



**St Joseph's Catholic Church, Upminster**  
***Building Our Future - September 2025***

Dear friends,

I have been your parish priest for three years now, and I continue to be impressed by the welcoming, faithful community that has been formed here. I have always been mindful that, whilst the care of souls and the stewardship of parish resources is entrusted to me, it is not 'my' parish in a possessive sense. Yet I am also mindful of St Augustine's saying, 'with you I am a Christian, for you I am a priest' (he said 'bishop', which I am not!); thus I would rather refer to this as 'our' parish, mine and yours. I hope I will be here for a few more years!

Soon after I arrived, I was informed that 2023 was our parish's centenary year. My intention in marking that year was not merely to look back, but to look forward. What are we seeking to be? I would suggest the following phrase is a good summary: *a parish of missionary disciples, growing in faith, serving God and our local community*. Early on it became apparent that at some point we would need to address some issues relating to our parish buildings, as these play an important part in enabling us to fulfil the task given to us. Of course, the greatest task of any parish community is the worship of God, and we are blessed with a fine church building, well-maintained, that is set apart for this purpose. However the spaces that are available for other purposes, such as faith formation for all ages, and hosting events that build our community and serve our neighbour, are either insufficient, not fit for purpose, in the wrong location, or expensive to maintain.

The question of our parish buildings has been discussed in various forums, from the finance committee, to open parish meetings, as well as many informal conversations. Since last autumn more concrete plans have been put forward, and in this letter I want to set out the reasons behind some of the decisions that are now being carried through with oversight from the trustees of the diocese.

**St Peter's Cranham**

The building and land on Front Lane in Cranham known as St Peter's Catholic Centre were intended as a dual-purpose Mass centre and social hall serving that part of the parish. The regular celebration of Mass stopped a decade ago, as it had become unrealistic to cover it with a single priest in the parish. The location of the building, some distance from the main parish site, makes it less useful for parish events which often follow on from worship in church. It is used by a number of external groups and for one-off external events, but the only parish group to make regular use is the St Joseph 5<sup>th</sup> Upminster Guides. The nature of construction means that it will become more and more difficult and expensive to maintain, and at present income from lettings barely covers day-to-day running costs. The simple fact is that, apart from the Guides, we don't use it. It has been suggested we find more ways of using it, and invest in improvements, but the better option is to develop a new social centre as outlined below. I am working with our parish Guides to find a temporary alternative home, in the hope that they will ultimately benefit from our new building.

The trustees of the diocese have agreed to the sale of St Peter's, and a property consultant has been engaged to achieve the best possible value for the site. They have given us an idea of its value which for obvious commercial reasons must remain confidential. They have also given us detailed advice addressing some of the questions that have been raised by parishioners. They have been quite clear that obtaining planning permission in advance for a speculative scheme would *not* be the right approach, as it would incur significant risk, financial outlay and time delay. In their view we should encourage offers from the widest possible range of interested parties, with a preference for unconditional offers. The reality is that (most likely) whoever buys the site will be looking to make money out of it in some way, in return for their investment of capital, time and expertise and their acceptance of certain risks; that is the nature of the property business. Nevertheless, there are ways of making sure that we are not simply taken advantage of by someone looking to make a quick profit, such as profit sharing clauses in the sale contract.

Selling property is not something we do lightly, for we would be unlikely ever to get it back. But there is no point in our hanging on to an asset for the sake of it, if there is a clear benefit in selling something we are not

otherwise making use of. Given that it doesn't meet our present and future needs, and a sale could go a considerable way to creating something that does, I firmly believe this is the right step. On the other hand choosing to keep St Peter's and invest in it would make it nigh-on impossible to create new facilities which are needed at our central location.

The intention is that the site will be put on the market very soon, and to be on the safe side we are working on the assumption that we will no longer be able to use it after the new year. Our obligations under charity law mean this has to be done through an open process, though all things being equal I hope we would be able to show a preference for proposals which are conducive to the good of the community. If you know of anyone interested in acquiring the site, I will be able to direct them to the agents (contact details for interested parties will be published once the site goes on the market).

### **St Joseph's Social Centre**

Our Social Centre in St Mary's Lane is, on the other hand, well used by the parish. The Pre-School provides us with income and, though a private business, has good links with the parish and a long history. The Catholic Club has proved a great success on its volunteer-run model, contributing to the parish and community financially and providing a family-friendly place for parishioners to socialise. The social centre is also used by other parish groups – including the toddler group, prayer groups, CWL activities including the Wednesday Lunch, Children's liturgy, the knitting and craft group, along with formation and catechesis for various ages. Yet there is limited space, which doesn't meet the needs of all these groups. Some other activities involving larger groups have to take place in the church, which for various reasons is not ideal. Spaces that had previously been used by various groups, such as the convent, are no longer available. The schools in our parish have generously made space available for catechesis, but that cannot be guaranteed and is only available during certain hours. The building itself has well outlived its design-life, and, though currently in a better condition than St Peter's, would nevertheless likely succumb to similar issues in coming years; expensive repairs have already been required to keep the building open in recent years.

The time has come to create a new building to serve our parish into the future and enable this community to be everything it should be. It will not come cheaply, and we should be prepared to pay what is needed for a good quality building. A firm of architects recommended by the diocese following previous work (including at St Edward's in Romford) have begun work on designing a new building for us. The preliminary designs circulated earlier in the summer were simply a starting point (and didn't cost us anything). Exciting new designs have been produced taking into account the feedback received (an accessible toilet upstairs as well as downstairs, for instance) and we hope to have some artist's impressions to share soon. The overall scheme is for a two-storey building (the architects have advised a third storey is unlikely to be approved), incorporating a bar area and pre-school/meeting room on the ground floor, and a large hall, kitchen and meeting room on the first floor. We will of course make sure the building meets all relevant access, environmental and safety standards.

Our architects anticipate making a pre-application submission to Havering this autumn. After making any necessary adjustments to the design, a formal planning application will be submitted, and our hope is to have planning permission in the second half of 2026. A tender process will follow, and it is to be hoped that construction could start in the summer of 2027. By then, I hope we will be well on the way to our fundraising target. Exactly what this target will be can only be determined once we know how much is achieved by the sale of St Peter's, and once a full costing of the new building has been completed. Once we have more precise figures we will be in a position to apply for grants, as well as launch a parish fundraising campaign. But very roughly the total cost, which will need to be covered by the sale of St Peter's, grants and donations (and, if need be, a loan from the diocese), will be somewhere in the region of £2 million.

There are other hurdles to overcome. We need to make plans for keeping parish activities going whilst the construction is taking place. Ideas are already being explored. However I am confident that it will be worth the disruption and the cost, which I hope we will generously bear, as previous generations have done. This is an exciting opportunity for our parish – please pray, and don't hesitate to ask me about any aspect of it.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Fr Matthew', written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.