

Titchmarsh/Thrapston Glebe: A Note from the Bishop of Peterborough

Under our processes, the Bishop is not directly involved in such matters. I am not a member of the Glebe and Trust Committee (GTC), appointed by the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF), which “directs and manages the glebe properties on behalf of the Board and acts for the DBF in its corporate capacity as custodian and managing trustee.” In theory the DBF could over-rule GTC, although it has delegated full authority to it. At that point I have just one vote at DBF. I think this is right: the Bishop should give leadership at the vision and strategic levels, but not have undue sway over financial matters.

However, following the recent publicity and controversy over the planned sale, I have been asked to offer a steer on this to the DBF, and am glad to do so. I am deliberately giving some background which will be familiar to DBF members, as I am aware that this note may become more public.

Diocesan finances are complicated and arcane, with many of the rules being well outside our control, embedded in Acts of Parliament, Measures of General Synod (which have the same force as Acts of Parliament), or Canon Law (which is binding on bishops, clergy, and dioceses). There seem to me to be a number of aspects of the rules which come to the fore here.

- The Diocese comes under charity law, company law, and church law, which aren’t always easily compatible.
- The Diocese is legally responsible for training, paying and housing the clergy, and for making significant payments to the Clergy Pension Fund.
- Except for those dioceses in poorer parts of the country, little or no money comes from national church funds towards paying the clergy.
- The main source of income for the Diocese is what it can ask from the parishes in Parish Share, but legally this is only a voluntary payment.
- Glebe is land or property which must be used for the support and maintenance of parish clergy.
- The Diocese has to maximise its income from investments, consistent with its aims and objectives.

The current situation includes some further complications.

- Current reserves are sufficient to cover our costs only for about two years, and are being depleted rapidly.
- During the recent lockdown, with closure of churches and still only limited re-opening, the parish share receipts have fallen very substantially.
- The furlough scheme has not included parish clergy, so we have had to keep them all on the normal payroll.
- Recent changes in church law have removed some of the consultations, checks and balances to do with sales of investment land.
- Likely future changes in planning law will remove yet more checks and balances over land development.
- Most agricultural land brings in very little income, while land for various forms of development currently offers much more.

Given all this, my steer to the DBF is as follows.

- This proposed sale should be put on hold pending a review of the environmental and social considerations. (These used to be dealt with under the consultations, checks and balances of both church and planning law, but as noted above they are disappearing.)
- This should involve a new process, perhaps a new committee, within the DBF, to ensure that such considerations are borne in mind when future land sales are being considered, as well as for the Titchmarsh/Thrapston glebe.
- This should not be a matter of stalling, or kicking into long grass; the review should be thorough but as quick as possible; the decision to sell should be confirmed or reversed within a few months.

+Donald Petriburg:

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