

## Bishop of Portsmouth

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Bringing people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church

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### Letter to the Faithful of St Swithun Wells Parish

26<sup>th</sup> January 2026

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

After a sustained period of prayer, consultation, and careful consideration of all written and oral representations made during the consultation process, including hearing the views of the Parish Priests and Deacons, Council of Priests and the Diocesan Trustees (Diocesan Finance Council), I have taken the difficult decision to close St Swithun Wells Church, Fair Oak, for regular public worship.

I want to be clear from the outset about what this decision is, and what it is not.

This decision is not a judgement on the faith, generosity, or commitment of those who have worshipped in this church over many years. Nor is it driven by the physical condition of the building itself, which is not unsafe or neglected. Rather, it reflects the pastoral reality of the parish today and the need to plan responsibly for the future.

Over time, the regular worshipping community at St Swithun Wells Church has become very small. While the area in which the church is located is experiencing population growth, this has not translated into a growing or sustainable Catholic community worshipping at this church. Experience across the Diocese shows that population growth alone does not, of itself, create a viable parish community. At the same time, the wider parish of St Swithun Wells as a whole, is responsible for sustaining multiple churches. The combined cost of maintaining buildings, meeting statutory requirements, and planning for future repair liabilities as well as supporting plans for development of the mission of the parish, now exceeds what can reasonably be supported in the long term.

Importantly, the spiritual and pastoral needs of the faithful can be met fully at nearby neighbouring churches within the parish. These churches are able to offer regular celebration of the sacraments, pastoral care, and opportunities for community life, and they remain accessible to those who currently worship at St Swithun Wells Church.

**Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth**

Registered Charity No.

1199568 (England) | 457 (Jersey) | CH263 (Guernsey)

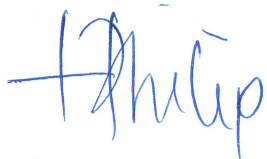
Our Diocesan Mission Plan, *You Will Be My Witnesses*, invites us to nurture Christ-centred, missionary communities that can flourish and endure over time. At times, this calls us, with care and humility, to reflect on how our people, clergy, and resources are best shared, so that the life of faith can be supported and strengthened, rather than stretched so thinly that communities find it difficult to grow and thrive in their mission.

I know that for many this church holds deep personal and spiritual significance. It has been the setting for baptisms, marriages, funerals, and countless moments of grace. Feelings of loss, sadness, or anger are entirely understandable, and I do not dismiss them.

Yet we are also reminded that the Church is not the building alone, but the living Body of Christ, gathered around the Eucharist and sent out on mission. *"You yourselves are God's building"* (1 Corinthians 3:9). That life will continue within the parish, and I am committed to ensuring that worship, pastoral care, and community life remain strong, welcoming, and accessible for all.

I ask you to pray for one another, for your parish, and for those entrusted with leadership at this time. Please be assured of my prayers for you.

In Corde Jesu

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Philip', with a stylized initial 'P'.

Bishop of Portsmouth