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May 21st, 2015. Feast of the Lord's Ascension

Dear Friends,

As you know, our Community has enjoyed the hospitality of St Bartholomew's Church for a little under 30 years. Last May the Priest in Charge of the Anglican community, Fr Graeme Fancourt, asked to meet with the Council members of the Greek Orthodox Community. He explained to us that St Bartholomew's was in an extremely precarious financial position (necessary repairs to the roof alone would be in the region of £350,000) and the small Sunday congregation was simply unable to raise the sums required to maintain the church. Fr Graeme had been asked by his bishop to look into ways of continuing to maintain St Bartholomew's as a place of Christian worship, and had further been told that if he and his Parish Council were unable to come up with any positive solutions St Bartholomew's would have to close.

After much thought and discussion the Parish Council of St Bartholomew's suggested a way forward: the main (nave) area of the church could be used as a performance area for local Christian arts groups, who would pay to hire the venue and also generate income through their performances. St Bartholomew's could remain a place of Anglican worship if the local congregation used the chancel area as their worship space for at least occasional services. Unfortunately this is the area that we currently occupy, and Fr Graeme was therefore reluctantly having to notify us that we could no longer use St Bartholomew's for our services. He was most concerned to help us find a suitable place to relocate, and offered us several suggestions (though of course the final responsibility for finding somewhere would rest with us).

Since this meeting the Parish Council and Trustees of St Elias have worked hard to find a place to which we could move. Various churches have been considered and several have proved to be unsuitable for one reason or another. But finally it has seemed possible to come to an agreement with the Church of St Mark, Tilehurst, and negotiations are underway.

There is some urgency about this - we were originally given 9 months' notice (to the end of March, 2015) but when we pointed out the difficulty that that would cause for our celebration of Easter, St Bartholomew's kindly reconsidered and allowed us to stay longer, initially to the end of April, and latterly to the end of July. But last week Fr Graeme informed me that although our equipment could stay until July 30th sadly we would be unable to use the church for worship during July. We have stayed longer than was envisaged, and it has proved necessary for the financial health of St Bartholomew's to accept bookings from interested

groups which will directly impact the possibility of Sunday worship in July for everyone.

There are several points which it would be good to bear in mind. First, we should be grateful for the hospitality which St Bartholomew's has extended to us for so many years. Many Orthodox parishes in this country do not have the facilities which we have enjoyed. They have to bring in and take away all their icons, holy vessels, etc. every time that a Liturgy is served. We have been blessed to have a permanent fixture for many years, but we can neither expect nor demand that in our new home we have exactly the same arrangements. It may be necessary for parishioners to volunteer storage space of their own for some of the church material, but I am sure that there will be people among us who are happy to share in this.

Secondly we should recognise how helpful St Bartholomew's have been towards us in giving us long notice of their intentions, in extending the time limit of our stay with them and in trying to help us find a new place by making positive suggestions, and offering what help they could. In this they have gone far beyond the duties of a landlord, and shown themselves as genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of us, their fellow Christians. We have been allowed to stay within their shelter until they, too, are unable to use the church for services.

Thirdly we recognise that unfortunately the fact that we have been unable to establish ourselves in a new venue yet means that we will be moving just before the Parish feast, which may mean that celebrations will be a little lower key than they have been in the past, as we find our feet in a new place and with a new landlord. But I am sure that we will all feel grateful that we will be able to continue to worship according to the Greek Orthodox tradition, and within the town with which we are familiar.

In March, following his visit to St Elias for the service of the Akathistos Hymn, His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios wrote to me to ask me, as one of your priests, to be actively involved in the meetings and negotiations for the new venue. Unfortunately this message took a little time to reach the community, and so I have not been able to attend all the meetings. But I remain ready to help, and confident that with God's help and by your prayers this new step forward for our Community will be a blessed one. If anyone wants to discuss this matter further with me they can contact me via the email or phone number on this letter.

I wish you all the blessings of our Lord,

Fr Ian