



THE ARCHDIOCESE  
*of* BIRMINGHAM

# PROCESS FOR MERGERS & CLOSURES

Guidance for Parishes 2026



## FOREWORD

The life of our Church is one of constant growth, discernment, and renewal. At times, this journey leads us to make difficult decisions regarding our parish structures, sometimes involving the merger of communities or the closure of a church. Such choices are never easy, for our parishes are far more than buildings; they are living communities of faith, memory, and worship.

This guidance is offered to support our parishes through these challenging processes. It is rooted in our shared mission: the spiritual good of souls and the proclamation of the Gospel. Every step outlined here, from initial discernment to pastoral preparation, consultation, and implementation, is designed to ensure these processes are undertaken with prayer, transparency, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility.

True renewal requires courage, hope, and a spirit of trust in the Lord's guidance. My prayer is that this document will serve as a practical and pastoral resource, helping our communities navigate change with faith, a will to foster unity and a shared commitment to the vibrant future of the Church in our Archdiocese.

With every blessing,

+Bernard Longley  
Archbishop of Birmingham

# INTRODUCTION

We must clearly distinguish between three distinct canonical processes: merger, closure and alienation.

Each process has its own procedures, and each must be followed carefully and correctly.

Ordinarily they are sequential, in other words if a closure and alienation are being planned then a merger should precede. It is not always the case but is a general principle that needs to be borne in mind.

## **This document covers:**

### **DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE**

What is Merger, Closure and Alienation. Principles, vision for change and challenges.

### **PASTORAL PREPARATION**

Recommendations for pastoral preparation.

### **COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION**

Guidance on effective communication and consultation.

### **MERGERS**

Guidance on discerning the case for change, parish consultation, key roles, parish identity and decision making for mergers.

### **CLOSURE AND ALIENATION**

Guidance on discerning the case for change, parish consultation, setting out the case for change and key roles for closure and alienation.

# DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

What is merger, closure or alienation?

## MERGER (EXTINCTIVE UNION)

Term clarified per canonical categories. For example: When Parishes A and B unite to form a new entity, Parish C, only the new parish remains.

In some mergers, one or more parishes are subsumed into an existing parish. The absorbed parishes become extinct, and the surviving parish extends its territory and community (cf. can. 121).

## DIVISION

Term clarified per canonical categories. For example, A is divided into B and C, only B and C remain (cf. can. 122).

## SUPPRESSION

Term clarified per canonical categories. For example, A is extinguished, nothing remains (cf. can. 123).

# DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

What is merger, closure or alienation? Continued.

## CLOSURE

The permanent cessation of a church's operations and the discontinuation of its use as a sacred space. Canonically, this requires a grave cause specific to the church (cf. can. 1222 §2).

The church is no longer used for any liturgical purpose.

## ALIENATION

The transfer of church property or assets to another entity or individual by sale, lease or gift following canonical procedures (cf. cann. 1291–1298).

## PRINCIPLES

**While many stakeholders are involved in parish modifications, the Archbishop and the Parish Priest hold the most essential roles. The Archbishop alone can erect, suppress or alter parishes after hearing the Council of Priests (can. 515 §2). In all juridic affairs the Parish Priest represents the parish according to the norm of law. He is to take care that the goods of the parish are administered according to the norms of cann. 1281-1288 (can. 532).**

# DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

## PRINCIPLES, CONTINUED

It may become evident that a change is required for pastoral, practical or financial reasons. These considerations could first arise in deanery discussions, as part of the Diocesan plan, from a Deanery visitation or they could arise from a change in circumstances.

Each case for change must address the specific circumstances of the parish or church, rather than relying solely on general diocesan planning. For any change identified or raised by the considerations above, you will need to discern the case for change, considering the following principles:

**Opportunities** → These decisions are made to strengthen pastoral care, improve parish life, and make the best use of resources. While changes may feel challenging, they should be guided by care and vision.

**Consultation** → Consultation is a chance to gather a wide range of perspectives, ensuring everyone's voice is heard, rather than trying to obtain a majority view.

**Collaborative leadership** → Decisions are made by the parish priest, Council of Priests, College of Consultors, Archbishop, Board of Trustees, and COO, reflecting shared discernment rather than a single-person decision.

**Long-term vision** → Decisions are guided by long-term thinking, ensuring sustainable parishes and responsible stewardship of resources for the future.

**Planning for renewal** → Structural changes are tools to support the Diocesan Vision, enabling better pastoral care, evangelisation, outreach, and the vibrant life of our communities.

# DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

## VISION FOR CHANGE

The guidance below applies to both mergers and closures. Some of these points can be also raised in parish consultation.

- How will the proposals serve the good of souls? Unity of the parish? Priests and deacons working together? Opportunities for young people?
- How will the proposed change help the parish to become more financially resilient to better serve the mission of the church?
- How could the parish estate be used to better serve the mission of the church?
- How could resources released be used to better serve the mission of the church?
- What is the vision for the new parish arrangement?
- What is good about the parish communities now, that could be carried forward into the new arrangements?
- How will clergy and lay faithful work together across a wider area, in a way that maximises strengths and talents and avoids duplication of effort?
- How will the wider community be better served? How will visibility and impact on society be greater? E.g. consider the geographical configuration of the church's presence such as one single Catholic church in a town or city.

# DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

## CHALLENGES

The guidance below applies to both mergers and closures.

- Is Mass attendance increasing, stable or decreasing?
- Can the community be served by another church in the local area? Would resources be more effective pooled together?
- What are the demographics of the community? Are there younger members?
- Are the buildings safe and fit for purpose? Has there been/might there be a forced closure for safety reasons?
- How big is the worshipping population? Can it sustain the running of the local worship space? Financially? In terms of times and talent?
- Does income keep pace with running costs? Does income keep pace with inflation?
- Is the estate in good condition? Is the level of maintenance required affordable over the long term?
- Are there financial reserves?

# PASTORAL PREPARATION

If the proposed change is deemed viable, **pastoral preparation must follow.**

The merger of parishes or the closure of a church affects far more than buildings or parish records; it deeply touches the hearts of parishioners past and present, as well as the clergy and pastoral staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1. Listen with empathy and compassion**

Parishioners clergy and staff need opportunities to remember, share stories, grieve, and begin to heal. Be patient, honest, and sensitive - recognising that some may feel denial, anger, or fear. These fears may include uncertainty about the future, loss of influence or connection, and concerns about being accepted by the receiving parish. Everyone is being asked to let go of the familiar for an unknown future.

### **2. Communicate openly and honestly**

As new information becomes available, keep the parish or parishes involved fully informed. Use bulletins, pulpit announcements, social media, websites, and other appropriate channels. Consider hosting parish “town hall” meetings to share developments, listen to concerns, and allow time for feedback.

### **3. Involve all groups in dialogue**

Parish councils, ministry teams, parish organisations, parishioners and schools should be part of open discussions so their questions and concerns can be heard and addressed with care.

# PASTORAL PREPARATION

## **4. Model positive leadership**

The attitude of parish leadership is both powerful and contagious. Avoid blame and remain hopeful. Even if there is disagreement with the final decision, clergy and lay leaders should refrain from sharing personal opinions with staff or parishioners. In times of transition, the community looks to its leaders for guidance and unity.

## **5. Reframe the change as an opportunity**

Some may see a merger or closure as a sign of failure, leading to discouragement. Remind the community that the new parish will be strengthened by the gifts, traditions, and faith of its former communities. With the dedication of the faithful, this coming together can spark new gifts, fresh opportunities, and a deeper shared faith.

## **6. Build up joint activities between parishes which may be merging**

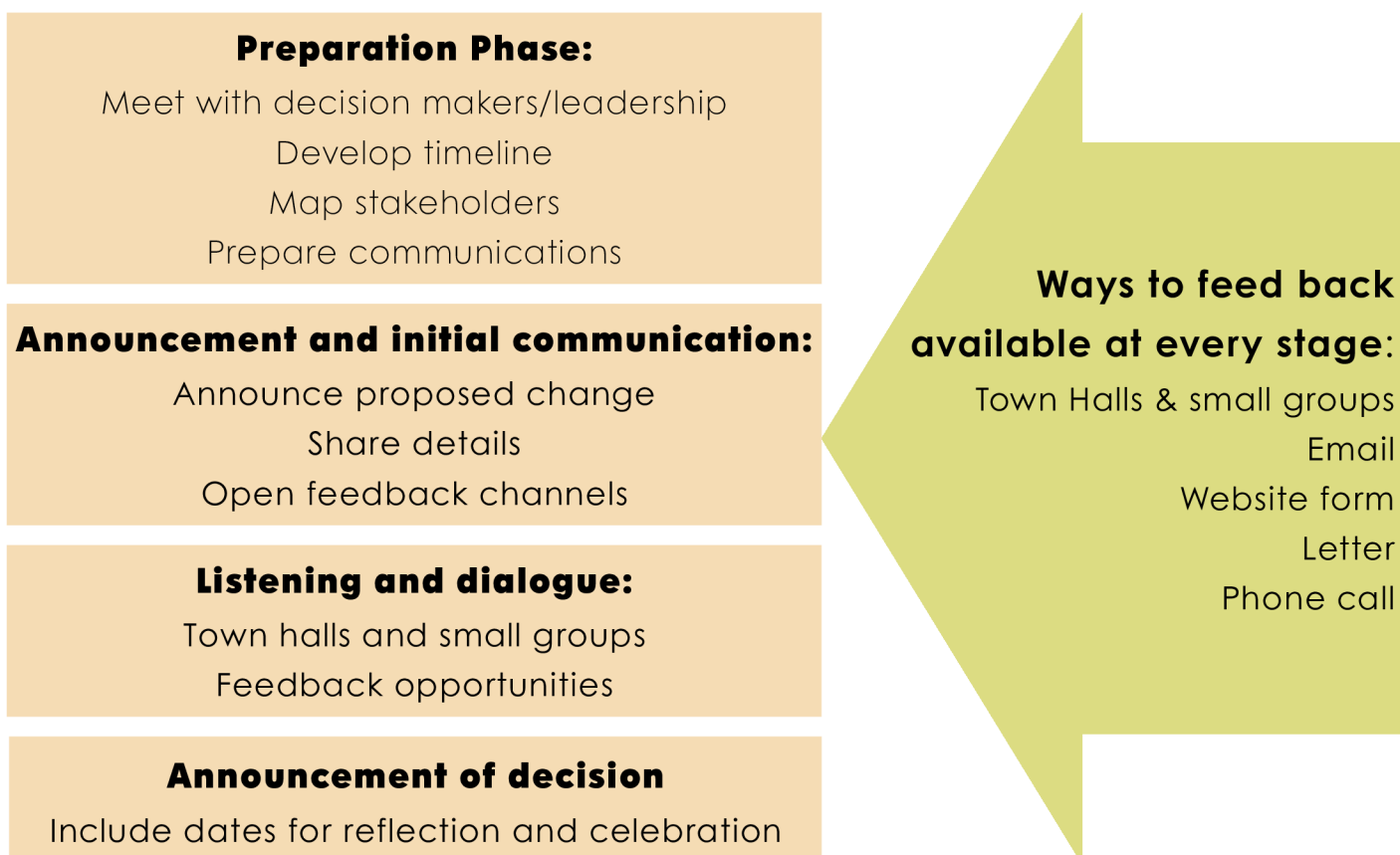
Consider inviting choirs or music groups to lead music from each of the affected parishes on different Sundays. Plan joint celebrations of feast days and for other events and fundraisers.

# CONSULTATION

As noted under Pastoral Preparation, the merger of a parish or the closure of a church affects far more than buildings or parish records. It is important to acknowledge the pain of the process, to keep members of the parish family well informed and to keep prayer at the heart of the consultation process.

Clergy, parishioners, and parish staff often have a deep understanding of the spiritual life and vitality of their parish and see the impact that church closure or parish merger could have. Consultation is a **canonical requirement** for mergers and closures. It is a process of shared discernment, not a vote. However, true discernment requires personal detachment—it calls us to prioritise what God wants over our own preferences. It's important to remain open to the difficult possibility that a decision to merge a parish or close a church may, in fact, be the right one.

## CONSULTATION PLAN OVERVIEW



# CONSULTATION

## PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

**Keep it clear and timely:** Share information in plain language and schedule meetings at realistic, accessible times.

**Plan your message:** Use a communications plan to outline what will be shared, with whom, and when.

**Choose the right channels:** Tailor communication methods to the audience—e.g. parish notices, letters, emails—and use multiple formats to ensure broad reach.

**Stay consistent:** Ensure all communities and individuals receive the same core message.

**Designate a contact:** Provide a single point of contact for questions. Be mindful of individuals or groups with separate agendas.

**Respect confidentiality:** Only share information when appropriate. Premature disclosure can disrupt the process and upset those directly affected.

**Manage misinformation:** Encourage community-minded dialogue and prepare to address rumours or leaks with a clear response plan.

# CONSULTATION

## ASSESSING AND RESPONDING TO FEEDBACK

**Make it clear:** Ensure the purpose of the consultation is easy to understand and clearly communicated.

**Explain how to respond:** Let people know how they can give feedback—whether in writing, at meetings, or through other channels.

**Track responses:** Keep detailed records and group feedback to identify common themes.

**Balance voices:** Create space for all participants to contribute, recognising that the loudest voices may not reflect the majority.

**Assess participation:** Consider how representative the feedback is—*are there silent voices that haven't been heard?*

**Clarify the purpose:** Emphasise that consultation is about gathering views, not making decisions by majority view.

**Following up:** Thank participants and share a summary of the decision outcome.

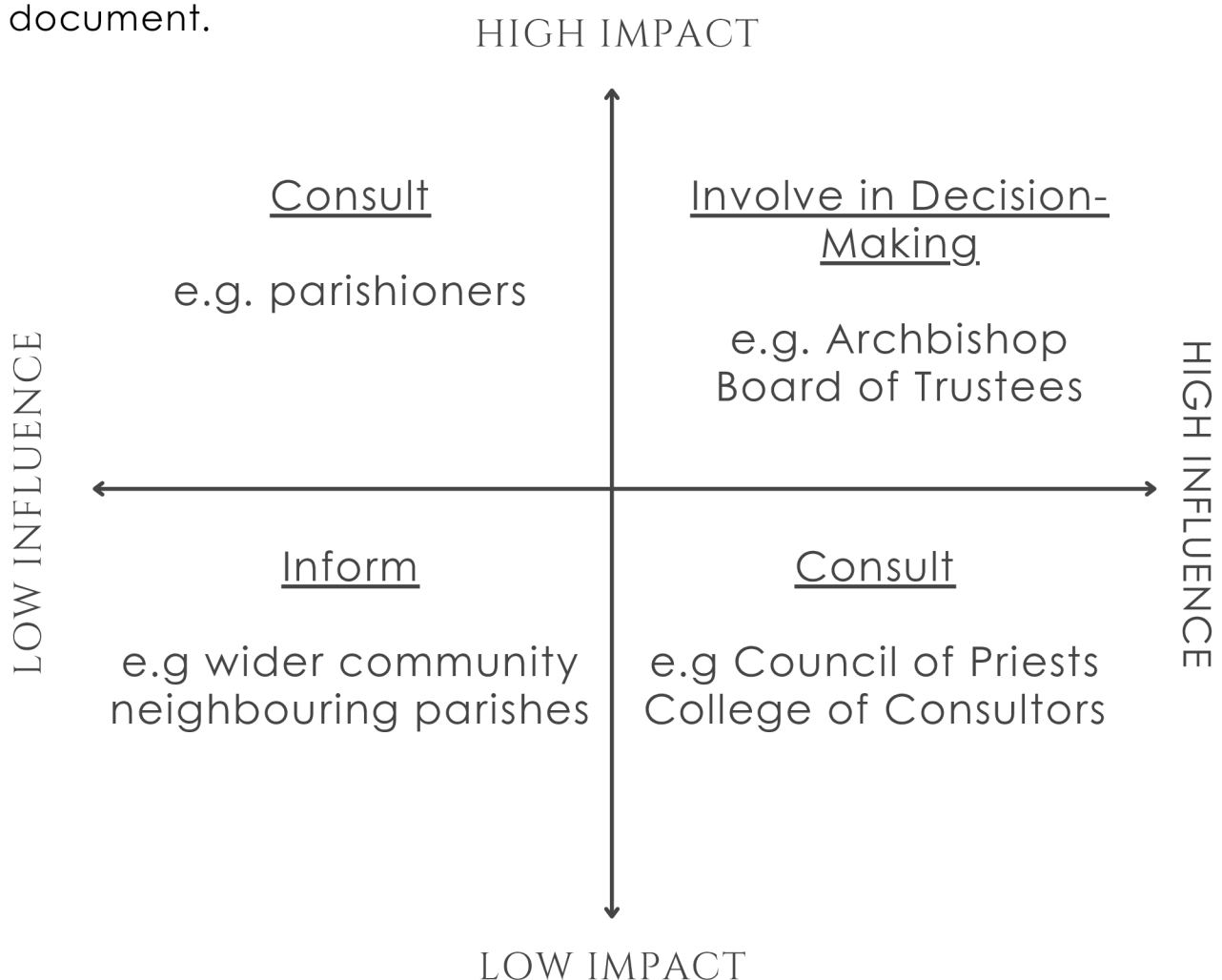
# CONSULTATION

## WITH WHOM TO COMMUNICATE

It's important to identify everyone who might be affected by the proposed changes before you begin. Decide how and when they should be informed and how involved they should be in the process.

In simple terms, make sure you've thought about who needs to know, so their views can be heard and their concerns addressed before any plans are put into action.

This will help you to realise the vision you want to achieve and enable people to help you on the journey. You can find further explanation of this process in the Parish Merger Consultation Plan document.



# CONSULTATION

## METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

**Parish meetings:** Invite whole community to a consultation meeting(s) to share the proposal and gather views.

**During Mass:** Raise the consultation in the parish notices. Reflect on relevant themes through the homily.

**Parish newsletter:** Raise awareness of the proposal, consultation and meetings, including how to participate.

Parish website: Raise awareness of the proposal and consultation. You may want to set up a form to gather views.

**Social media and posters:** Raise awareness of the proposal and consultation. Include a link / QR code to give feedback.

**Letters:** To reach specific people you want to ensure take part in the consultation, for example members of the Parish Pastoral Council, major donors etc.

# MERGERS

## DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

*Petition: For Parish Merger Submission* is available in the appendix to use to set out the petition for consideration by the Archbishop and consultation by the Council of Priests.

A written petition to the Archbishop must include:

- A summary of the just cause for the modification; there must be a just cause or series of just causes which is specific to the parish. This is covered in more detail in the detailed guidance in the appendix. The question must always be asked-is this proposal for the 'good of souls'?
- Pastoral care considerations, including the impact on parishioners and the proposed Mass schedule for the new parish.
- Temporal considerations, including property management and financial arrangements.
- The proposed staffing and governance structure.
- Evidence that the local parish communities have been consulted on the proposal.
- The opinion of each constituent parish finance committee.
- The financial impact of the proposal.
- The potential risks associated with the proposal and the mitigation for these.
- The proposed sacred name for the new parish.

# MERGERS

## PARISH CONSULTATION

When a parish merger is being considered, consultation should be thoughtful, transparent, and rooted in prayer. It will also need to refer to canonical consultation requirements for validity. Clergy, parishioners, and staff often have deep insight into the life of their community, and their perspectives are vital. Discernment is a shared process that seeks God's will above personal preference, and openness to change is part of that journey.

For practical guidance on how to plan and carry out consultation, including communication methods, feedback handling, and engaging affected groups, please refer to the Consultation section of this document.

## NAMING THE NEW PARISH

When considering names for a new parish, please keep in mind the following:

- Three options should be presented: the name should not already be attached to one of the churches in the area.
- Choose first a Divine name- Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Holy Trinity or Christ the Saviour, Christ the Redeemer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus etc.
- Or a dedication to Our Lady and one of her titles: Our Lady Help of Christians.
- Or a saint.
- A geographical denominator must be added to the title (Our Lady Help of Christians, Coventry).

# MERGERS

## KEY ROLES

Parish Priest	Finance Committee	Faithful in the Parish Schools and BDES	Archbishop	Consultees: Council of Priests Chancellor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sets out the case for modification in writing.</li> <li>• Petitions the Archbishop for the modification.</li> <li>• Undertakes a parish consultation.</li> <li>• Publishes the decree.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be consulted on the proposal.</li> <li>• The opinion of the Parish Finance Committee should be included in the written case for modification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be informed of the proposal, including the justification for the modification.</li> <li>• Should be consulted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receives the petition.</li> <li>• Seeks out any further information he may need to make the decision.</li> <li>• Hears views of those whose rights could be affected.</li> <li>• Consults the council of priests.</li> <li>• Makes the final decision and issues a decree.</li> <li>• Establishes the new parish and makes clergy appointment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chancellor or Vice Chancellor must be involved from the start.</li> <li>• Must be consulted on each individual parish modification proposed.</li> <li>• Should consider the relevant arguments for and against proposed modifications.</li> </ul>

## THE DECISION

At the end of the process setting the case for change and consultation, the Archbishop will make the final decision after consultation with all the consultees. If he agrees with the proposed modification, he will issue a decree.

### The decree must include:

- Summary of just cause
- Criteria for membership in affected parishes
- Disposition of temporal goods

The Archbishop is responsible for communicating the decree without delay. The parish priest is responsible for publishing the decree.

Parishioners or clergy seeking hierarchical recourse must submit their appeal to the Archbishop **within ten days** of the decree's publication.

# MERGERS

## BUILDING A NEW PARISH IDENTITY

*Building on pastoral activities.*

**Vision:** Have a clear vision and mission for the new parish, grounded in scripture. Make sure this is communicated widely and keep it central to decision-making. Keep linking back to it.

**Name and branding:** Use the new parish name and imagery across all communications, signage, letterheads etc.

**Celebration:** Have a liturgical celebration of the new parish, bringing the new community together. Consider linking this to a significant date for the parish e.g. patronal saint day (closing mass for previous parishes?)

**Coordination:** Ensure there is a coordinated Mass rota, offering a variety of times across the parish. There should be a consistent process for sacramental preparation, including a single point of contact.

**Communications:** Set up a single parish website, take down the old ones. Produce a single newsletter, perhaps setting up a rota for contributions from each priest appointed in the parish.

**Leadership:** The parish priest should be present and visible across the parish communities. There should be a single parish finance council and parish pastoral council/evangelisation strategy team.

**Groups and activities:** should be communicated across the parish. Plan shared opportunities for worship and celebration within the Family of Parishes—such as Thanksgiving, Penance Services, special prayer gatherings, and Holy Week liturgies—to help strengthen the sense of community.

Consider inviting choirs or music groups to lead music from each of the previous parishes on different Sundays.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## DISCERNING THE CASE FOR CHANGE

*Is this the right church to close? A grave cause specific to the church is required. Canonical requirements (cf. can. 1222 §2)*

**Alternatives:** How far are alternative catholic churches (including non-diocesan)? Does the church serve a rural community which would not have access to a realistic alternative?

**Heritage:** Is the building listed? Are there other heritage considerations? Are there any legal considerations? *(Diocesan property and legal team to advise?)*

**Location:** Is the church near to a school, university or major hospital?

**Restrictions** – Is the estate held in a special trust? Are there any restricted funds or donors or people with special interests? *(Diocesan finance, property and legal team to advise?)*

**Finances:** What is the current financial position? Are there debts? Is there a plan for recovery?

**Maintenance:** What are the anticipated liabilities (e.g. check quinquennial inspection report), has there been significant recent investment?

**Congregation:** Is the size of the congregation viable? Is attendance stable? Is substantial housing development planned?

**Grave cause:** Closure requires a 'grave cause', that is a compelling and specific reason why this particular place of worship can no longer fulfil its purpose.

A place of worship can remain open without daily or weekly Mass or with reduced numbers of worshippers. Therefore, a grave cause must demonstrate an overwhelming case which may consist of one matter or a combination of matters, but which leads to the conclusion that the place of worship should be relegated to profane, (or secular) use.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## PARISH CONSULTATION

When considering the possible closure of a church or chapel, the Church requires that certain criteria are carefully discerned in consultation with parishioners. This is not simply about closing buildings, but about seeking the best way forward for the mission of the Church in each local area. Through prayer, dialogue, and reflection, we look at how our resources can be used most fruitfully to strengthen faith, unity, and pastoral care.

Canon Law (cf. can. 1222 §2) requires grave causes for the closure of a church. Several factors have to be considered including:

- **Participation and Growth (Attendance):** Whether the number of parishioners has decreased and how this affects the life of the parish.
- **Pastoral Need (Need):** Whether the church is needed in the area to provide for the spiritual and pastoral care of the faithful.
- **Good of Souls (Spiritual Wellbeing):** Whether closure would in any way be harmful to the good of souls.
- **Strengthening Mission (Consolidation):** Whether reducing the number of churches would help the local community by making parish life stronger and more sustainable in the churches which remain.
- **Fostering Communion (Unity):** Whether reorganisation could support deeper unity among parishioners and neighbouring communities.
- **Prudent Stewardship (Other Considerations):** Any other relevant circumstances, such as the safety, condition, or financial sustainability of the building.

By looking at these areas together, consultation becomes an opportunity to discern how best to direct our resources, renew our mission, and ensure that parish life remains vibrant and fruitful for future generations.

For practical guidance on how to plan and carry out consultation, including communication methods, feedback handling, and engaging affected groups, please refer to the Consultation section of this document.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## SETTING OUT THE CASE FOR CHANGE

*Closure of a Church* is available in the appendix, to set out the petition for consideration by the Archbishop and Board of Trustees and consultation by the Council of Priests.

Some factors will determine how the church could be sold and what restrictions may be placed on the sale. The Diocesan Property and Legal Teams must be involved.

The case for change should include:

- The reason for closure.
- The current context, including usage, condition and financial position.
- An options appraisal, including the arguments for both maintaining and closing the church.
- The pastoral impact, including proposed alternatives for parishioners.
- Temporal considerations, including an inventory of sacred items and plan for how the property and assets will be treated.
- Details of the consultation and communication, including a summary of feedback and a communication plan.
- Key risks and associated mitigations.
- The recommendations of the parish priest.

Having received the decree for closure, the parish priest should consider the alienation of the property (usually by transfer or lease) if he has not already started that process.

Parishioners or clergy seeking hierarchical recourse must submit their appeal to the Archbishop **within ten days** of the decree's publication.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## THREE PATHWAYS

Canon Law includes three pathways for alienation based on the value of the property being alienated.

When the value of the sacred edifice is more than that determined by the Bishops' Conference, either the Diocesan Bishop or the Holy See must consent to acts of alienation

In all circumstances the opinions of founders and key donors is required:

Up to £650k	In between	Over £6.5m
The competent authority to alienate is the parish priest.	The consent of the Archbishop must also be obtained.	The Archbishop must obtain the consent of the Holy See.
Diocesan process for closure should be followed	Consent of the College of Consultors, the Diocesan Finance Committee is required.	Application to Holy See for approval once Diocesan decision-making process is complete.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## PROCESS FOR SELLING A CHURCH BUILDING

Canon Law includes three pathways for alienation based on the value of the property being alienated:

1. **Initial enquiry.** Consultation with COO and Director of Property to establish case for alienation and agree process.
2. **Records review.** Records reviewed to assess whether there are any potential restrictions on the sale.
3. **Case for sale.** Written case for alienation prepared to enable fair and transparent communication.
4. **Initial approval.** Approval in principle sought from Bishop and Board of Trustees prior to consultation.
5. **Consultation.** Parish consultation and Council of Priests consultation undertaken. Founders and donors need to be informed and their interests addressed. Detailed records must be kept of all feedback.
6. **Final proposal.** Final proposal (petition) drafted. Designated Advisor appointed to prepare a Charities Act valuation and options for alienation and marketing. Costs covered by the parish.
7. **On the market.** Once canonical decision to alienate the church is complete, property is put on the market in line with designated advisors' recommendations.
8. **Once an offer is received,** the Diocesan Trustees consider the sale for final approval.

# CLOSURE AND ALIENATION

## KEY ROLES

Parish Priest	Faithful in the Parish	Archbishop	COO	Council of Priests Chancellor	College of Consultors	Diocesan Trustees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sets out the case for closure or alienation, supported by the Diocesan Property Team.</li> <li>• Undertakes a parish consultation</li> <li>• Petitions the bishop for the modification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be formally consulted about the proposal, including the justification and evidence for the closure/ alienation .</li> <li>• If there is a Parish Pastoral Council, this committee should be included in the consultation.</li> <li>• If the alienation is more than £650k, the consent of any major founders, major donors and others whose rights may be affected must be sought.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receives the petition</li> <li>• Asks the view of the Oeconomus</li> <li>• Consults/seek the required consents</li> <li>• Makes the final decision. In the case of alienation, this is in collaboration with the board of Trustees.</li> <li>• The Archbishop issues the decree.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should be consulted on the proposal by the parish priest at the start of the process.</li> <li>• Must give a view as Oeconomus to the Bishop.</li> <li>• Will provide practical assistance with the process.</li> <li>• Will review any relevant restrictions, e.g. special trusts and Heritage requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Chancellor or Vice Chancellor must be involved from the start.</li> <li>• Must be consulted on proposal for closure (Canon 1222)</li> <li>• Should consider the relevant arguments for and against proposed closure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the alienation is more than £650k, the College of Consultors must consent to an alienation. (Canon 1292)</li> <li>• Must be provided with information about the economic state of the parish and details of any previous alienations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As the Diocesan Finance Committee, must consent to the alienation in Canon Law.</li> <li>• Must be provided with information about the economic state of the parish and details of any previous alienations.</li> <li>• Makes the final decision for alienation, following the requirements of Charity Law.</li> </ul>

# MERGERS

## TO DO LIST

There are administrative tasks to undertake following a parish merger, to ensure arrangements are transferred to the new, single parish. Checklists are available on the intranet [appendix] to assist with this.

These include the following topics:

- Record keeping
- Employee arrangements
- Finance and property
- Formal notification to the diocesan support and admin team to ensure central administrative tasks are undertaken