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ARCHBISHOP HELPS US MARK 150 YEARS

THE Archbishop of Canterbury will join us to celebrate the 150th anniversary of our diocese's only religious community.

The Most Rev Justin Welby will preach and celebrate the Eucharist in Portsmouth Cathedral this summer, marking the milestone of the Society of the Sisters of Bethany in Southsea.

The community was established in 1866 by Etheldreda Anna Benett, and was the first Church of England community to offer retreats for women. There are currently eight Sisters based in their Southsea convent.

The cathedral celebration will mark not just its significant history, but also its role in contemporary Christianity, as a place of prayer and service. And the presence of the Archbishop will confirm his commitment to the vital role played by religious communities within today's Church.

The cathedral service happens at 11am on Friday 29 July. Hundreds of guests from across the country with links to the community are expected to attend. They'll chat over a simple lunch afterwards.

Sister Rita-Elizabeth, the current Mother Superior, said: "The Archbishop doesn't accept every invitation, so we are grateful that he has accepted ours. He has already met the leaders of many religious communities and has expressed how important he thinks those communities are.

"I think coming to celebrate with us just reinforces his



The Bethany family, including the Sisters, associates, clergy and members of the Order of Companions of Martha and Mary; (above right): the Most Rev Justin Welby

commitment. He has said the Church needs religious communities in order to be healthy – it needs the undergirding of people living contemplative, prayerful lives.

"Three years ago, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the death of our foundress, and we looked back at our history then. We also committed ourselves then to seek afresh God's will in our lives and invited people to pray for us.

"Now we're looking forward to how we fit into the Church of England's 'Renewal and Reform' agenda, and the diocese's 'live pray serve' strategy, which does describe exactly what we do – live together, pray corporately and serve God."

The Society was founded in Clerkenwell, London, with three

key aims – daily prayer for the unity of Christians, daily recitation of the divine office, and to allow women to go on retreat for the first time. One of its first retreats, in 1891, attracted 91 women.

A convent was built in Bournemouth, and the Sisters ran an orphanage there until 1939, where more than 100 children were brought up and educated. In the 1890s, four Sisters were sent by the then Archbishop of Canterbury to Syria to instruct women in the Orthodox faith.

The Sisters ran retreat houses in Bournemouth, Winchester, Hindhead and Whitwell on the Isle of Wight before coming together at the House of Bethany in Nelson Road, Southsea in 1998.

From the earliest days of the community, they promoted the

idea of 'associates', who would live in their own homes, but commit themselves to a similar rule of life to the Sisters. There are now more than 100 associates.

From 2010, some of those associates have felt called to commit themselves more fully to contemplative prayer. Those individuals are now 'novice oblates'.

Also part of the Society's family are the Order of Companions of Martha and Mary, who are based in Lancashire and are exploring a new expression of monastic life within a parish.

If you would like to attend the celebration on July 29, please let the Sisters know on ssb@sistersofbethany.org.uk. For more information, see www.sistersofbethany.org.uk.



'WE EMBRACE THE RULE OF LIFE'

A RECENT development for the Sisters is the presence of 'novice oblates' within the Bethany family.

Ten individuals felt called to a commitment to God, to live by the same rule of life as the Sisters. They share the same values within their own homes and life circumstances. This may also involve the offering of time and gifts as part of the ministry of the community.

Jane Bosonnet (pictured with Sister Mary Joy), who had been an associate for 28 years, has embarked upon this journey. A time of exploration and formation began in September 2014. After an ongoing period of discernment, there may be an opportunity for admission as an oblate. Vows are made and renewed annually.

"It felt like the next step on my journey", said Jane. "Our desire is for a deeper relationship with God, through a deeper commitment to the community. It is both challenging and exciting".

