

Diocese of York

Uniting Parishes – a Guidance Note

Background

A parish is the basic geographical unit of the Church of England. Traditionally there was a model of one church in one parish with one incumbent. However, benefices are increasingly comprising several parishes, with the risk that clergy become overburdened with attending meetings and administration.

Each parish has a PCC, which is a body corporate. This gives the PCC its own legal identity so it can hold property and enter into legal contracts in its own right such as with contractors for works carried out under faculty, employment contracts etc. It is the body which is legally responsible for the finance and accounts of a parish. The parish priest is chair of the PCC.

Each PCC must hold Annual Meetings and meet at least four times per year. There is a perceived need to free up parishes from administration so that they are able to concentrate on Mission. In addition there is concern about the ability to fill posts in benefices with a number of individual parishes. Increasingly parishes are considering uniting together to reduce the number of meetings and officers to be elected, and duplication of administration.

The following points have been identified as key to the successful union of parishes:

- Good stewardship
- Good leadership – both lay and ordained – and working relationships.
- The need for full communication through the process
- A sense of mutual identity – this is important. Many people have strong emotional attachment to their local church building, particularly if there is a churchyard. Generally, people dislike administration and welcome the opportunity to reduce it, but some will see the union of parishes as resulting in a loss of identity. Most successful unions are preceded by a period of time in which the parishes seek to work closely together on an informal basis to develop working relationships in which each community feels that its voice is heard
- Good and active support from Bishop and Archdeacon

What uniting parishes means

When two or more parishes unite they create a new larger parish and must appoint a PCC which covers the whole area of the new parish.

If a benefice is made up of several parishes it is possible to unite some of them and not others. Thus if in a benefice of five parishes only three want to unite, it is possible to do this whilst leaving the remaining two parishes distinct but still within the same benefice. This would result in a benefice of three parishes.

Consequences of uniting parishes include:

- Financial responsibility for all church buildings, churchyards, and things like Freewill Offers, investments, and the preparation of Annual Accounts will pass to the new PCC.
- The Annual Meeting of the new PCC will elect church officers for the whole parish.
- Churchwardens will be churchwardens of the new parish. All churchwardens are members of the new PCC.
- There will be one Electoral Roll for the new parish.

- The number of parish representatives when a new priest is being appointed and the number of representatives on Deanery Synod will be linked to the new parish.

The Status of Churches

A union of parishes will not of itself change the status of any of the churches involved. So if a church is a parish church in one of the original parishes it will remain a parish church in the new parish unless provision is made to change its status. There could therefore be more than one parish church in the new parish, each requiring its own churchwardens (though not other officers). When parishes are considering uniting they should give thought to whether they wish all the churches to retain their existing status or whether changes should be made. These changes could involve changing a parish church to a chapel of ease and so reducing some of the legal requirements for that building. It should be noted however that if a church loses parish church status it will need to be separately licensed for marriages if these are to continue to be celebrated in the building.

The Parish Name

Thought needs to be given to the name of the new parish. If all the parishes in the benefice are uniting it makes sense for the parish name to be the same as the benefice name. Many parish names are historic and circumstances may have changed and so this is a good time to ensure that the parish name properly reflects the identity of the areas it covers and the name people use on a day to day basis.

Financial Matters

Any trusts, investments, or property held in the name of one of the original PCCs will be transferred to the PCC of the new parish.

Although formal legal responsibility for financial matters will pass to the new PCC, funds whose use is legally restricted to the maintenance of the fabric of one church building, will remain restricted for that purpose and cannot be used for the wider parish.

The new PCC will be legally responsible for the maintenance and insurance of all churches and churchyards in the parish.

Individual church congregations will be able to hold bank accounts for minor local expenses, but these will need to be reflected in the PCC's accounts, and are legally under the control of the PCC.

If a union of parishes results in the new PCC having a gross income of over £100k, it will need to register as a charity with the Charity Commission and follow the appropriate guidance for audit requirements etc.

What is the process for Uniting Parishes?

A union of parishes needs to take place under the requirements of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011, and is created by a Pastoral Scheme, prepared and made by the Church Commissioners. The process provides for formal consultation with local interested parties (clergy, PCCs, rural deans, deanery lay chairs, and patrons).

In the first instance PCCs should contact their Archdeacon to discuss the proposals. The Archdeacon will also be able to advise on process.

When PCCs are ready to investigate a possible union more formally the Archdeacon will call a meeting of the Archdeaconry working party, which is made up of a small group of clergy

and lay people from the Archdeaconry whose function it is to make a report to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral sub committee (DMPSC). The working party will meet with parishes and listen to their views – it does not come with fixed ideas of what should happen.

The working party report will be considered at the next meeting of the DMPSC. If the sub committee is satisfied that the proposals should be progressed, the report will also be considered by the Archbishop's Council, which is the formal Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee. Once agreed by Archbishop's Council, short draft proposals for the union will be drawn up and circulated to the interested parties for comment. Usually six weeks are allowed for the consultation. It is important that PCCs that are in favour of the proposals should respond to the formal consultation as well as those that have concerns. The DMPSC will base their views on whether the proposals should be progressed on the responses received. If the sub committee agrees that the draft proposals should proceed, the proposals and consultation responses will be recommended to Archbishop's Council. If Council also agrees the draft proposals will be recommended to the Archbishop for his signature.

Once the draft proposals are signed they are sent to the Church Commissioners who will prepare a draft pastoral scheme which will provide for the proposals to be brought into effect. This draft scheme is again circulated to interested parties for comment, with responses being returned to the Church Commissioners. If no objections are received or remain unresolved the pastoral scheme will be made and brought into effect. This will bring the union of parishes into being. This process can take around nine months, longer if objections are received.

Representation of Lay People

In practice most newly united parishes manage elections to the PCC by electing representative members of the churches in the parish. However, it is possible for the parish annual meeting to make a formal scheme under the Church Representation Rules for the election of members of the laity to the PCC so as to ensure due representation of the congregation of each church in the parish. This would need a scheme to be drawn up by the parish, approved by the annual meeting and then approved by Archbishop's Council. In the first instance the parish should contact their Archdeacon.

Local Ecumenical Partnerships

If any of the uniting parishes is part of a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP), consideration will need to be given to whether the area of the LEP should be extended. It is perfectly possible for an LEP to cover part of a parish rather than the whole parish, and so in many cases the area of the LEP will not change. It may however be necessary to alter the LEP documentation to reflect the new arrangements – eg to define the area of the LEP within the new parish.

Patronage

A union of parishes does not affect the patronage arrangements as patronage relates to the benefice rather than individual parishes.

District Church Councils

In some cases it may be felt that a parish is too big to function without local bodies in addition to the PCC. These can be informal bodies without legal standing, or can be formalised as District Church Councils. A District Church Council is not a body corporate. The PCC may delegate certain of its functions to the DCCs, but there are certain functions which cannot be delegated. These include:

- Financial responsibility, including the preparation of the annual accounts,
- The right of the PCC to be consulted as an interested party in pastoral schemes or orders relating to the benefice or parish concerned,
- Functions relating to the appointment of an incumbent,
- Resolutions requesting arrangements in accordance with the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests to be made for the parish.
- Applications for Faculty permissions.

Again the scheme would need to be drawn up by the PCC, approved by the annual meeting, and approved by Archbishop's Council. Amendments or termination of the scheme would require the same procedure.

In practice this process is better undertaken once the new parish has been created and local working arrangements put in place. Care should be taken that the establishment of District Church Councils does not add an additional level of administration and meetings to replace that removed by the union of the individual parishes. It is important to remember that the creation of District Church Councils does not remove the requirement for the PCC to meet at least four times a year.

It is important that good communications exist between the PCC and the District Church Councils.

If a parish is considering the creation of district church councils it should in the first instance contact the Archdeacon.

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