



## Solihull Parish: St Alphege Parish Church

### Project Turnaround Statement of Needs

August 2023, updated September 2024

#### **1. Background information**

Solihull Parish is a large Anglican parish in the heart of the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Grade I listed parish church of St Alphege is in the town centre at the end of the High Street, opposite the Council Offices and Touchwood shopping centre.

St Alphege Church is currently used primarily for formal worship, including civic and major life events. Regular services have congregations from 20 to 150 although the nave pews can seat up to 321 people, with chairs used at the back of church for additional capacity. As an historic sacred space for occasional visitors, around 60 visitors are welcomed to St Alphege Church every week, and a weekly music recital attracts around 50 people. Otherwise, the church space is largely unused, even when the building is open. In central Solihull, only Bushell Hall at Solihull School and St John's Hotel Park Suite can seat more people indoors. The church is losing potential occasions to create more touchpoints with people because the church is limited as a suitable venue for the community to use. In order to create and use these opportunities, we need **to provide a more flexible, welcoming, comfortable and hospitable environment**, but maintain the capacity for large occasions.

On the same site as the parish church is the Parish Centre, including the Oliver Bird Hall, built in 1962 as the church hall, offices and meeting rooms with ancillary facilities for St Alphege Church. The Parish Centre brings in lettings that generate good income to support the church activities, but in the desire to generate income we may have lost sight of the reason we have a Parish Centre. **There is a real opportunity to modernise the Parish Centre to better serve the mission of the church and to reinforce an umbilical connection to the church building.**

In the summer of 2021, Solihull PCC undertook a parish-wide consultation asking four questions:

- What do you especially like about our church and why?
- What do you think are the biggest problems for our church?
- What would you like to see our church doing in the future that it doesn't do now?
- How could our church do more in the community?

There was a good response from individuals and groups of all ages across all our congregations and from the local community. Key mission priorities emerged from the consultation:

- To nurture young people and their families
- To provide life-long learning opportunities
- To become more outward looking to serve the communities in our borough

This is summed up in our strapline: *Growing Disciples, Building Community and Transforming Lives.*

To achieve outreach and church growth we need to generate more chances to meet as many people as possible and to make the most of each opportunity for personal interaction and engagement. Touchwood shopping centre might call this "maximising the footfall" in our premises. What more could St Alphege Church and the Parish Centre offer to the 215,000 people who live and work in Solihull? Our church buildings could become an attractive "all-day, every-day" destination for the people of Solihull and hence give us the opportunity to build new communities and spread the Good News. We need to **TURNAROUND** and look to the mission field outside of our buildings.



## **2. What we need, why we need it, why we need it now, and what is the evidence for the need?**

Our church building is one of the components in our outreach to the local community of Solihull. Its location at the centre of activity – Touchwood shopping centre, High Street, bus stop, schools - gives a real opportunity for welcome that we are missing. It is true that the community no longer comes to us out of tradition or duty, so we must seek people where they are. Their need of us to heal the broken-hearted is as great, if not greater than before. What part can our building play in this mission? Our challenge is to create an environment in the building and its surroundings that represents our living church without destroying the historical monument and the sacred space.

To support our mission strategy we want our buildings to become more compelling by providing the facilities needed to encourage people in. What do we mean when we say that we want “to provide a flexible, welcoming, comfortable and hospitable environment”?

### **BASIC EXPECTATIONS**

- A friendly face at the entrance to say “Hello” and make the first contact
- Food and drink preparation area to offer hospitality
- Accessible to all
- Easy access to sufficient cloakroom, toilet, washing and baby changing facilities
- Comfortable temperature
- Well lit
- Flexible and comfortable seating for different configurations of occasions
- Multiple areas, preferably sound-proofed, to allow different activities at the same time
- Uninterrupted sight lines
- Helpful signage
- Clear amplification for speech and music
- Audio visual facilities
- Environmentally friendly
- Cost effective

## CURRENT EXPERIENCE

The people who attend St Alphege Church are blessed to worship in a building with many benefits:

- Ancient, beautiful building with its origins in the 12th Century
- Civic church in the centre of an affluent town
- Traditional location of “hatch, match and despatch” for the local community

The people who belong to the worshipping communities at St Alphege Church have many advantages with so much going on:

- Thriving groups of committed individuals catering for many and various needs
- Strong Christian ethos in Church Nursery, Infant and Junior Schools

For those in the community who know little or nothing of the Christian faith however, the current experience of visiting St Alphege Church is not as appealing as it could be.

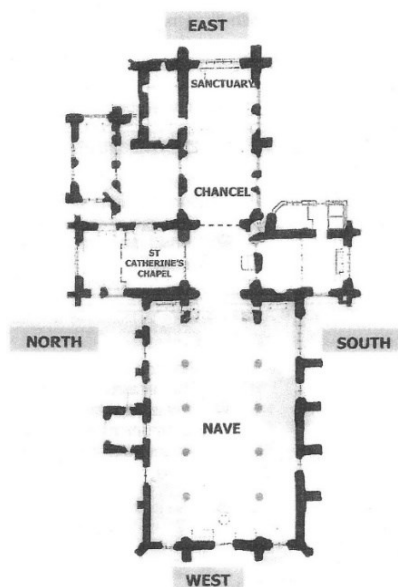
To the unchurched, St Alphege Church may seem shut. Even when the church is open, vast closed oak doors face Touchwood, metaphorically saying “Keep Out”. The High Street entrance is secured with full height black and gold metal gates. Even when the church is closed, we want the public to be able to glimpse into the light of a sacred space.

Once inside the building, it is dark, unless the new lights are on. Deeply tinted stained glass keeps out the light. The sandstone walls don’t reflect the light.

It is hard to find out what is on and what happens here because information sources are scattered between the two cramped entrances, various noticeboards, and the bookstall. There is no signage and little option but to explore randomly. The chapels, windows and other significant parts of the building have no information to lead the visitor on a journey that could stimulate an interest in faith.

At the back of the church there are some mixed classical-Gothic cream and gold thrones – installed in 1963 - which recite a roll call across the centuries. They seem rather pompous and a little bit tacky. Nearby are stacks of plastic chairs and books getting dusty.

For the majority of the 168 hours a week the church is under-used, aside from regular services, a few baptisms, weddings and funerals and a weekly music recital. It is a valued sacred space but may seem to the outsider to be a relic.





## NEEDS IN THE CHURCH BUILDING

Given the untapped mission potential and to address the basic expectations of a welcoming, comfortable and hospitable environment, these are the specific proposals that Solihull PCC has agreed, to bring the St Alphege Church building up to standard to support 21<sup>st</sup> century mission.

### 1. WELCOME, HOSPITALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

- a. Change the “welcome” entrance to the west door, facing the Touchwood Shopping Centre and linking closer to the Parish Centre, whilst retaining both north and west entrances for safety reasons. Build a new, external west end entrance lobby (“narthex”).
- b. Create new secure glazed entrances to enable the ancient doors and gates to be left open at all times so that the passer-by can glimpse into the light of the sacred space.
- c. Ensure both entrances have uninterrupted level access from pathways over the thresholds into church.
- d. Achieve level access throughout the main body of the church by eliminating the ridges between carpet, heating grills, paving and pew platforms.
- e. Create accessible access for Parish Centre users, and from a new drop-off bay in St Alphege Close for funeral and wedding parties, across new ramps and paths directly to the west end of church.
- f. Create a welcome and hospitality area near to the west entrance as a first point of contact around which all information, books, cards and notices can be consolidated. New designs for the bookstall and welcome desk against the west wall are proposed to replace the mixed classical-Gothic Wardens’ stalls installed in 1963. The Roll of Rectors would be rehung in St Katherine’s Chapel.
- g. Provide a food and drink preparation area (servery and counter) with hot and cold running water and drainage in the south-west corner of the nave, moving the Children’s Area to the north-west corner.
- h. Provide accessible visitor toilets, washing and baby changing facilities in the new narthex.

### 2. WARMTH AND LIGHT FROM LOW CARBON ENERGY

- a. Reduce the use of gas significantly in the immediate future by installing a lower temperature heating system, leading to eventual replacement of the gas boiler by heat pumps.
- b. Reduce electricity use and brighten the interior. Phase One of Project Turnaround – to install a replacement lighting system – was completed in September 2024. To brighten the nave further, we could consider restoring some lime-wash to the walls that was removed in 1856, which could also improve the church’s poor acoustics.

### 3. LITURGICAL REORDERING

- a. There is growing demand to provide more flexible spaces for worship and events which cannot be easily accommodated by the current nave fixed seating which faces east.
  - i. Sunday Eucharists in the nave
  - ii. Sunday Evensong in the chancel
  - iii. Weekday Eucharists in a side chapel
  - iv. Weddings with a central visible space for bride & groom
  - v. Funerals with a central visible space for the coffin
  - vi. Baptisms in a circle around the font with plenty of space for buggies
  - vii. Breakout areas configured for age-appropriate teaching during services including a space for young children and their parents



- viii. Infant & Junior school services with space for pupil presentations to staff and parents
  - ix. Bible study and prayer groups meeting in the round in quiet spaces
  - x. Church quiet days configured with various focal points around church for meditation – for example, around the Candlemas window
  - xi. Praise & Play, a weekly support network for families of pre-school children, comprises praise songs, Bible stories, drinks and chat in church;
  - xii. The annual promenade events of “Journey to the stable” and “Easter Journey” with various tableaux around the church
  - xiii. Stations of the Cross on the pillars of the church
  - xiv. The Parish Puppet Team perform during All Age services from a specially constructed booth which needs to be visible for the whole congregation
  - xv. Flower festivals with arrangements around the church pillars and alcoves
  - xvi. Concerts, and organ and instrumental recitals from a visible platform
  - xvii. Conferences, symposiums, exhibitions in a variety of seating configurations
- b. In order to provide:
- i. uninterrupted level access in the nave
  - ii. suitable seating around the font at baptisms
  - iii. more circulation space for wheelchairs and buggies
  - iv. a lower temperature heating system
  - v. more flexible spaces for worship and events

we propose to replace the nave pews, which date from 1879, and lay a level, paved floor with underfloor heating and durable chairs (Howe 40/4) which are light and easy to handle, and stack up to 40 high. The capacity of the church will be unaltered by using chairs rather than pews, supplemented by fixed perimeter seating in the nave, part of which can incorporate the existing Mayoral pew ends and memorial pew inscriptions.

- c. Sunday Eucharists are currently celebrated in the nave from an altar under the western tower arch. The choir, seated in the chancel, is currently both acoustically and physically remote from the worshipping congregation, despite the best efforts of audio amplification. We want the choir to be a physical part of the worshipping congregation, whose music they lead, by re-positioning them behind the nave altar. This gives an opportunity to return the Servers’ Stalls to the west ends of the chancel choir stalls, where they were before 1975, to create a more defined chancel worship space, like a Lady Chapel, for Evensong and other occasional services.
- d. The current nave altar is on castors, but heavy. To accommodate a new choir position behind a nave altar, we would like to commission a beautifully-designed, simpler, smaller and undressed altar table, well forward of the western arch. The altar could be moved on occasions but would usually be kept in position as the focal point of the church. Matching lectern and choir stands would also be commissioned.
- e. As a result of moving the choir, and also to create a more flexible space at the head of the nave, we need to relocate:
- i. the Jacobean pulpit, from around 1610 - now used infrequently. It was originally positioned against the first pillar of the nave on the south side, then against the south-west pier arch, and in 1963 was moved to its current position against the north-west pier arch. It is proposed to move the Jacobean parts of the pulpit to the east end of the south choir stalls.
  - ii. the eagle lectern, from 1884, which is too high without platform steps, and too heavy to move when needed to create flexible space. It is proposed to move the eagle lectern to the north side of the high altar sanctuary.
  - iii. the free-standing Rector’s stall, dedicated to the memory of A. Edward Fraser, Rector 1935-53. It is proposed to remove the Rector’s stall.



- f. Make much better use of the north transept by repurposing St Katherine's Chapel, currently used for post-communion ablutions, as a vestry and meeting room with step-free access, a levelled floor and better-designed storage areas. The existing stalls and altar dating from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century would be removed but the reredos and screens retained.

## NEEDS IN THE PARISH CENTRE

The objectives for the parish centre, originally drafted in 2008 and updated in 2017, are:

- To provide a hall that has the facilities to meet the needs of today's communities
- To form a stronger association with St Alphege Church and the town by creating the entrance of the Parish Centre closer to and aligned with the church building
- To create any new building in sympathy to the sensitive setting
- To improve and diversify the role that the hall will provide for the wider community
- To deliver a building that is more energy efficient

To address this long-standing desire, and to fulfil the untapped mission potential and the basic expectations of a welcoming, comfortable and hospitable environment, the following are the needs to bring the parish centre up to standard to support our 21<sup>st</sup> century mission.

1. Revisit the building annexe requirements and plans from the 2017 proposal, aiming to provide:
  - a. an annexe on the North side of the existing hall, visible from the west end of the church and as far as possible visible also from Touchwood and the High Street
  - b. a direct, gently sloping pedestrian link from the west end of the church across the churchyard to the new entrance of the parish centre on St Alphege Close
  - c. provide a ramp by the existing steps from the hall to the church
  - d. as much additional car parking as possible, within the sensitivity of the conservation area and the Grade I listed church.
2. Reassess the required replacement/refurbishment works in the existing building
  - a. works to the main hall - new windows, doors, ceiling and redecorate
  - b. works to the rest of the building – accessibility, new windows, doors and redecorate
  - c. replacement of the entire heating, lighting and electrical systems of the existing building
3. Review the required ten-year maintenance works against the costs identified in 2017
  - a. roof repair/replacement
  - b. resurface car park
  - c. works to internal walls, floors and finishes
  - d. replace boiler with heat pumps
  - e. maintain and decorate external doors/walls/windows/cladding
  - f. maintain and decorate internal ceilings
  - g. window repair
  - h. Compliance with statutory testing and maintenance



### 3. Progress to date

- A sub-group of Solihull PCC was set up in March 2021 to look at how the church buildings might better serve the mission of Solihull Parish.
- An options paper was commissioned and discussed with key members of the parish leadership in June 2021.
- Responses to the parish-wide consultation in the summer of 2021 informed the outline requirements of “Project Turnaround”
- The diocesan Historic Places of Worship Support Officer visited in August 2021 and again in June 2023 to advise on emerging ideas.
- The Birmingham Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches (DAC) were first notified in July 2021 of the possibility of reordering St Alphege Church.
- Preliminary discussions about finance options were held with the PCC and St Alphege Treasurers.
- Proposals were brought to a dedicated joint meeting of the PCC and the St Alphege District Church Council (DCC) for discussion in September 2021.
- The PCC agreed to appoint architect(s) to undertake site appraisals and develop options with outline costs against the requirements for both St Alphege Church and the Parish Centre for further PCC and DCC discussion.
- The project was paused whilst a planning application for redevelopment of the old rectory site was considered. The application was submitted in March 2021, refused in December 2021 and an appeal dismissed in July 2022. In November 2022 the PCC agreed to use some of the proceeds from the recent sale of a curate’s house towards a first phase of Project Turnaround, instead of the previous plan to use proceeds from the aborted development of the old rectory site.
- In November 2022 the project was restarted. A User Group of Pam Price, Deirdre Moll, Philip Leach and Andrew Halstead was formed to make the selection of architect and to move the project forward. A “Brief for Architects” was prepared for tender in November 2022 and is available.
- After a competitive tender and interviews, Aidan Ridyard of Burrell Foley Fisher was appointed as architect for both the church and parish centre elements of Project Turnaround.
- After seeking DAC advice, Solihull PCC subsequently appointed Aidan Ridyard as the Inspecting Architect for St Alphege Church, Solihull at its meeting on 21 November 2023, to replace Steven Matthews of Brown Matthews Architects.
- Briefings during or after church services and in the monthly Parish News have kept the congregations informed of the Project Turnaround plans.



## 4. Options to meet the needs and proposals

- From January to May 2023 the architect met with the User Group in a series of workshops, talking through possible strategies to join church to parish centre, undertaking an analysis of the spaces in the church, developing spatial, liturgical, access and functionality concepts and some options for a parish centre strategy. Outline costs were prepared.
- This work was presented in a Feasibility Study to a joint meeting of the PCC and all three DCCs on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2023. The Feasibility Study included analysis of the whole site, with options considered for the church, the site/landscape and the parish centre. It offered a preferred design solution as a proposed Masterplan for discussion, with relevant precedents quoted. Comprehensive feedback was garnered via emails and during various PCC/DCC meetings in July 2023.
- After a site visit in August 2023 and subsequent feedback from the Diocesan Advisory Committee, the Church Buildings Council, Historic Buildings & Places, Historic England and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society, the PCC assessed priorities for Project Turnaround in line with the Masterplan.
  - Phase One – to install a replacement lighting system: *completed September 2024.*
  - Phase Two – to undertake a comprehensive liturgical reordering of St Alphege Church, including a new, external, west-end entrance (narthex) with associated landscaping.
  - Phase Three - to extend and refurbish the Parish Centre, together with redesigning the surrounding roads and parking.
- In September 2023 the PCC agreed to progress Phase Two to the design stage for St Alphege Church and for the site and landscape sufficient to obtain faculty and planning permissions, i.e. to RIBA Stage 3 with some Technical Design.
- In response to the feedback garnered over Summer 2023, and with input from the new Priest-in-Charge (Rector Designate), Revd. Nick Parker, the PCC agreed the following changes to the Masterplan:
  - Pulpit to be repositioned at east end of the south choir stalls, rather than the west end of the north choir stalls, to be more visible
  - Eagle lectern to be repositioned on north side of high altar sanctuary to balance the new pulpit position
  - Servers' stalls, currently at entrance to St Katherine's Chapel, to be relocated to their original position as return stalls at the west ends of the choir stalls, creating a more defined chancel worship space, like a Lady Chapel
  - St Katherine's Chapel to have the floor levelled as a multi-purpose worship and meeting space with storage, and with ramp access from under the tower, but WC provision relocated to the west end external narthex. This avoids creating a new opening in the medieval wall at the east end of the north aisle and avoids building a mezzanine floor, which would not have been fully accessible.
  - St Katherine's altar table and small return screen to be removed, but reredos retained. Sacristy to remain as is.
  - Rector's Stall to be removed
  - Mayor's pew crests and other pew inscriptions to be retained as part of perimeter seating to cover convector radiator wall heating, replacing the cast iron Victorian pipework.
  - Discreet information panels to be designed to highlight the liturgical and historical features of the church
  - Chair storage area to be in the north-west corner of church to balance the servery in the south-west corner
  - Font to stay centrally where it is





- Children's Area furniture to be retained, but repositioned from the south-west to the north-west corner
- External narthex to be enlarged westwards and redesigned to incorporate two WCs plus one accessible WC
- The new east/west ramped path along the churchyard wall to be extended to the current disabled parking bays
- In November 2023 Rachel Sycamore, furniture consultant to the Hereford diocese, was commissioned to write a Significance Assessment of the nave pews, and in August 2024 to write a Significance Assessment of the pulpit, Rector's stall, St Katherine's Chapel pews and altar, servers' stalls, choir stalls and book stall.
- In January 2024 Interlocks Surveys undertook a measured building survey of St Alphege Church, churchyard and Parish Centre producing floor plans, elevations, sections & a topographical survey, as well as a 3D colour point cloud.
- Between October 2023 and July 2024, the Project Turnaround User Group convened a series of workshops with the architects Burrell Foley Fisher LLP to work up the detailed plans for Phase Two. These were presented to the PCC and DCCs of Solihull Parish on 17 July 2024.
- The PCC agreed on 17 July 2024
  - to authorise the petitioners, Revd Nick Parker, Pam Price and Andrew Halstead, to apply to the Consistory Court of the Diocese of Birmingham for a faculty for permission to undertake the works set out in the plans presented to the PCC on Wednesday 17th July 2024;
  - to agree that the plans for the narthex and the new paths and landscaping should be submitted to Solihull MBC for planning permission;
  - that briefings to the congregations about the plans should continue alongside these applications.
- The design proposals for which faculty permission is sought are described in detail in the document Project Turnaround: Design Narrative (September 2024) with the associated plans, sections, elevations and fittings.



## **5. How is the proposal contributing to the need for environmental sustainability?**

St Alphege Church is currently the third highest emitter of greenhouse gases in the Church of England Birmingham. As part of our journey towards being a net zero church by 2030, the ambition is to reduce the use of the gas significantly in the immediate future by installing a lower temperature heating system, leading to eventual replacement of the gas boiler by heat pumps.

The lighting system was well over thirty years old, using a mixture of high wattage halogen lamps with some more recent LED replacements. Parts of the system, including lamps under the tower, could no longer be used without tripping the electricity supply. The nave lighting was dim because the lamps reduced in output with age. There was poor lighting control with no preset configurations. The lighting was expensive to run.

A new lighting system was installed in St Alphege Church between June and September 2024. The new economical, environmentally friendly and maintainable lighting will significantly reduce electricity use and increase brightness. Easy-to-use flexible lighting configurations now highlight the historical features and create moods for different occasions, including overnight. The default setting was to turn all the lights on at most times because the lighting was so dim. An economical configuration in the new system will give significant energy and cost savings, particularly during the week when the church is open for visitors.