



Church parishes are facing a fight for their future

Marcus Walker

The parish is at the centre of English life. This is true well beyond the church: it is the smallest unit of local government, it is the physical focal point of villages and towns and, as a study last year showed, it is the source of £12.4 billion of economic and social value.

Of course the parish is a church institution. And it is glorious, because it puts the local at the heart of everything. Church of England churches come in all shapes and sizes. Some rock to modern music, some sway to Wesley's hymns, some float on clouds of incense. They organise foodbanks and childcare. They bury and marry and counsel and listen. They offer oases of calm for those in desperate need of beauty and peace.

But over the last 60 years money and authority have ebbed away from our parishes and coagulated in centralised pots. This started in 1976 with the decision to take all the parsonages (built and paid for by local parishes) and all their endowments (built up over generations) and give them to the dioceses to look after, in

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return for the promise to use the income always to provide a priest and a parsonage to each parish.

Not only have the dioceses squandered their appropriations to an eye-watering degree (a 2016 study put the loss at £8 billion) but they now have the nerve to demand parishes pay again for their priests and parsonages through inflated parish shares and then say those parishes are "failing" if they can't. All while blowing fortunes on new middle-management roles such as associate archdeacon, directors of "justice, peace and the integrity of creation", and ever more chief executive officers to oversee them.

Now the next synod is being asked to consider proposals which would make it far easier for dioceses to remove vicars and sell parish buildings without local consent. It's a power grab from church authorities who let slip last month that they see "a building, a stipend, and a long costly theological education" as "key limiting factors" for the church.

This is why thousands of grassroots laity and clergy met, in person and online, last week to plot a General Synod campaign to oppose this new plan and remind our superiors of the promises their predecessors made when they despoiled the parishes of their assets a generation ago. The election is next month and our slogan is the simplest of all: Save the Parish.

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