

## **FRIENDS GROUPS – A GUIDANCE NOTE FOR PARISHES**

The purpose of this document is to provide parishes with information on Friends Groups. It discusses what a Friends Group is, how to assess whether one would be suitable for your church, how to start one up and its legal position.

### **Introduction**

The establishment of a Friends Group for a church can be an effective way of raising support and profile from outside the immediate church community. Often the wider community have great sympathy for a Church building, but may not wish to worship there or be directly involved in church life. A Friends Group can act as a link between the secular and ecclesiastical communities and unite a common interest in retaining a special and sacred building. The activities of such groups positively contribute to community life.

### **What is a Friends Group?**

It is a group of people who have a shared interest in a particular building. They may well provide financial support through subscriptions, donations and fund raising or practical help with things like basic building maintenance and special events, such as concerts, art exhibitions and educational tours.

### **Who would want to be a Friend?**

Everyone and anyone! Anyone who has a special interest in your church may want to be a Friend. They may be people who already have a connection with the building through being baptised or married there or who have relatives buried in the churchyard. They could be people from the wider community who have no connection with the church but want to help keep it because they value its historical, architectural or archaeological significance. You may even have Friends who want to be “future users” of your church – people who want to get married there or have their children baptised. It may even inspire them to join the worshipping community!

### **Is a Friends Group right for my church?**

It depends on what activities you want the group to be involved with. For example, the group may be formed only to assist with a specific fund raising task and then disbanded at the end of it. On the other hand, you may want the Friends to be a more inclusive group who are there to promote the architecture and history of the building, as well as assisting with fund raising activities and community events.

### **I. Starting a Friends Group**

Finding out whether there is an interest in forming a Friends Group and deciding what you want it to achieve, may seem a bit like a chicken and egg scenario! Which

should you do first? Should the Parochial Church Council (PCC)<sup>1</sup> see if there is any interest before deciding what they want to achieve or do it the other way round? It may therefore be a good idea for the PCC to start the process by first looking at the problems or issues facing the church. Can these be solved without the need for a Friends Group? Or could a group not only help resolve these issues, but also make a valuable contribution to the running of the church and the promotion of it as an asset within the community?

The following sections look at the key stages in starting up a Friends Group from an initial plan of action through to setting it up and the on-going operation. The group's relationship with the PCC, its legal position and possible structure are also discussed.

### **The plan of action**

Ask yourself as a PCC what you want to achieve. You might already have done this with a parish plan or vision statement or are using your latest quinquennial inspection report as a basis for a programme of work. If so, how could a Friends Group help you with this? You need to be clear about how the group will fit in with the overall future vision of your church. You must be open and transparent about the plan with any prospective Friends Groups as it is important to establish a good working relationship from the start. It may therefore be a good idea to discuss the following before forming your Friends Group:

#### **a) Agree a programme of repairs for the church's fabric**

The chances are that your primary aim in forming a Friends Group is to help with the maintenance and repair of your building. If that's the case then think strategically! Get yourself a properly defined programme of repairs. You will not attract members if you cannot show why you need their help (eg. roof repairs so that the building can then be used for wider community use).

Consider a one, two or five year programme to get you started. Your quinquennial inspection report will serve as a good basis for this. A longer term plan (say ten or twenty years) may also be appropriate if you know that a lot of work needs doing to the building's fabric and it will need to be done in phases as the funds become available.

#### **b) Consider how a Friends Group fits in with the repair programme**

Perhaps you would like the Friends to help with the costs of the ongoing maintenance while the PCC concentrate on raising the big sums? Or maybe they could help with the major fund raising through organising events or assisting with grant applications? Make sure that you are clear about which areas of the programme that you want the Friends to help with and share this with them.

#### **c) The church's vision within the local and wider community**

It is often difficult to think about how the church can help its community when there are costly building repairs that need doing. However, engaging with the community and asking them what they want from their parish church, may well

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<sup>1</sup> The term "PCC" is used within this document to describe the local trustee body responsible for the management of the church and churchyard. These bodies may also be known as the Ministry Area Council, the Local Ministry Area Council, Rectorial Benefice Council, Mission Area Conference, or any other term designated by diocesan policies.

help shape your future plans. Community consultation shows that the church is interested in helping the non-worshipping community and is not an “exclusive club” but willing and keen to help. For example, maybe the community need an arts venue and the church is looking to re-order. A Friends Group may be able to help with the co-ordination of the two groups or raise funds for the project.

It could be that the church is already in a good state of repair but help is needed in promoting this beautiful building to a wider audience. A Friends Group could help by providing guides, organising educational visits or producing historical and architectural history booklets. All of these activities could help bring in extra money for (say) general on-going maintenance.

## **2. Setting up the Friends Group**

The following considerations should be applied by PCCs when thinking about establishing a Friends Group:

### **a) Is there an interest in forming a Friends Group?**

Firstly establish whether there is any interest in forming such a group from the PCC, congregation and the wider community. This can be done by spreading the word that this is being considered and by circulating leaflets in the local community describing the church and its needs. Community newsletters and local newspapers are another important link. Ask for people to come forward if they would like to get involved with running a group.

### **b) Call a meeting to discuss the idea**

It will be useful to have done some basic preparatory work over the potential aims and activities of the group for discussion (see earlier section – *the plan of action*). It is important that everybody is able to contribute their ideas in an open and honest way, and appreciating that this may invite some comments about how the Church is run – constructive criticism is no bad thing!

### **c) Formalise the process**

The PCC will need to make a formal resolution to set up a Friends Group. It should also establish clear aims for the group such as:

- To assist the PCC in restoring and maintaining the Church
- To organise appropriate activities to raise funds as required by the PCC for:
  - The restoration and maintenance of the Church
  - Maintaining and improving facilities for worship in the Church
  - Beautifying the Church
  - Any emergency work that may arise which cannot be provided for out of funds available to the PCC

It is useful however, to give the Friends some clear ‘stake’ in the building at the start. An example might be for the Friends to organise the arrangements for opening the church to visitors by drafting guidebooks, arranging welcomers, providing hospitality and running a gift/book shop.

### **3. The structure of the Friends Group**

You need to think about how the Friends Group will be organised and structured. The Church in Wales recommends that the group should be set up under the PCC's authority and be, in effect, a sub-committee of it. This is simple to establish and operate and ensures that the group acts with the full authority of the PCC. Financial and insurance arrangements can also be organised through the PCC. The Friends Group sub-committee would organise its own membership, events and activities, and report to the PCC on a regular basis. However, that does not mean that the Friends Group (as a sub-committee of the PCC) should not look and feel different from the PCC. It could have its own logo and website for example.

You should ensure the following when setting up the Friends Group:

- The Friends committee should elect a Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Secretary. It is important to have a mix of people from the worshipping/non worshipping communities so consider co-option.
- Agree the financial arrangements of the Friends. This would be through the PCC treasurer albeit with separate accounting of the income and expenditure of the Friends.
- Keep records of the accounts and publish these at least annually to the membership and the PCC.
- Agree how membership of the Friends will be organised (free of charge/annual membership fee; membership benefits – newsletters etc). Generally, an annual membership fee is usually charged of between £5 and £15 to cover costs of mailings, newsletters, magazines etc.
- Ensure close and regular liaison between the Friends Group members and the PCC/Congregation. Consider a simple reporting procedure to allow the Friends Group to feed back their activities to the PCC, perhaps in the form of minutes of their meetings. The Friends need to be encouraged and welcomed into the Church.

Use the above points to draw up a simple “terms of reference” document that outlines your procedures and practices for the Friends Group. See the *Resources* section at the end of this guide for further information.

Friends Groups set up as separate charitable trusts are not recommended by the Church in Wales, although under some circumstances this may be an option. This is both administratively more complex and can create difficulties in terms of the interaction between the charitable purposes of a separate trust and the PCC. Any Friends Group that is registered as a charity separate from the PCC, must have a mandate or resolution from the PCC clearly setting out the working relationship between the two.

#### **4. The legal position**

The PCC, under the Constitution, has the responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of the Church whilst it is in use. A Friends Group can have no legal interest in the building and all decisions relating to the building must be made by the PCC.

In setting up the group, it should be clearly stated that the Friends do not have any control over the building and its management. Clearly, the Friends will raise funds for the PCC, and the members will be interested to know how those funds are spent, but responsibility for organising work and spending the money will rest with the PCC. It is therefore important that the rules by which the Friends operate, and their relationship with the PCC, is clear from the start.

#### **5. Launching the Friends Group**

It is important that you advertise the presence of the newly formed Friends Group to attract as many members as possible. A good way to do this is to have a “launch” day. Maybe you already have a community event coming up (eg. flower show, concert, etc)? If so, launching the group at the same time would be a good idea as you already have a gathering of prospective members. Make sure that you have good quality posters and leaflets on hand to distribute, and people there to field questions about why you are forming the group, and what the advantages of becoming a member are.

A separate day devoted solely to the launch of the group can also be a good idea if you want to be able to reach people in a more targeted way. However, you need to make sure that the event will attract as many people as possible, so advertising it widely is of paramount importance. Distributing leaflets to households and putting up posters in the parish to advertise the event, needs to be done well in advance of the launch day. Advertising in free local papers or magazines is a good idea, as is contacting your local radio station or newspaper to see if they would like to cover the launch. Also contact the diocese as they can perhaps publicise the event in any newsletters or communications they send out.

If you are having a separate launch day make sure that you have a programme of activities planned - you want to entice people to join the Friends Group after all! Perhaps you could invite a local dignitary to open the event or have someone to talk about the history and significance of the church (eg. a local historian or architect) in an opening address? Have refreshments (and toilet facilities) available throughout the day and “helpers” to assist people with any queries they may have about joining the group.

Don't forget to follow up the launch event by contacting the people who signed up on the day to become members. Send them a welcome letter with information about the group's activities, how they can get involved in the future and any forthcoming events you have planned.

#### **6. Ongoing operation**

If you have worked hard to recruit members, make sure that you keep them! Don't go quiet after the launch. Communication is the key. Let people know what you are doing with their subscriptions or donations, how you are spending this money and what you have planned for the future. Consider setting up your own website or having a page on the parish one. Open a Facebook or Twitter account, send out

regular newsletters, magazines and annual reports/accounts. It is vital to keep in touch with members.

Plan regular events that members and non-members can attend. Use these to recruit new members and keep existing ones happy. Not all events need to be at the church so consider using other local venues (eg. village halls, pubs, etc). Some ideas for events could be concerts, plays, flower & vegetable festivals, craft/art fairs, BBQs, quiz nights, wine/ale tasting evenings and local history evenings. Local groups may be happy to work with the Friends Group to “co-host” events that would be mutually beneficial to both parties eg. scouts, guides, school, etc.

Hold regular meetings with members (which should also be open to the local community) to keep them up-to-date with the ongoing operation of the group and to help with future activities. Make sure that you always hold an annual general meeting (AGM) to ensure that members are fully apprised of how their money is being spent and what the group have planned for the future. You could schedule an AGM meeting before or after a planned event for example, when everyone will be in the same place.

Membership will naturally gradually decline if positive steps are not taken to recruit new members. Do not become complacent! Spread your net wider than the local community for members. Consider getting in touch with people who live away but still have links with the local church or community. Ask local residents if they would be willing to suggest people to contact. Look at parish and electoral rolls, marriage, baptism and death records for contact names. Invite them to become Friends, making sure that you explain the benefits and what you are aiming to achieve. It is especially important to keep “distant” members updated as to the groups’ activities as they probably won’t be able to come to many events.

## **7. Other arrangements**

Sometimes a congregation, through its PCC, may struggle to sustain a building and so a Friends Group (or other Community Group) might come forward with an idea to ‘take over’ the building.

As a charity, the Church in Wales has an obligation to achieve best value when it disposes of land (sale, lease or gift, etc). The Representative Body, as trustees, will consider each case on its own merits, looking at the financial value of the property and the value to the mission and ministry of the church from any proposal.

Clearly, if it is possible for a new group to take on responsibility for a building, perhaps for wider community purposes, whilst retaining some form of worship use, could be advantageous to all.

## RESOURCES

There are several organisations where further information on forming a Friends Group can be found. The main ones are listed below.

### **The Church of England Parish Resources Website**

The website has a page dedicated to Friend's Schemes which parishes may find useful. Please be aware that references to legislation only apply to CoE churches:

[www.parishresources.org.uk](http://www.parishresources.org.uk)

### **The Diocese of London (CofE)**

The Diocese of London has published their own toolkit for creating new Friends Groups, which can be found at:

[www.london.anglican.org](http://www.london.anglican.org)

### **National Churches Trust (NCT)**

The NCT have a section on their website dedicated to setting up a Friends Group where you can download a toolkit and model constitution to help you set up one. It should be noted that this advice is for setting up a Friends Group as a separate Charitable Trust from the PCC and is not the preferred option for Church in Wales' churches. However, this model may be an option in some circumstances. If you think this is the model you want to adopt, please make sure you seek advice from your Diocesan Office or speak to the Property Services department of the Representative Body *before* setting it up. There are also useful links to the Charity Commission and the HMRC from the NCT website.

[www.nationalchurchestrust.org](http://www.nationalchurchestrust.org)

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30<sup>th</sup> August 2019