

**FAO: St Peter's Parkstone
re: Open Response to Letter of Termination, 16th August 2023**

Dear St Peter's Choir, Congregation & Community,

As many of you know (or maybe some of you don't!), I've been a member of St Peter's Parkstone community for 32 years.

For the last 14 I've been your Director Of Music.

Over that time I've had the privilege of working with so many talented and committed people.

Last week I went to see the fireworks on Poole Quay. My daughter Elowyn wanted to go on the teacup ride that was there. When I asked the guy running the ride how much I owed him, he said - "Don't worry about it, I sang in your choir as a boy".

That was Jordan who before covid would sing sometimes with us. He wasn't often at choir, mainly because of situations outside of his control. But I was amazed that he remembered me and his experience that he had.

Many others have followed.

Elliott who sang as a treble for the first few years I ran the choir has just bought his first house. Ethan is spending the summer in Canada having just done his GCSEs. Leah has quite a prestigious job in London. I know because I've provided references for all of them along the way as a result of fulfilling my role as choirmaster.

And fittingly Zach, whose first day at choir was also my first day as Director Music and who sang as Head Chorister for many years came into St Peter's to film the piece that will accompany this letter for what I assume will be the last time I play in the church.

We've done some great projects over the years.

Do you remember the giant Stained Glass Windows built together with curate Jenny? Or the giant illuminated Star sculpture that I built with the help of our then youth group?

We also put together a giant Advent Wreath that was featured live on South Today. When I phoned up Rector Michael Camp to say that they wanted to do the piece live, I vividly remember him saying '*Oh shit...*'.

More importantly though, I remember Curate Jonny saying to me that the reason he had picked St Peter's as the church to do his curacy was because it looked like that there were cool things going on that he could get involved in.

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Bishop Nicholas+ (former Bishop of Salisbury) told me that church choirs are not just part of our heritage, although that is an important part, but that they are a method of outreach.

For me, an important reason is because music has the ability to enhance the literary arts of which church is often based around. We hear poetry, readings, sermons, words so often. But music has the ability to create additional shapes, colours in addition that can engage people in different spaces.

And that is just for the people who listen.

For those performing, the act of making music can be both a form of worship, learning, listening and engaging in the setting that we are in.

Singing in a choir is a special team experience, one that at St Peter's is shared uniquely across generations & people from a variety of backgrounds.

There are also unique challenges that society currently poses. Live music performance opportunities have become more limited. For people on lower incomes, access to a space to learn & perform is increasingly difficult.

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Isn't it brilliant then that St Peter's has a beautiful space with professional music facilities?

You have a beautiful grand piano and an organ that rivals any church in the south of England. It's the perfect place to learn to sing given the acoustics as well.

I remember Eliana's first choir practice - although confident, she was horribly off-key! But a few years later she had achieved a choral scholarship to Canford and recently got distinction in her ARSM Performance Diploma for singing.

Everybody must start somewhere, and for so many that starting place has been St Peter's.

That is the role that I have tried to provide over the years. The role of facilitator and educator.

My challenge to you all is to keep that space as a safe place for anybody, of any ability to learn and develop.

That is the unique service St Peter's can provide it's community. It's one that over the years i have (often behind closed doors) fought extremely hard to protect.

You as a choir, congregation and community must now continue to do the same otherwise that opportunity will be lost forever.

The reason I say it is a challenge is because not everybody understands this.

The reason that I'm writing this to you is because two weeks ago, Reverend Mike Trotman phoned me up at 9.30am, Monday 7th August 2023.

He told me that St Peter's would cut my pay by over 50% and that any contract going forwards would be a zero hours contract. This meant that my pay for running both a choir practice on Friday and the Sunday Service would be £55 for both, with no additional pay for any preparation, pastoral or outreach.

When I wrote back to say I was upset that the role was valued at so little and that we should discuss this further, rather than a further conversation Mike simply sent me a letter of termination.

In that letter Mike said that it had not proved possible to negotiate a lower fee.

I'm challenging you directly now Mike, - there was no negotiation or any discussion. This was all one way.

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I am acutely aware of church finances. I have sat on St Peter's PCC before for many years and remember how difficult decisions always needed to be made.

However, if Mike had simply come to me, over a beer and said I have no money, can we talk about how we can work together then I would not be writing this now.

The letter of termination also stipulates that in my agreement with St Peter's, there is a notice period of 12 weeks, and that I am expected to fulfil those.

However, I am really angry and upset that after all I have worked hard to achieve, Mike simply wouldn't talk to me and discuss anything.

As a result, with regards to my own mental health and that of my family, I will not be fulfilling those 12 weeks for St Peter's. I simply don't want to work in an environment that I am not valued or wanted. **As such I won't be leading choir or directing the music in September or any time going forwards.**

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I hope that I will be able to say a formal farewell to both you as a choir and the congregation, but that will be down to Mike and the church wardens.

If in the future, the opportunity arises to be involved at St Peter's again, my door will always remain open. I will always keep an open mind.

However if this is the way that people are to be treated, then I will need more than a little persuasion to be involved with anything associated with Mike and his vision for the future of St Peter's.

I am walking away from all of this in the knowledge that there are still exciting opportunities to be developed at St Peter's. To demonstrate what I mean, you can watch a short piece on piano and organ that I have filmed that will be available on my YouTube channel.

I hope you find this piece to be an advert for St Peter's going forwards, and a reference for anybody looking to explore features of the facilities you have that otherwise I believe would have been lost with my departure.

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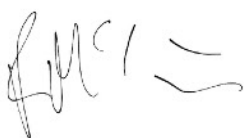
I want to thank everyone for their efforts and commitments that you have all put in. Singing week in, week out is a serious commitment that I have always been extremely grateful to be part of.

Thank you especially to organist Bev who has been an inspiration to me. That thank you extends to people beyond just those who have turned up to services in the last year. I know some of you haven't been able to make it for a variety of reasons.

You all know who you are and what you have put in. **THANK YOU.**

But please do not let those efforts go to waste.

Keep live singing & music opportunities going in Parkstone and make the best use of the space before it is taken away for good.



Richard McLester