

St Agatha's Church Sparkbrook  
St Barnabas' Church Balsall Heath

PARISH PROFILE

May 2022



A BEACON FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY  
AND CATHOLIC FAITH  
IN SOUTH-CENTRAL BIRMINGHAM

## Vision for the future of Mission and Ministry

Because of the size and splendour of St Agatha's church and its situation on the arterial Stratford Road, and the location of St Barnabas' in the heart of the residential quarter, we are the main visible presence of the Church of Christ in this part of the City. We are determined to maintain our churches, not as museums but as a sign to all that the Faith is alive: but we need to grow and develop, and for that we need confident pastoral and sacramental leadership.

The parish wishes to do all it can to contribute to and build up a tolerant, diverse and multi-cultural community within which, despite many challenges, people of all faiths and cultures can flourish and live their lives in peace. The unique status of the Church of England and its presence in every local community creates both an obligation and an opportunity for us not only to bear witness to our baptismal faith, but to provide a social bridge between the people of the City as a whole and the Muslim community.

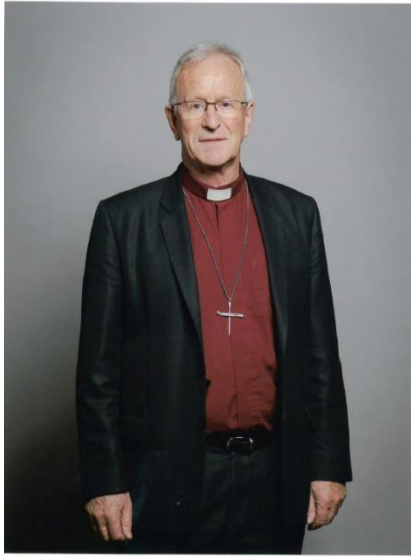
The Muslims and those of Other World Faiths mentioned in the census are in practice unlikely to seek the ministry of the Church, but that does not mean that we are not required to meet their needs in service and in advocacy for social justice, and to hold them up to God in prayer. These aspects of Catholic practice must be rediscovered and renewed if our parish is to serve the whole community.

We are Catholics in the Church of England when that Church is undergoing major changes. We are, after four years of growth and development during the ministry of an inspirational Priest-in-Charge, fully engaged in the life of the Birmingham Diocese, while remaining steadfast in our witness to the Catholic tradition.

Church of England Birmingham proposes that, once a new Priest-in-Charge has familiarised himself with the parish, there should be discussion of relations between our parish and others in the Deanery, and possibly a wider area, with possible scope for growth in the role of our Priest-in-Charge. These planned conversations are the rationale for the current suspension of the Presentation.

We recognise that the size of our congregation limits our scope for outreach, and we aspire at least to double it over the next two years. We hope to achieve this in part because of the high profile of St Agatha's church and in part because of our track record as an inclusive and welcoming community which attracts young families.

## A message from the Bishop of Birmingham



In Church of England Birmingham, we work and pray towards our vision of Transforming Church and growing more, and more confident Christians. In the midst of the major issues of our age – our threatened environment, the scourge of racism, the personal tragedy and economic crisis of the pandemic -followers of Jesus Christ continue to hold fast to their faith and share the hope of the Gospel with those around them.

The magnificent church of St Agatha's stands tall on the Stratford Road, in one of the most diverse parts of our vibrant city, whilst St Barnabas offers a more intimate place of prayer and worship. Their faithful congregations are looking forward to welcoming a new priest to lead and strengthen them as they live out the apostolic life of worship and witness. Relationships

between this parish and the deanery and diocese have deepened in recent years, and the particular Catholic tradition and rich heritage of this parish is valued for its present and future contribution to our life together.

I very much hope and pray that as you read this profile, you will hear God's call to continue and develop the mission and ministry of this parish. You will find a community full of potential for new partnerships, and wonderful companions on the shared journey of faith.

*+David Binningham*

## A message from the Bishop of Wakefield



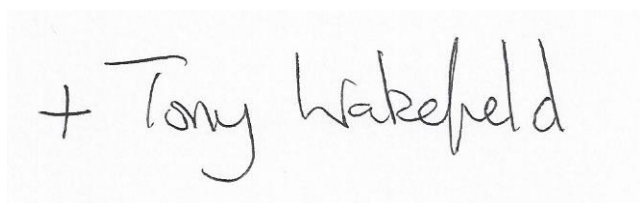
It's not every CofE parish profile that can say that their vicarage is close to an array of 'mouth-watering Balti-belt restaurants'! This profile builds up a strong sense of the identity of the worshipping congregations at St Agatha's and St Barnabas's, their commitment to the Gospel, to one another, and to the local populations – so changed from the days of their origins but which they continue to serve. It is so reminiscent of communities around the world I've seen where congregations of Christians with relatively few securities give a joyful witness and self-less

engagement in the midst of huge cultural complexity and religious diversity: prayerful, dedicated, flexible, resilient, hopeful, and honest about their needs and gifts.

The sheer size and prominence of St Agatha's as a church building is a constant reminder that this is a bold witness, and one that cannot be put down or set aside without a huge loss to the whole community and the Church of God.

If you are listening for God's call to you for a new and stimulating focus for your priestly ministry and are able to offer it on a house for duty basis, I am praying that you will be moved to explore this appointment further with us.

The priest that the parish and I are seeking to identify will be affiliated (or be willing to become affiliated) to The Society, someone ready to embrace the challenges of the local context and reach out well beyond it to make new Catholic Christians of all age groups in and for the Church of England. He will lead the parish in active participation in the Healthy Churches Initiative in the See of Ebbsfleet, and be able, with lay leaders, to nourish faith and prayer, to set a clear direction for the future, and to encourage others to help build it. In other words a genuine apostolic ministry. If you would like to discuss the profile, or reflect on a possible application, please feel free to contact me. May God bless your reading and thinking.



St Agatha, Sparkbrook  
St Barnabas, Balsall Heath

- a dedicated community in the Catholic tradition of the Church of England, with a diverse congregation
- a bustling, socially mixed parish, with a mainly Muslim population
- close to the social and cultural amenities of Central Birmingham
- the stunning Grade 1 Listed Church of St Agatha
- an excellent Hall and Parish Centre at St Barnabas
- a strong musical tradition

## OVERVIEW and BACKGROUND

### Where we are

Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath are adjacent, once prosperous, suburbs some two miles from the centre of Birmingham. Their fortunes changed with demographic shifts and altered use of buildings: the parish is now identified by the Church Urban Fund as one of the 30 most deprived in the country. Much of the housing is in late Victorian terraces, though there is some modern, largely social, housing. The 2011 Census recorded a population of 4,100, of whom 88% are of Asian (and predominantly Pakistani) origin. Most are second-, or increasingly third-generation British citizens. 70% described themselves as Muslim, 26% as Christian, having no religion or having no declared Faith, and the balance as having some other World Faith. There is severe social deprivation, though “balti belt” restaurants, and food and clothing retailers on the Stratford Road and Ladypool Road provide some employment.

The Census records that some 50% of the population is under the age of 20. A parish audit in 2001 drew attention to the lack of provision for youth, and prompted initiatives by our two churches:

- (a) St Agatha’s parish hall is leased to a charity which runs a Boxing Club; it is headed by Frank O’Sullivan, who was awarded the MBE for his services to amateur sport. We have a cordial relationship with the Club, which does invaluable work with local young men and women.
- (b) St Barnabas’ church hall accommodates a children’s nursery which provides affordable child-care and is another very valuable local resource.

Other than large retail outlets such as an Aldi store on the Stratford Road there are few public buildings or meeting-places in the parish.

There are other (mainly small) Christian communities in (and just beyond the border of) the parish: Christ Church, Sparkbrook (C of E); the Stratford Road Baptist Church; St John’s Sparhill (C of E); English Martyrs (RC); the Ladypool Congregational Church; Calvary Temple; Assemblies of the First Born; New Testament Church of God. There is an active Sparkbrook and Sparkhill Council of Churches. There is at present no Mosque in the parish, though there are plans to build a large one close to St Agatha’s.

### Who we are

A few of the congregation live in the parish, and others are retired and spend time in the working week at the two churches. Most of us live elsewhere, mainly in other Birmingham suburbs.



This Profile is written during the Covid 19 pandemic and as closure of churches is only beginning to be lifted, of course worship and other aspects of parish life have been much curtailed. Since this is, please God, a temporary state of affairs, the Profile describes what happens in normal times.

The two churches share a tradition of Anglo-Catholic churchmanship. Fr GD



Rosenthal, who was Vicar of St Agatha's from 1918 to 1938, was an acknowledged giant of the inter-war Anglo-Catholic movement. The tradition is proudly maintained today, as the church offers post-Conciliar (modern) Catholic worship, with the highest standards of dignity and reverence in the liturgy, and

excellent music, but an informal, accessible and welcoming approach by priests and people to all comers. At St Barnabas', worship is in the same tradition but on a smaller and more intimate scale. The parish was the first in the Diocese of Birmingham to pass a Resolution requesting Alternative Episcopal Oversight, which is provided by the Bishop of Ebbsfleet. It is affiliated to and has close links with Forward in Faith and is also affiliated to the Society under the Patronage of St Wilfrid and St Hilda.

In both churches, worship is centred upon the Mass, which is celebrated on Sundays at St Barnabas' at 9.00 am and at St Agatha's at 11.00 am. We are fortunate to have an excellent Director of Music. St Agatha's has a fine three-manual organ, a detailed description of which is in Appendix 3. During the Covid 19 church closure the transmission system of the organ was extensively modernised by Nicholsons. As part of the tradition of liturgical excellence we take full advantage of these assets, and a devoted team of cantors leads the congregation in worship. The musical resources at St Barnabas' are more limited, but include a two-manual Allen organ which was purchased second-hand in 2018, and the small church building lends itself to a more intimate, but still highly reverent, celebration of the Mass. Both churches make use of both the English Hymnal and Laudate. There is also a devoted following for weekday Low Masses and forms of worship according to the season, eg Stations of the Cross during Lent.

The congregation at St Agatha's fully reflects the rich ethnic and social diversity of the City. The congregation at St Barnabas' is smaller. The two churches have separate Electoral Rolls. In 2020 they stand at 50 for St Agatha's and 4 for St Barnabas'. The corresponding figures in 2015 were 52 and 5. In 2020 before closure the usual Sunday attendance was 35 at St Agatha's and 5 at St Barnabas'.

Since Easter 2020, when our Priest-in-Charge retired, the parish has been in an interregnum. There are now no clergy formally attached to the Parish, though a retired priest and his wife are members of the congregation. There are no Lay Readers and, with the exception of the (self-employed) Director of Music, no paid church workers.

During the current interregnum, as in the previous one, the parish is being run by a management committee appointed by the PCC. A number of laypeople are licensed as Eucharistic Ministers and regularly administer the Chalice at Mass. Two of them also take the Sacrament to the homes of house-bound former members of the congregation. Members of the congregation are active in all non-Sacramental aspects of the life of the Parish, including running the Junior Church, editing and producing the weekly news-sheet, maintaining the website, and hosting visits to St Agatha's by parties from local schools.

Despite the geographic distribution of our congregation, we are an exceptionally friendly parish family, and have an active and enjoyable programme of social events. Recent highlights have included a coach trip to Gloucester Docks.

St Agatha's has attracted families with young children. There is a thriving Junior Church, with classes every Sunday, integrated into the celebration of the Mass. The average pre-closure attendance was 6. There is a happy tradition of Junior Church, helpers and friends going to the pantomime at Christmas.



The clergy are supported by a dedicated and inclusive team of servers with strong leadership. Members of Junior Church also assist the adult servers.

There is an annual Parish Pilgrimage to Walsingham, which in 2019 was attended by 15 people and led by the then Priest-in-Charge. There are also periodic Pilgrimages to Glastonbury. That in 2018 was attended by 16 people.

At St Agatha's members of the congregation had a programme of serving to homeless and other needy people in the locality hot meals, provided by the Hyatt Hotel. Unfortunately that had to be discontinued because of food hygiene regulations: the church does not have a kitchen or other dedicated catering facilities. Part of its current fund-raising effort is directed to converting one of its two entrance porches into space for a disabled-access WC and a kitchenette.

St Barnabas' supports a local charity which operates food banks.

There are few cultural or educational facilities in the parish, and we are actively seeking funding to create, in partnership with the City Museum and Art Gallery in part of the nave of St Agatha's church, a display of images of the history of the neighbourhood as a resource for the local schools and community.



We have just received from the Henry Smith Charity a grant of £3,500.00 to enable us to assist those living in the Parish who are in need.

We support both the Boxing Club at St Agatha's and the nursery at St Barnabas'.

We support the Sparkbrook and Sparkhill Council of Churches. For example, members of the congregation take part in the Council's Good Friday Walk of Witness.

The Parish is active in the life of the Diocese of Birmingham generally.

### **WHAT WE SEEK in our PARISH PRIEST**

In a challenging context the Parish community has been a faithful one, and we wish to build on that. We are looking for a Priest who ...

- is (or is willing to become) affiliated to the Society under the Patronage of St Wilfrid and St Hilda
- will lead, encourage and deepen our sacramental and prayer life
- will embrace the challenges of our churches' culturally non-Christian local context and reach out well beyond it to make new catholic Christians for the Church of England
- will lead the Parish in active participation in the Healthy Churches Initiative of the Diocese of Ebbsfleet
- will work closely with the PCC and other lay leaders to set a clear direction for the future, and encourage others to help build it
- will be visible and active on the streets of the parish, engaging with all parts of the population and using a range of social communication techniques
- will lead us in our ministry, with the support of the Henry Smith Charity, to those in the parish who face social and economic disadvantage such as those on low incomes, with disabilities or health issues, or facing social isolation
- will provide joyful initiatives for new discipleship and learning programmes
- will secure our future as a parish within the catholic movement and the Diocese of Birmingham, and
- will ensure all age and ability groups are encouraged to discover ways of contributing to our mission and to strengthen their faith

### Church buildings and facilities

#### St Agatha's Church

The church is a magnificent Grade 1 Listed building, on the Historic England list of 200 Major Parish Churches and a member of the Major Churches Network, which was established under the guidance of the Church Buildings Commission. It was described by John Betjeman as "the finest parish church in Birmingham". A detailed description of it is in Appendix 3.

### 3.2 St Barnabas' Church

Before the present church there was on its site a corrugated iron Mission Hall. The church was built in 1904 and was severely damaged by fire in 1970. It was rebuilt<sup>1</sup> using only part of the original structure. The resulting church is small but highly attractive. It was badly damaged again in a tornado of 2005, but has been restored. The Lady Chapel has a stained glass window depicting John the Baptist by the noted manufacturers Hardman of Birmingham<sup>2</sup>. The church retains a missionary feeling, and the acoustic is excellent. It is eminently suitable for its small but devoted congregation. It is adjacent to the Clergy House, and clergy living there have used the church as a chapel for private prayer.

The two church buildings are complementary, and we exploit this, for example, by alternating use of them during Holy Week.

#### St Agatha's Church Hall

The hall is behind the church and within its boundary wall. Since about 2001 the Hall has been occupied by the Boxing Club (see above), and from 2016 this has been under the terms of a Lease. The Club pays rent and the operating expenses of the Hall, and is responsible for repairs and maintenance. Although as a result the parish no longer has the use of the Hall as a resource, it has been relieved of the cost of its upkeep, and the rent provides a valuable source of income.



#### St Barnabas' Church Hall

The Hall adjoins the church and is a pleasant, light and modern building with good facilities. It is used by the parish for meetings and social gatherings, and is a very valuable resource. It also provides a home for the Nursery (see above). There is a Licence Agreement with the Nursery management company for 20 years from April 2019.

#### The Clergy House

The clergy house adjoins St Barnabas' church and hall, and was added to the site in 1994. It is a modern, very secure and economical house, and received an architectural award. It too is a resource for the parish as a whole.

#### Administration and finance

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<sup>1</sup> The work was completed in 1972

<sup>2</sup> John Hardman Trading Company Limited, founded 1838 and closed 2008

The former separate parishes of St Agatha's and St Barnabas' had long enjoyed a friendly relationship, and it was natural that when the benefice of St Barnabas' became vacant the two benefices should<sup>3</sup> be united, and that later<sup>4</sup> the former parishes should become a United Parish, retaining the two parish churches. There is a single PCC, but each of the two churches has Churchwardens (currently two from St Agatha's and one from St Barnabas), has a separate treasurer and accounts and makes separate Common Fund contributions. The PCC delegates day-to-day running of most aspects of parish business to a management committee made up of the three Churchwardens, the two Treasurers and the PCC Secretary, who is also its lay vice-chairman.

Members of the congregations are encouraged to make their regular donations to the churches by standing order and as Gift Aid, and a Gift Aid secretary is responsible for recovering the tax on the donations.

There is an active fund-raising committee which seeks donations from the congregation and other local sources and makes application for grants. In 2018 it secured a sum of £10,000.00 to enable the electrical wiring at St Agatha's to be renewed.

The Accounts for 2019 for St Agatha's and St Barnabas' respectively are Appendices 1 and 2 to this Profile.

### Opportunities and expectations

Adjoining St Agatha's is Ladypool Junior School. Most of the pupils are Muslim. During his ministry our former Priest-in-Charge has forged a good relationship with the Head and staff at the school. He has also, with lay assistance, hosted parties of children from other, predominantly Muslim, local schools, and explained to them the religious significance of key parts of the building and its furniture. There is clearly scope to build upon those contacts.

Both churches have in the past accommodated Christians of other traditions; most recently St Agatha's was made available to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church for worship during Holy Week and Easter 2017. We are open to sharing our churches in this way in future with Christians of other denominations or with a religious community attracted by the opportunity for inter-faith work.

There are no hospitals or residential care homes in the parish. Former members of the congregation are in care homes or are housebound at home, elsewhere in the City, and they receive regular pastoral visits.

## **6     Key events and activities in the recent past**

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<sup>3</sup> In March 1983

<sup>4</sup> On 1 November 1990

Fr John Herve TD was Vicar of St Agatha's from 1990 until June 2014. There was an interregnum until March 2016, when Fr John Luff, who had had a ministry in Guernsey until his retirement there, took up a House-for-Duty post as Priest-in-Charge. He retired from that post at Easter 2020. There is now again an interregnum.

Because of its Anglo-Catholic tradition, the parish has sometimes in the past seemed at best semi-detached from the Diocese of Birmingham, but in the past four years that has changed, and it is now thoroughly engaged with the Diocese and Deanery.

During the Covid 19 closure of all churches, and restrictions on travel and social contact, we have had to find new ways to worship and remain in fellowship while unable to meet or to receive the Sacrament at Mass. Members of the congregation who are well versed in social media have provided links to Zoom worship and preaching and have created a lively and well-supported parish What's App group.

The members of the PCC continue to be actively engaged in the governance of the parish as we have arranged to conduct "virtual" meetings of the PCC until circumstances permit ordinary meetings to be resumed.

Vision for the future of Mission and Ministry - see page 2 above

Appendix 1 St Agatha's accounts 2019



APM2020-Treasurer-  
St\_Agatha.pdf

Appendix 2 St Barnabas accounts 2019



St B accounts  
1999.xls

Appendix 3 Detailed description of St Agatha's church

The Church was built from 1899 – 1901 in what was then the affluent outer suburb of Sparkbrook, and dedicated to St Agatha.<sup>5</sup> The building was funded by the sale of Christ Church New Street, in the City Centre, which was demolished to make way for a development of shops and offices (itself then demolished in 1970 to make way for Victoria Square). St Agatha's has the foundation stone, marble font on a Doric column (1865) and single bell from Christ Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Virgin and martyr, d (according to tradition) 251 AD in Catania, Sicily

The competition for the design of the Church was won by William H Bidlake (1861 – 1938)<sup>6</sup> and St Agatha's is recognised as being his masterpiece: it was described by John Betjeman as "the finest parish church in Birmingham". The respected local builder was John Bowen (1844-1926).

The Church is in late Gothic revival style, but with the simplicity and sympathetic use of materials of the Arts and Crafts movement. Red and blue brick with stone dressings were used for the exterior, and unusually long and narrow yellow-grey Staffordshire buff bricks for the interior. Hollington stone was used for the arches and mouldings and Bath stone for the dressings.

A notable feature is the tower, which is 36.6 meters (120 feet) high: the height was increased from that originally planned as additional funds became available. The tower dominates the surrounding landscape. It houses the bell from Christ Church and the clock which strikes that bell.

Over the entrance door is a relief tympana depicting the patron, St Agatha, being comforted in prison by St Peter, and (on the right) with her persecutor, the Roman Governor Quintilianus.

The exterior of the Church is now obscured by unlovely modern buildings, but the interior is striking for its lightness, height and abundant space. The lightness is enhanced by the wooden tunnel-vault roof. The East end of the chancel was badly damaged, and the East window destroyed, by a German bomb in 1940. The restored work can be seen in the slightly yellower brick on the East wall. The nave roof was destroyed in 1959 in a fire (thought to have been started by a disaffected chorister), but was re-built to the original design: the work was completed in 1961. Of the internal furnishings, only the octagonal wooden pulpit with a stone base is by Bidlake. The stained glass East window (1961) is by LC Evetts.

The fine three-manual pipe organ is an eclectic instrument containing pipework by a number of master organ builders. Most of the chorus work is by "Father" Henry Willis, comes from the old organ at Oundle school and dates from the 1890s. The brilliant Swell reeds are by T. C. Lewis and date from the 1920s or '30s. The pedal ophicleide is by a local organ builder T. Sheffield of Olton, Solihull using pipework from the original Willis bombe. The instrument in its present form dates from the 1960s. The skill of the voicers and builders at Nicholsons of Worcester who assembled the instrument, and the warm, resonant acoustic of the church have combined to produce an instrument of rare quality. During the Covid 19 church closure the original direct electric transmission was updated to solid state Nicholsons. A few minor tonal alterations were also made.

In 2001 the Church celebrated the centenary of its consecration with a Mass celebrated by Archbishop David Hope of York. From 2002 to 2005 major restoration work was carried out, which included the strengthening of the tower. The restored Church was officially reopened

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<sup>6</sup> He inaugurated the teaching of architecture at the Birmingham School of Art in 1892, and was Head of the School of Architecture from 1919 to 1922. He entertained his students by drawing the volutes of an Ionic column simultaneously with both hands. His other Midlands churches include St Patrick Earlswood (Warwickshire), Bishop Latimer Winson Green, St Andrew Handsworth, and Sparkhill URC church. He also designed houses which Muthesius in *Das englische Haus* (1904) compared favourably to those of Lutyens. In 1924 he married an actress over 20 years his junior, and retired to Sussex.

in January 2005 by HRH Prince Edward and the Countess of Wessex. In July that year a tornado struck parts of South Birmingham. The Church suffered some damage, but it is likely that but for the restoration work the tower would have been lost. The excellent Victorian Board School (now Ladypool Primary School) which adjoins St Agatha's (by Martin and Chamberlain, 1885) was extensively damaged by the tornado, and lost its tower.