

Supplementary Statement regarding St Oswald's Church, Broken Head

Friday 19 November 2021

The commemoration of the service and sacrifice of Arthur Goard, Frederick Flick and Frank Kimpton in WW1 are sacred to the Byron Bay community as well as to the wider nation of Australia. The Memorial in St Oswald's Church at Broken Head to Arthur Goard, together with the Altar and Lectern also in memory of him, and the Font in memory of Frederick Flick, have stood for many years as a tribute to their sacrifice and have been lovingly cared for by the Parish of Byron.

However, we would like to correct the story, promulgated by various media outlets and the RSL, that the land belonged to a local family and was donated to the Diocese in memory of the soldiers. St Oswald's stands on land that was purchased by the Diocese at a public auction of Crown Land back in 1922. The original Title Deed dated 1922 in the name of the Corporate Trustees of the Diocese of Grafton, reflects this.

Sadly, in recent decades support for St Oswald's has dwindled to the extent that only three Broken Head residents were attending on a regular Sunday. Despite the memorials in the church, no Anzac Day or Remembrance Day services have been held there for many years, with local people preferring to attend these commemorations in other locations.

In September 2020 the Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Grafton, composed of over 100 representatives from parishes and other ministries across the North Coast, agreed to the closure and sale of St Oswald's.

Since the decision to close the church was made, local parish clergy and lay ministers have taken great care to minister pastorally to those remaining Anglicans who until recently were regular attenders at St Oswald's. The closing service, held in June 2021, was an opportunity to grieve together and to share memories.

Services are now held at each of the five other churches in the parish, including the nearby St Paul's Church at Byron Bay.

The Diocese is conscious that while there are memorials to these WW1 Soldiers in the church, St Oswald's itself is not a War Memorial Church. Yet both the Diocese and the Parish are genuinely committed to creating an appropriate lasting memorial and will liaise with the families concerned, the RSL and other parties to facilitate this.

The Memorial plaque will be removed from the church and relocated to an appropriate place where it can continue to be a focus of community remembrance into the future.

Every church contains memorial plaques, furniture and other items that have been donated in memory of departed loved ones and so the diocese has an established process of returning these items to donor families should they desire them. In relation to St Oswald's, the Altar, Lectern, Font and any other memorial furniture and items do not form part of the sale and the Parish of Byron has already liaised with donor families about their wishes of return.

Like any church organisation, almost all of the assets of the Diocese originated as donations of money, land or buildings. Therefore, it is not possible for the Diocese of Grafton to honour its financial commitments to meet claims of historic sexual abuse without disposing of assets that originated as donated funds, land or buildings. Survivors of abuse deserve redress for the abuse they suffered and the church has a moral and legal obligation to pay them.

The decision to close and sell St Oswald's is one that has been difficult to accept. Sadly, some media reports have contained many inaccuracies and have helped to fuel misunderstanding and anger. Yet nothing justifies the verbal abuse, obscene language and personal threats that have been directed at the Real Estate Agency and at Diocesan staff. The memory of the three Soldiers is best served by everyone respecting one another and working together for a solution in a difficult situation.

Ends

St Oswald's Church Broken Head Parish of Byron

Media Release by the Anglican Diocese of Grafton from 12 November

The Anglican Diocese of Grafton has confirmed its church of St Oswald's Broken Head has been placed in the hands of Ray White Byron Bay to be sold through an expressions of interest process.

St Oswald's Church was closed in June as part of a major restructuring program in the Diocese, which covers an area extending from the Queensland Border south to Wauchope.

The program involves the proposed closure and sale of a number of small churches and the amalgamation of the remaining churches into parishes or ministry areas based on a larger more viable districts.

The first step in the restructuring program occurred last year with the amalgamation of three parishes to form the Parish of Byron and subsequently the Parish of Nambucca Valley has been formed by amalgamating two local parishes.

In the Northern Rivers area this has seen the closure and sale of a small church at Eureka and a church at Nimbin.

"The sale of the former St Oswald's at Broken Head has followed a long period of very low attendance and has been generally accepted by local people," a diocesan spokesperson said today.

"The final service held in June recognised the history of ministry at the church."

"Decisions to close churches are never taken lightly.

"Individual situations are studied carefully and there was extensive consultation within the Diocese at all levels before the final plan was presented. The overall restructuring plan was endorsed by the Diocese's annual Synod held in September 2020.

"The model of restructuring our Diocese (and the need to close some churches) is about reshaping the church to better carry out its ministries.

“Where a local ministry has many small churches that are used only occasionally by small congregations, there is a lot of effort and limited resources used to maintain the status quo.

“This means there is little left for active mission and new initiatives: outreach, promoting increase in attendance and greater involvement in the community.

“Any funds released as part of the restructuring plan will be deployed to assist with the continuation of Church’s ministry in the area, funding new initiatives relevant to a changing community, and to allow the Church to meet the costs arising from historical claims of abuse.

“We do recognise for some people, whose families have been faithful supporters and worshippers at these small country churches over many decades, this is a painful time.

“The decision to close each church is not an easy one. We recognise that a church is not only a special place of worship but also a place of many memories that connect with family and community.

“When closing a church there is care to celebrate the past and to consider how each memorial and dedicated item will be honoured and used in the future.”

The restructuring program is expected to take at least two years.

“Some have suggested that St Oswald’s should be used to accommodate the homeless or those on low incomes. However, we do not think that the building is suitable for this purpose. It would not meet any of the government guidelines. The Anglican Church, through its agency, Anglicare North Coast, is already a significant provider of community housing across the North Coast. It is currently working on plans to expand its provision of supported accommodation in the Byron region.”

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