of their discussions will then be shared with you.

I am so sorry that I have had to write plainly. The truth is, we are all very grateful for all that you have done and continue to do in each of your communities. At the same time, we cannot afford any longer to avoid issues that have been becoming increasingly clear. I hope and pray that together we will be able to face these significant challenges and work together to build a more stable future for the churches in your area.

With every blessing

Barry Wilson

Archdeacon of Montgomery

