



# THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM

## PARISH VISITATION DEANERY OF North Staffordshire

**Parishes of St Joseph's Goldenhill, St John's, Kidsgrove, and English Martyrs,  
Biddulph [parishes nos: 175, 124, 58 respectively]**

Visitor: Bishop Stephen Wright

Parish Priest Fr. Julian Green. Deacon David Child (retired)

Date of Visitation: 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> November 2022

### Summary of Visitation Activities:

Conversation with Fr Julian Green

Conversation with Deacon David Child

Conversation/lunch with Chair of Finance Committee

Celebrated and preached at all Parish Masses: Saturday 6.30pm- Kidsgrove, Sunday 9am- Biddulph, Sunday 11am – Goldenhill. Sunday 6.30pm – Packmoor (Chapel of Ease in Biddulph Parish)

Parish Meeting – 50+ attended. All Primary School Headteachers and the CSEL attended.

### A brief profile of the Parishes.

Our Lady of Grace Partnership of Parishes consists of three parishes: Goldenhill, Kidsgrove and Biddulph serving the northern most parts of the Diocese with Leek further to the east. Biddulph Parish additionally has a Chapel of Ease, St. Patrick's, Packmoor.

There is one parish priest who is resident at Goldenhill. Due to its capacity, Goldenhill is evidently the hub parish for this area. The only downside is the lack of a purpose-built meeting room. The three parishes have lower numbers of Catholics than other parts of the Deanery. There have been some demographic changes in the Goldenhill area with more migrant catholic families moving into that area.

Taken together, one Mass in each of the four churches, produces a capacity of 880 people. The present congregation across the four churches is at most 240 people. That over capacity of numbers of masses and the number of churches is not sustainable given the proximity of Goldenhill, Kidsgrove and Packmoor. Biddulph is more distant from other churches and that needs distance to be borne in mind.

#### **St. Joseph's Goldenhill.**

**Buildings:** The parish priest is resident at St. Joseph's, Goldenhill in a large presbytery with 4/5 bedrooms. The house is large enough for a religious community to live here or to

house a retired priest or assistant priest alongside the parish priest. The Presbytery is connected to the Church by means of a corridor that could be blocked off if required.

The Church is large, with a capacity of about 400. It is not listed but it is consecrated. There is no meeting room but there is a large sacristy and side chapel area that could be utilised for meetings. There is a large garden to the rear that could be used for development, however any housing would be very close to the Presbytery. There is only road car parking outside of the church but there is a nearby small free car park.

The Quinquennial report from 2016 points to major repairs required to the unused Church Tower. The Parish breaks even and is viable as a parish.

Goldenhill is only 1.4 miles from the similarly large Sacred Heart, Tunstall. At present retaining both nearby large parish churches makes pastoral sense as combining these two parishes and their clusters would lead to a parish cluster having five primary schools, which is simply unworkable for one priest.

St. Joseph's Primary School is 200 metres away and the school uses the church for masses.

**Finances:** The bank balance is £20,000 with no units. One Finance Committee covers all three parishes.

**Sunday Masses and Parish Life:** Around 100 people attend the Sunday 11am Mass. Weekday Masses are celebrated in Goldenhill. The local population has changed in recent years with an increase in migrant parishioners. The Church is popular with and well attended by the travelling community, with a travellers' site within the parish.

#### **St. John The Evangelist, Kidsgrove.**

**Buildings:** This parish grew out of Goldenhill, and the Church was built by the initiative of a wealthy parishioner. It is not listed nor consecrated, though the War Memorial in front of the Church is listed. The Church is just 1.5 miles from St. Joseph's, Goldenhill. I was told the Church's capacity is 180, it seemed smaller, with 40 people attending the Saturday 6.30pm Mass. There are no regular weekday Masses.

The attached Presbytery is unoccupied and is not now generally used by the parish, except for it having the only toilet on the whole site. The Presbytery is also externally attached to the primary school building next door, which is about to be vacated and disposed of. The presbytery cannot realistically be rented out as it is attached to the Church and provides the only toilet on site. Even if it were to be rented, it would need major redecoration and would need to be blocked off from the church. This parish does not have the money for such a project. Overall, it is not a good site for a hub parish/presbytery, especially when there is a better site at Goldenhill, just 1.5 miles away.

There is only road car parking near to the church.

The newly built parish Primary School is now about a mile away and will no longer be able to use the church for its Masses. The school will use its hall instead.

At time of writing St. John's Parish is closed due to not having any water supply. The Saturday evening Mass has been relocated to St. Joseph's, Goldenhill. The school site will be sold soon.

**Finance:** The parish struggles financially to break even. It has less than £10,000 in the bank and no units.

**Parish Life:** There are no weekday masses at Kidsgrove. There have been several Alpha Courses run from Kidsgrove in the past and there is a wish to use the properties for social outreach. The church remained closed throughout the COVID pandemic as social distancing was so difficult to maintain in the small church. Those who wished to attend Mass during this period relocated to nearby Goldenhill.

Regrettably it is clear that Kidsgrove is no longer viable as a stand-alone parish. Regardless of the future use of the buildings, given its very close proximity to Goldenhill, it now needs to be now merged with Goldenhill and Biddulph.

**English Martyrs, Biddulph (including St. Patrick's, Packmoor as a Chapel of Ease.)**

The Parish Church, English Martyrs, Biddulph is 4.9 miles from St. Joseph's Goldenhill and 8.6 miles from Leek. Therefore, it is quite remote from other parish churches.

**Buildings:** The Parish Church is consecrated but not listed. The church capacity is 200 and around 60+ people attend the 9am Mass on Sunday. There is a good meeting room and kitchen at the back of the Church and the facilities in general are excellent. The Church is in good order. It has a large separate presbytery (5 bedrooms) which is rented out for £8,700 per annum. I was not able to visit the presbytery, but it could be used for retired clergy/religious although Biddulph may be viewed as quite remote.

The Church has a small car park and there is road parking nearby.

The parish primary school is nearby and uses the Church.

There is a very active and impressive foodbank operating from the Church, which was also used as a designated warm place for locals. The social outreach of this parish is very strong. There are weekday Masses.

**Finances:** The parish generally makes a surplus year on year and has £40,000 in the bank but has no units. Given its location this church needs to be retained. It will never have a resident parish priest as the parish is too small to warrant it. So rather than be a stand-alone parish, it recommended to merge the parish with Goldenhill and Kidsgrove.

**St. Patrick's Packmoor** is 2.8 miles from Biddulph but only 1.8 miles from Goldenhill and 2.4 miles from Tunstall. It is not a Parish Church but is a Chapel of Ease built from Biddulph.

**Buildings:** The chapel is not listed or consecrated. It sits in a residential street in an open plot surrounded by residential houses and open fields. There is no presbytery. The Church was earmarked for closure in 2009-2010 after extensive damage due to a fire. The decision was made then to repair and rebuild. The church's capacity is 100 but only a maximum of 40 people attend the 6.30pm Sunday Mass. For my visit there were only 24 people. There are no weekday masses in this church however there is a faithful Rosary Group who meet weekly. It is very regrettable, but I recommend it is not going to be viable to keep chapels of ease so close to other churches and I recommend the Mass here should cease and the church be closed. I realise it is the only Sunday evening Mass in the area but numbers are consistently low. If there is a pastoral need for a Sunday evening

Mass in the northern part of the deanery, and low numbers presently suggest otherwise, then there are plenty of nearby churches that can offer a Sunday evening Mass.

## The Parish Meeting

The aim of the parish meeting was to discuss the implementation of the Diocesan Vision: *'Our vision is to be a Catholic Diocese which is faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly in vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour'*.

Over 50 people attended the open meeting held at St. Joseph's Primary School, Goldenhill. Worshippers from all 4 churches were present as were all the primary school headteachers and the local MAC CSEL. Young parishioners/pupils attended. The meeting was very lively and there was a lot of engagement in conversations and reflections. The wishes expressed about parish life formed a vision to work towards.

Concern was expressed about the perceived threat to close churches, in particular comments about Packmoor and Kidsgrove. People accepted the Diocesan vision and the priorities outlined in it. People accepted that parishes need to be outward, mission facing. There was an acceptance that the status quo was not sustainable given the lower number of priests in the future.

Catholic schools and their work were greatly appreciated. There was sadness that reaching out to parents of children at catholic schools was difficult. Likewise, there was a wish to reach out to the younger members of the catholic community. It was noted that families/children will participate in sacramental preparation but then often will stop attending Mass. Comments made that parishes gave little opportunities for children to participate and so feel welcome.

A sense of welcome to all was seen as a key part of growing parish life. All being co-responsible is important. It was discussed that what does take place in the churches is often not well publicised.

When asked, initial comments stated that the 3 parishes did not work well together. However, after further reflection it was noted that there are activities where the parishes do work well as a cluster and with other parishes too. During Holy Week the parishes do come together for Masses and liturgies. Foodbank, Young at Heart at Kidsgrove, 11 Alpha Courses across the parishes in three years pre COVID, prayer groups, men's group, Bible Study Group. Much of the reflection dwelt on pre- COVID activities that have not returned post COVID. There was some discussion about revisiting these activities and starting them again. A Parishes Council was discussed as was the need for co-ordinated lay involvement to help organise mission/social outreach focused activities.

The Deanery Area Pastoral Council was seen as a good mechanism for co-ordinating mission across the parishes, but it was acknowledged that it was not well known and parish links were not always strong. People were aware of the Station Masses and Study Days across the deanery.

Social Outreach: as well as the Foodbank and warm places, the Mini SVP was mentioned. This is a very popular mission of young parishioners in the schools and focuses ministry with the elderly.

## **Parish Institutions**

St. Joseph's Church, Goldenhill. Consecrated not listed. Capacity 400.

St. John's Church, Kidsgrove. Not consecrated or listed. Capacity 180

English Martyrs Church, Biddulph. Consecrated but not listed. Capacity 200

St. Patrick's, Packmoor. Chapel of Ease belonging to Biddulph Parish. Capacity 100

Primary Schools: St. Joseph's, Goldenhill, St John the Evangelist, Kidsgrove, Our Lady of Grace, Biddulph.

Secondary School: Fr. Julian assists with chaplaincy at St. Margaret Ward

## **Parish Masses and Liturgy**

Saturday 6.30pm – Kidsgrove

Sunday 9am – Biddulph

Sunday 11am – Goldenhill

Sunday 6.30pm - Packmoor

## **Future Life of Parishes**

There is so much to admire about the life of the three parishes. The parishes' meeting was one of the most lively, honest and constructive across the deanery. There is so much good ministry in terms of formation, catechesis and social outreach found in the communities. It was mentioned at the meeting that it was felt the three parishes did not work well together, yet upon deeper reflection it could be seen how they were working together. Ever closer working together needs to continue as more than anywhere else in the deanery this part of the deanery needs structural reform. There are simply too many masses in too many churches. Regrettably the present pattern of four Masses across four churches is not sustainable. Mass numbers are lower in this part of the deanery as the numbers of resident Catholics is lower too.

I strongly recommend that the three parishes, Goldenhill, Kidsgrove and Biddulph are now merged to form one parish covering this northern part of the deanery. I am recommending that only two churches are required to meet the pastoral needs of the area, Goldenhill and Biddulph. Whether the parish priest thinks two or three masses are required is a matter for his pastoral judgement. Certainly, four masses are not required and should not be continued.

It is regrettable to say I recommend church buildings should close. St. Patrick's, Packmoor is not a parish church, it is a chapel of ease in the parish of Biddulph. Yet it is closer to Goldenhill. It is used just once a week for Mass. 25-40 people attend and most if not all

people drive to it. Sadly, it is time for the chapel to close as there is insufficient pastoral need for it to exist. If there is a pastoral need for a Sunday evening Mass and congregation numbers consistently suggest otherwise there are plenty of churches that can offer a Sunday evening Mass in the northern part of the deanery.

Mass numbers at St. John's Kidsgrove are low, around 40 people attending the only Mass celebrated there each week. Sadly, there is insufficient pastoral need for the church to exist as there is an alternative church, St. Joseph's Goldenhill, just 1.5 miles away. As well as the insufficient pastoral need there are practical issues too. The parish is too restricted by its buildings to ever be a hub parish serving others. The site is cramped, and the facilities are too small and inadequate. The parish struggles financially, and it is not feasible that it has the resources to transform the site into one fit to be a hub parish for the long term. The recent ongoing issues with the water supply and the parishes' low income and financial resources have highlighted its vulnerability.

The local primary school is no longer close enough to make use of the church and recent history has shown that when St. John's has been closed the congregation has been able, if they wish, to relocate to Goldenhill or to other churches.

The next-door primary school site will be disposed of. I suggest it is timely to dispose of the whole site and use the money to ensure the newly formed parish is well placed to serve the Catholic community in this area.

I take no pleasure in making these recommendations to close churches, but I suggest it is timely.

I thank the parishes' communities for their kind welcome and openness with me.

Bishop Stephen Wright. April 2023.