

A Message from the Rector on Behalf of the Vestry about the Future of Saint Thomas Choir School

November 8, 2024

Dear Friends,

It is with great excitement that I share a momentous step forward for the Saint Thomas community. **Today, the Vestry announces the successful preservation of the Choir School through an academic collaboration with the Professional Children's School in New York.** This partnership secures a sustainable future for the Choir School and Choir of Men & Boys while preserving the values, mission, and unique choral heritage we cherish. This decision comes after 18 months of prayerful work to develop a plan to address the budget deficit while protecting the spiritual and financial well being of the institution as a whole.

In May 2023, the Vestry, clergy, and senior lay staff gathered for a three-day retreat to review the 2019 Strategic Plan and envision the post-pandemic future of Saint Thomas Church, focusing on finally addressing the long-standing financial deficit in the operating budget and unsustainable funding model for the Choir School, which has strained the unrestricted General Fund for decades. In December 2023, the Vestry responded to concerns about the General Fund's erosion by cutting nearly \$1 million from the church's operating budget and postponing capital projects. Music expenses remain a significant cost, comprising almost half of the church's \$14 million budget, and more than 50% when adding other administrative costs. To ensure fiscal sustainability, the Vestry considered closing the Choir School but instead entered a period of discernment to explore alternative financial models. Since March, this process has included broad community engagement and consultation with Carney Sandoe & Associates. The church has appreciated the commitment shown by community members and budget-holders throughout this process.

The time has come for change, in order for us to be fiscally responsible in the medium-term so that we can grow our invested funds, build on them, and live towards a more sustainable future long-term.

The Vestry has now had time to reflect on the various models put forward by the Sustainability Task Force and we have come to a decision. **We believe that the Collaboration Model with Professional Children's School (PCS) offers the best way forward to preserve our unique choral heritage in a modern world while putting the church on a path to financial sustainability.**

We are not calling this the 'partnership model' anymore because our two schools will not be merging; rather, PCS will provide the core academic instruction to our students, while we retain a residential Choir School built on religious principles, centered on the liturgical life of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue.

Any change is hard – we recognize that – but we also believe that these careful plans are the beginning of something fresh and new, yet retaining all that we hold dear, including a Choir School that is a home-away-from-home for those who live, learn, and sing there. Many alumni have told me about the transformative experience they had at Saint Thomas Choir School. By retaining the boarding program, the rigorous musical and liturgical training, and the nurturing atmosphere of our small community, the collaboration with PCS will make those transformative experiences available to new generations of choristers.

Let there be no doubt: **the Christian character of our school will remain as vibrant and central as ever.** Our boys will continue to be nurtured in an environment that includes liturgy, prayer and spirituality, an exploration of Christian ethics and morals, and all rooted in the study of the Bible, and lived out in the Anglican tradition. In addition to our boarding staff, we will continue to employ a School Chaplain who will not only have a pastoral role but will continue to be responsible for ensuring the teaching of Theology and preparing children for Baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation. We will continue to offer classical lessons such as Latin. The clergy team will continue to support the House Parents and School Chaplain in all aspects of our school's life.

Music, of course, will continue to be at the heart of the academic life of our school, and this will mainly be taught in the Choir School, as well as at PCS. Instrumental lessons and vocal lessons will continue to have their important place alongside choir practice.

The Professional Children's School is renowned for nurturing talented young artists and has a long history of successful partnerships with organizations such as the *School of American Ballet* (SAB). We are confident that our boys will receive exceptional support from a school that understands the unique and demanding needs of artistic and dedicated students.

Next steps:

Looking forward, we are thrilled to work closely with parents, staff, and PCS to bring this vision to life. Together, we will fine-tune the day-to-day schedule for our choristers, enhancing both their academic and musical experiences while maintaining the structure that has served our school so well. Mother Alison Turner, our Choir School Chaplain and a life-long educator, has been appointed **Interim Director of Transition**, formally commencing in January 2025, and will be dedicated to supporting our community at every step, ensuring this process is as seamless and enriching as possible.

- We will continue to consult with the parents of our choristers to ensure that they fully understand what will change, and what will *not* change in the day-to-day life of a chorister, so that with confidence, they can re-enroll their boys for the academic year 2025-26.
- We will be discussing with our current faculty and staff next steps, as we recognize the significant changes this model will present to some of them.
- We will be working with PCS to ensure that appropriate staffing will be provided for Grades 4 and 5 going forward (PCS will re-open those grades in its school).

- We will cease admitting boys into Grade 3; it is helpful to remember that Grade 4 only began in 1998 and Grade 3 was introduced in 2007.
- Meetings have been held for some weeks now exploring the day-to-day life of the choristers and how PCS can support their academic needs, while allowing the same amount of time for their choir training, and the (on-average) five liturgical services a week plus concerts.
- We will advise our accrediting body, The New York Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS), how these changes will be implemented and their consequences. We will continue to remain affiliated to the *Choir Schools Association*, and hope that our long association with the *National Association of Episcopal Schools*, and *The Association of Boarding Schools* will also continue.
- We will discuss with the current Board of Trustees a plan for a formal ending of that Board, and the creation of a new governance body with an appropriate constitution from September 2025.
- Finally, the Vestry resolution makes clear that we expect work to begin in earnest to form a **separate girls' choir**; this may very well be in collaboration with another school. Furthermore, we expect that the success of the Noble Singers will serve as an impetus to increase our musical outreach into the local community, thus sharing what we treasure with as wide a group of children as possible.

At a time when the choral tradition that we have inherited from the cathedrals and collegiate chapels of England remains under threat, and so many English cathedrals are struggling with the exact same financial problems as we are, the Vestry hopes that this solution will actually strengthen and grow our unique choral heritage.

So that there can be no doubt – this is the first stage in making our finances sustainable in the long-term. The Annual Appeal will continue to be hugely important to the well-being of our parish going forward; the investment committee will continue to give a strong lead in our fiscal planning; the importance of the Noble and Duffie Guilds cannot be overstated. At the same time, we are thinking about new revenue streams, and strengthening our programs so that Saint Thomas remains a beacon for as wide a group of people as possible.

Because some of you will be thinking this, let me state it – **we may fail in our endeavors**. Recruitment has always been a challenge for us at Saint Thomas even with the parish paying 89% of the \$4 million cost of the school, and we will need to recruit boys to this new model which is, of course, not yet tested. Time will tell, but we are committed to making this work. As I have said many times, I did not come to New York ten years ago to close the Choir School – it is something I have cherished. If we hold our nerve, move forward in hope, and work together, we can only strengthen our resolve. If we pull back, or are fearful of this change, we will not engender that hope.

Finally, I want to express my deep gratitude for the dedication and professionalism of our existing **Head of School, Christopher Seeley**, and the Choir School faculty and staff. Their commitment to nurturing the boys musically, academically, and spiritually has been nothing short of exceptional, and they have been the heart and soul of the Choir School. We recognize that the foundation they have built is what makes this next chapter possible, and we are immensely thankful for their unwavering devotion to the mission of Saint Thomas.

We will be holding some further meetings to answer peoples' questions as we move forward, and I ask for your continued support so that we can continue **to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican Tradition and our unique choral heritage.**

Sincerely,
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, Rector
on behalf of the Vestry