

Diocese of York

Uniting Parishes – a Guidance Note

Background

A parish is the basic geographical unit of the Church of England. Whilst in the past there was a model of one parish per benefice (a benefice is the office to which a parish priest is appointed), increasingly the norm is now that benefices comprise several parishes.

Each parish must have a PCC, which is a body corporate. Being a body corporate gives the PCC its own legal identity and means that the PCC can hold property, open a bank account and enter into legal contracts such as with utility companies, 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. A PCC must hold an Annual Meeting and, whilst there is no longer a requirement for a minimum number of meetings per year, is required to hold a sufficient number of meetings to enable the efficient transaction of business. Increasingly parishes are considering uniting, for reasons including to reduce the number of meetings and officers to be elected, and duplication of administration.

If a benefice is made up of several parishes it is possible to unite all of them, or 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.

A union of parishes does not affect the patronage arrangements as patronage relates to the benefice rather than individual parishes. However, the patrons will be formally consulted during the process.

What uniting parishes means in practice

When two or more parishes unite they create a single new larger parish. The old parishes and PCCs cease to exist. The minister of the new parish must convene a Special Parochial Church Meeting (the equivalent of an APCM) and elect a new PCC which covers the whole area of the new parish as soon as possible after the union takes place. The minister will also need to call a Special Meeting of Parishioners for the purpose of electing churchwardens for the new parish. The meeting of parishioners may be held immediately before the Special Parochial Church Meeting.

The consequences of uniting parishes include:

- The new PCC will elect or appoint church officers (vice-chair; secretary; treasurer; electoral roll officer, Safeguarding officer(s)) for the whole parish;
- There will be one Electoral Roll for the new parish;
- The new PCC will have financial responsibility for all church buildings, churchyards, church halls and matters such as determining the Freewill Offer and investment strategy;
- The new PCC will be responsible for the preparation of the Annual Report and accounts (financial statements) for presentation to the APCM in accordance with the Church Representation Rules. These will be for the whole of the new parish;
- If a parish employs any lay staff, their contracts, pay arrangements, pension liabilities etc will need to be transferred to the new employing body. It is strongly recommended that parishes in this situation seek legal advice.

The Status of Churches and the number of Churchwardens

A union of parishes will not of itself change the status of any of the churches involved. 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. If a parish church becomes a chapel of ease as part of the union it will need to be separately licensed for marriages if these are to continue to be celebrated in the building.

Each parish church or parish centre of worship requires two churchwardens, elected at the meeting of parishioners, (though not other officers). All the churchwardens will be members of the new PCC.

The Parish Name

The new parish will probably need a new name. It might be appropriate to combine the names of the old parishes, but this could be unwieldy. If all the parishes in the benefice are uniting it will be less confusing going forward if the parish name is the same as the benefice name (even if there is to be only one parish in the benefice there will still need to be a benefice name and a parish 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. It is helpful to have a geographical component to enable people outside the local area to know where it is! The new PCC will take on the new parish name.

Financial Matters

Formal legal responsibility for financial matters in the whole of the new parish will pass to the new PCC, as this will be the only corporate body in the parish.

The bank account will be in the name of the new PCC. A new account will need to be opened. Existing bank accounts should be closed (because the PCC in whose name they were held no longer exists) and the funds transferred to the account of the new PCC.

Each old PCC will need to prepare a final set of accounts which will form the starting basis for the accounts of the new PCC.

The new PCC will need to register with HMRC for Gift Aid reclaims and obtain its own Gift Aid Reference number.

The new PCC should apply for inclusion on the Charity Commission Register of Mergers. This will allow legacies left to a dissolved PCC to be receivable by the new PCC.

Regular givers will need to be advised of the new bank account details

All trusts, investments and contracts held in the name of any of the original PCCs will need to be transferred to the new PCC

The vesting of consecrated churches and parsonage houses will be automatically transferred under a pastoral scheme, where applicable. PCCs are advised to check with the Property Team at the Diocesan Office concerning any parish owned buildings.

The unrestricted funds from each of the old PCCs will unite into an unrestricted fund for use anywhere in the new parish

Funds whose use is legally restricted, for example to the maintenance of the fabric of one particular church building, will remain restricted for that purpose and cannot be used for the wider parish

The new PCC will be responsible for approving expenditure on the maintenance and insurance of all churches and churchyards and other buildings in the parish

The day to day practicalities need to be worked out locally but typically each church might put in place a system of counting and banking their collections and reporting same to the treasurer. Local expenses would be paid by the treasurer on receipt of a claim, all of which becomes much easier with internet banking. If necessary, a petty cash scheme with recorded receipts and payments could be put in place but this is best avoided wherever possible

If a union of parishes results in the new PCC having a gross income of over £100,000, it will need to register as a charity with the Charity Commission and follow the appropriate guidance for audit requirements etc

Representation of Lay People on the new PCC

Elections to the new PCC should seek to ensure representation from all the churches in the parish. Ideally there is local agreement that members are elected broadly in proportion to the relative sizes of the congregations. This may need to change as congregations increase or decrease in number over time. However, a more formal procedure is provided for under the Church Representation Rules.

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. If your parish is part of an LEP please flag this up to the Archdeacon when raising the proposals for a union of parishes.

Shirley Davies, Angus Deas, Louise Connacher

March 2022

Contact details

Pastoral Team

Shirley.davies@yorkdiocese.org
angus.deas@yorkdiocese.org

Property Team

bevil.edwards@yorkdiocese.org

What is the process for Uniting Parishes?

A union of parishes takes 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, area deans, lay deans, and patrons). The Pastoral Team at the Diocesan Office will administer the process.

In the first instance PCCs should contact their Archdeacon to discuss the proposals for union. 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 Mission and Pastoral Working Party. This is a small group of clergy and lay people from the Archdeaconry whose function is to meet with parishes, usually in a public meeting, listen to all their views and to make a report to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral sub Committee (DMPSC). The working party does not come with fixed ideas of what should happen, and this is an opportunity for members of the parish to ask questions and comment.

The working party report will be considered by the DMPSC. If the sub committee is satisfied that the proposals should be progressed, draft proposals for the union will be drawn up and circulated to the interested parties (see list above) 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 review all the responses received and base their views on whether the proposals should be progressed on those responses. If the sub committee agrees that the draft proposals should proceed, they will be recommended to the suffragan bishop for signature.

After the bishop has signed the draft proposals 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. Once any objections have been dealt with the pastoral scheme will be made and brought into effect. This will bring the union of parishes into being.

As an approximate guide, the process from the open meeting and Working Party onwards might take around nine months, and will take longer if objections are received.