

# **Proposal to Merge our Benefice into One Parish**

## **Context – the national picture**

The Church of England has been wrestling with how to stop decades of declining numbers of worshippers. The decline is not mostly caused by worshippers abandoning church but by parishioners, who have an average age of 61, dying and not being replaced by younger worshippers. It is not yet known what effect the Covid pandemic will have had on regular church attendance, but on the understanding that some worshippers are “cultural Christians”, whose church attendance is largely a matter of habit, perhaps some, having had their habits broken by a series of lockdowns, may never be restored to regular worshipping.

## **The local picture**

Our benefice has also changed. When the Benefice Profile was written in 2016, the numbers on the electoral rolls (i.e. those entitled to vote at the Annual Parochial Church Meetings) were: Blagdon with Charterhouse 84; Compton Martin 55; Ubley 29. Our combined electoral roll number is currently c. 120.

A recent review of regular worshippers (those who attend worship at least once per month) showed that there are now 17 regular worshippers in Blagdon, 15 in Ubley and 19 in Compton Martin.

It costs the Diocese around £50,000 per annum to employ a full-time priest (including pension contributions, housing, etc). The Diocese asks each parish to contribute to a common fund through the ‘Parish Share’, which assumes that each regular worshipper will donate on average £55 per month.

Currently, there is insufficient annual income to meet the Parish Share attributed by the Diocese to our three churches. We will be looking to link up with at least one other local parish to share the cost of having a full-time minister.

It is a permanent reality that rural churches must co-operate and combine to be viable and unify their resources. The question is not whether to do this but how best to do so.

## **Why move from a Benefice to a multi-church parish and why now?**

When a new Rector was recruited in 2017, he was given a key task by the Benefice “further to develop the cooperation between the parishes in the Benefice”. There are two main ways of doing this – first by bringing mission and worship into greater alignment and second by unifying the administration of the three churches. Under Simon Lewis’ leadership, The Pathways Project was initiated in October 2020 and the new pattern of worship across the three parish churches began in September 2021. In November 2020 our three PCCs each unanimously resolved to unite into a single parish, and subsequently approved the name “All Saints, North Mendip” for the new parish. More recently, some parishioners have questioned the rationale of the project and the PCC of St Michael’s Compton Martin resolved to pause their involvement for 12 months. The PCCs of both St. Andrew’s with St. Hugh’s and St. Bartholomew’s have nevertheless resolved to continue the unification, with the understanding that St. Michael’s can join at any time if and when they feel ready to do so. In the meantime, there would continue to be a united benefice of All Saints, North Mendip with St. Michael’s, Compton Martin, sharing a minister and church office.

This paper, to be sent to all those on the electoral rolls of Blagdon and Ubley - the churches proposing to merge now - outlines the advantages and disadvantages of forming a Single Parish, and invites feedback.

### **Single parish – the advantages**

1. The first advantage is the creation of a common purpose and mission within the community. There are both spiritual and practical aspects to this: from a spiritual perspective, it is the Holy Spirit who changes hearts and inclines us to want to become followers of Christ. We know this from John 3:5: Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit”. The Holy Spirit is grieved by dissension and is less effective in changing hearts if grieved (Ephesians 4:30-31 and Thessalonians 5:19). Conflict between Christians means that the likelihood of having a growing church is reduced. The opportunity for disagreement in a multi-parish benefice is greater than in a single parish because in a single parish all the representatives have responsibility for the whole parish. It could be said that the multi-parish benefice institutionalises dissension and that multi-parish benefices tend to inhibit growth of the kingdom. A united parish, on the other hand, receives the fruitfulness of the blessing of the presence of the Holy Spirit (Psalm 133) as He is able to transform the world around it and through it. Quite apart from anything else, our unity is a sign in the world that He has sent us (John 17:20).
2. Each parish has to have two church wardens, a treasurer and a PCC, with a safeguarding officer, electoral roll officer, deanery synod representatives and a data protection officer. Unifying the parishes means less people have to be found overall for these posts and there is less duplication of offices. This represents a real benefit, especially as we have struggled to find enough volunteers. From an incumbent’s point of view, the relationship with just one PCC can be a challenge in itself but the duplication of officers and meetings (the rector must attend all PCC meetings and all APCMs) significantly adds to the work. The church community needs to understand that if it wants to attract and retain good leaders it needs to organise itself in a way that makes it easier to manage.
3. A merger enables change to happen. There is no longer a need to have long delays as individual PCCs are consulted on everything proposed. For instance, it would be quicker and easier to progress our joint working with another local church, which, as noted above, we will need to do at some stage if we are to continue to have a full-time minister.
4. A merger centres decision-making in one place, rather than diffusing it in a series of unmanageable small groups. This is not to say that decision-making will be geographically centred in one of the villages: what is proposed is unification so that the power will reside in a new body representing the new parish, itself a newly defined and larger geographical region.
5. A merger means less process and more time for mission: precious volunteers’ time is not wasted on administration and can be directed towards mission. In the face of reducing church attendance and the limited success of the church in reaching the next generation, who can argue that mission and outreach are not critical tasks of this time?
6. A merger can facilitate a reduction in low attended services without completely undermining overall church attendance or engagement between villagers and the church. If for instance we keep trying to provide a service on most Sundays in each church in the benefice, not only is this not the best use of our paid minister’s time but the attending numbers will continue to be small. It is far easier for newcomers and enquirers to visit a full and vibrant church than an empty and introverted one.

7. It is much easier to recruit clergy for appointments.

From a practical perspective, experience has shown that when the villages come together as one parish, with one legal representative body and importantly one set of accounts, eventually the village representatives stop only thinking about themselves and their own village. The representatives get to know each other and as they become friends, they start to trust each other. They themselves start to worship at each other's churches and not just at their own. Eventually they see themselves as one, not several bodies.

### **Single parish - the disadvantages**

1. Each village must be allowed to feel that the church they see in the heart of their community is "their" church. The last thing we want to see is people falling away because they feel they are not wanted or needed in their local church. There will always be local roles – especially to do with looking after the buildings and churchyards, hospitality and pastoral visiting and stewarding weddings and funerals. There is a continued role for local church buildings in the celebration of festivals and life events and, to help safeguard this, the new single parish will maintain the status of St. Andrew's and St. Bartholomew's as parish churches.
2. A parish merger is hard work to achieve – a merger can easily be derailed by even a few and needs strong leadership and local buy-in. It's most likely to happen around the time of a change in church leadership because a newcomer has authority to bring about the changes for which they developed a vision. Our rector, Simon Lewis, has strongly embraced this vision for unity and our benefice churches have to decide whether they trust his leadership and inspiration in this matter.

### **Other stated objections to a single parish**

1. Does a combined PCC create another level of bureaucracy?

Comparing what there is now with what there would be afterwards: now there are as many PCCs, churchwardens and church officers as there are villages; afterwards there would be a Village Fabric and Fundraising (VFF) Committee in each village with responsibilities for fabric and fundraising. The VFF Committee would report to the PCC which would include representatives from each village. There would be one PCC which would be responsible for policies, budgets and expenditure, with one treasurer and two church wardens to represent each of the merged parishes. The opportunities for delay and conflict are vastly reduced. Experience has shown that, because the combined PCC has the actual authority, the quality of debate is hugely improved as the more motivated are drawn to the PCC and the church's mission stops being subverted by the preferences of difficult individuals at village level. (Whilst St. Michael's remains outside the merged parish, they will continue to have their own PCC, wardens, treasurer etc.)

2. Are our churches unsuited to a merger?

Our communities are judged culturally and demographically very similar and geographically conveniently located. The decision needs to be made with reference to the legitimate interests of the community and the fact that we have been running a successful joint benefice indicates our compatibility.

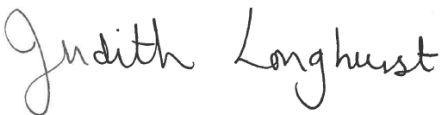
3. Are there issues in combining accounts?

Experience shows the biggest concerns about forming a single parish tend to be concerns that one of the churches is going to have to finance the spending of another. One church may, for example, have a large fabric fund due to legacies or fundraising over the years. When churches unite to form a single parish and account balances are combined, existing restricted funds continue to be reserved for their legal purposes and the same can be done with future legacies or fund-raising activities. The majority of income from all our benefice churches is and will continue to be paid to the Diocese for the Parish Share so in fact the difference before and after unifying into a single parish will not be so very different. The issue is largely one of perception – local congregations often do not realise the level of the annual parish share, or the cost of employing a minister. Allowing each village church to have a fabric fund will enable villagers to give to the fabric of their own particular church, if they wish to donate in this way.

### Conclusion

The application will be presented to the Bath Archdeaconry Mission and Pastoral Group on 10<sup>th</sup> May, prior to approval by the Bishop's Council, sitting as Diocesan MPG to approve the decision to merge two of our benefice churches into one. At 7pm, at the APCM meetings for St. Bartholomew's, on 17<sup>th</sup> May and St. Andrew's with St. Hugh's, on 18<sup>th</sup> May, all those on those two churches' electoral rolls are invited to meet and comment on this unification into a single new parish. Please take this opportunity to speak up - we are anxious to hear your legitimate concerns! Written representations are also welcome (addressed to the PCCs and sent to the Church Office, Easton House, Blagdon).

We will subsequently be looking for volunteers to serve on the new combined PCC and the two new VFF committees. Please contact the church office if you are interested in helping to look after our historic buildings or churchyards (and these roles do not require you to be a regular church attender) or in any other aspect of our church community.



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**May 2022**