

COMMENT

Why I fear the Church of England will not survive for my children

From bishops' groupthink to a war on our heritage, the Church is exacerbating the cultural threats it faces

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      353

I love my rural village church. My vicar. My neighbours who attend. It's local. It is, somehow, intrinsic. I love the Church of England and what it has brought to our constitution, language, law, architecture, art and music. Yet, unfortunately, I am increasingly worried that this great institution of our national life may not survive for my children's old age.

Christianity in general is under threat, but the CofE has exacerbated this by "leaning in" to secular managerialism and politically divisive issues, moving counterculturally away from localism and underplaying its "USP" (God). Behold three worrying shifts, which risk ruining its greatest assets.

First, its breadth. Two weeks ago, the widely-revered evangelical former bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir-Ali announced his departure from the Church of England to become a Roman Catholic. Dispiritingly, he was the third bishop in five months to do so. To misquote Oscar Wilde: "To lose one bishop may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose three looks like carelessness." The significance of Dr Nazir-Ali's decision should not be lost on those at the top of the CofE.

Bishops, now all nominated by the same appointments secretary, appear to prefer groupthink to diversity of thought. If no room exists for [Dr Nazir-Ali](#) – a theologically erudite, spiritually committed man who challenged the CofE's strategic direction – then it is clear that a form of cancel culture has invaded the Church. How strange if the concept of tough love – the idea that someone who cares enough to criticise might love you most – is not embraced by Christ's followers. Without extraordinary people, the institution will sink.

Second, its pastoral care. The centralising "CofE plc" now appears to regard its basic unit as the regional (diocesan) office. However, ordination vows reference being the Good Shepherd. The parish, the contact point with people providing local pastoral care, must be the basic unit.

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Since churches were closed as the pandemic began, the parish system has suffered further blows. Various dioceses announced morale-shattering parish clergy cuts. The Archbishop of York proposed the "Myriad" scheme to create 10,000 new lay-led "house churches". [Leicester Diocese](#) voted to consolidate 234 parishes into 20-25 huge groups, cutting local vicars.

This accompanies a third shift, the Church's loss of respect for its buildings, our shared national heritage. A green paper, nicknamed the Church Closers' Charter, has suggested empowering dioceses to dispossess vicars, close churches and sell parish-owned buildings more easily and quickly.

The Methodist Church, which has almost disappeared after centralising and selling thousands of chapels, provides a salutary lesson. If the CofE abandons its place in the heart of communities nationwide, it cannot expect to maintain its place on our national stage.

A governance review now proposes handing control of the Church to a cabal of 12 bishops. Please, no more centralisation, bishops or bureaucrats. Some dioceses, by pledging not to cut parish clergy, have managed to increase giving. This shows that we need not despair.

“Front line first” is the model we must follow, for the CofE to have any long-term hope.

Emma Thompson is a journalist and a member of Save The Parish

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    |  353