

Open letter, May 2018

RE-ORDERING THE VILLAGE CHURCH

The Parochial Church Council continues to work towards 're-ordering' our village church of Saints Peter and Paul.

The process has caused unhappiness in the congregation, with people who have supported the church for decades no longer comfortable worshipping there. Sensible suggestions like providing a kitchen unit and toilet have been rolled together with structural plans of unproven advantage, expensive to run and maintain, and with risks for the building as a whole. Destruction of historic pews, moving the ancient font, relocating the church's famous chancel screen, among other proposals, will be costly in terms of heritage and continuity.

There has been little consultation with the wider population. The idea of turning the church into a community space in addition to existing facilities like the Village Hall or the Sports & Recreation Centre has not been backed up by any real business plan or impact assessment. Broad informed support for radical change has not been demonstrated. The project is in the hands of a small group.

It is not too late to apply common sense, in case decisions are taken that we one day regret. There must be a *proper* consultation process in which everyone in our villages can have sufficient say. Diversity of opinion, Christian and secular, should be respected. Due attention should be given to the importance of our mediaeval church, with its irreplaceable artefacts, as a part of our beautiful Oxfordshire landscape. And all who take a long-term view should be able to examine issues of resourcing and viability in the framework of the entire community.

At the single open meeting that has been held there was only a brief opportunity for individuals to respond, off the cuff, to a presentation by architects which was interesting but at the same time, naturally, part of their bidding for the work.

We believe that, as a minimum, at least one further public meeting should be convened, this time with an independent chair, to allow the issues to be debated comprehensively, openly, democratically. Ahead of such a meeting it should be possible for differing positions to be set out in detail, for consideration by all parties.

Permitting the irreversible changes to be made to our church building as proposed will have significant consequences for Christian worship in Steeple Aston; for the attractiveness of our church to all comers; and for those managing other village facilities. Failing to require an inclusive, transparent decision-making process will let down both ourselves and all future generations of our community.

Please contact any of the signatories below if you support the holding of a public meeting to discuss the current proposals. Emails may be sent to iacobianus@googlemail.com (Ian Jackson, Wadham's Cottage, Steeple Aston, telephone 347895).

Very truly yours,

David Armitage, Paul Beadman, Malcolm Hensher, Ian Jackson