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Whalley Abbey to reopen next year

Whalley Abbey, the Diocese of Blackburn's Retreat House is to be relaunched in September 2021 in its new role as a Centre for Christian Discipleship and Prayer.

The Abbey has been closed since March 23, the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown and all but one of the ten staff were placed on furlough.

Originally it was hoped to reopen the Abbey in the autumn. But the Bishop's Council and Board of Finance have now made the difficult decision for the house to remain closed to business for a year, while work continues in preparation for a full relaunch in September 2021.

The reasons for the decision are two-fold.

The Abbey, as a retreat and wedding venue, was losing over £120,000 per year. The projected loss this year with the COVID-19 closure is £166,000.

The other factor is the uncertainty surrounding the hospitality sector as it emerges from the government's enforced lockdown. Rules on social distancing, accommodation numbers and many of the Abbey's potential clients being in vulnerable categories, only exacerbated the situation.

Sadly, the ten permanent members of staff are at risk of redundancy, though there will still be some ongoing work to maintain the grounds and the house. The Archdeacon of Blackburn, the Ven Mark Ireland spoke to the staff on Saturday afternoon with Andy Cooke, HR Manager for the diocese, to brief them on the difficult decision and to begin a four-week consultation period on possible redundancies.

Archdeacon Mark recognised that losing valued staff members would mean that the diocese will also lose a lot of knowledge and experience. "I would like to thank you all for your dedication and loyalty to the Abbey over many years, for your resilience in the face of uncertainty, and all you have given above and beyond your statutory duties. I also know that this is a very difficult day," he told them.

A final decision on reopening the Abbey and recruiting a new Director will be made in November by Bishop's Council. It is hoped this will pave the way for the new Centre for Christian Discipleship and Prayer to open in September 2021.

Since medieval times the Abbey has been known as a blessed place, 'locus benedictus', where clergy and lay people have been able to come apart and spend time with God in peaceful and beautiful surroundings. As dioceses in the northwest of England face the challenges of ministry in a post-coronavirus world, it believes that, more than ever, people will value and use the Abbey for prayer and to grow as Christian disciples.

Bishop Julian commented, "Bishop's Council remains fully committed to the vision of reopening the Abbey as a Centre for Christian Discipleship and Prayer, and to the formation of a praying community at the Abbey. We believe that deferring the reopening until 2021 will give it the best chance of success, in being able to attract more people to use its wonderful facilities and in achieving a more sustainable financial future."