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Stephen Cottrell: 'Cut the Church some slack – it's incredible what we do'

He'll be the man at the top when Justin Welby goes on sabbatical. But can the Archbishop of York hold the CofE together?

By Lucy Denyer

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I had hoped to interview the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Stephen Cottrell in person. But this was early March, the kids weren't back at school and travel restrictions had yet to be lifted. I protested that, as this was official work business, it was entirely

possible to do a socially distanced meeting that would stay well within the rules. The Primate of England would not be moved. And so we Zoomed instead.

It's hard not to see this overzealous interpretation of Covid restrictions as emblematic of the problems the Church of England has got itself into over the past year in its response to the pandemic. When lockdown was first imposed, back in March 2020, communal worship was forbidden, but it was the C of E itself that ruled that [clergy too should stay at home](#): they were not even permitted to go into their churches to conduct virtual services – although the buildings themselves were allowed to stay open for food banks and blood donor sessions. Last Easter Sunday, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, gave his sermon from his kitchen.

Many worshippers felt enormous anger that the Church had been complicit in the shuttering of its buildings to them, arguing that prayer and worship in the house of God was just as much an essential activity as grocery shopping. The second time round, the Government allowed church services to continue, albeit with restrictions. During the latest lockdown, the Church was technically permitted to continue with services, but again, 'the pressure on parishes from the top to close has been immense', one priest tells me.

Cottrell is robustly unrepentant for the stance taken by the Church. 'I'm not pretending we didn't get some things wrong,' he says, 'but I think the mitigating circumstances of the shock going into lockdown – many organisations didn't really know what to do.' Nor does he accept that many C of E worshippers were upset at churches' closure last year. 'I really do take issue with you that a lot of people were disappointed,' he says. 'Some people in London were disappointed.' Multiple letters to the Telegraph from across the country might suggest he's wrong, but we move on.

The Archbishop is speaking to me from his home in Bishopthorpe Palace on the outskirts of York, where he was installed as the 98th holder of the title last July. The 62-year-old will, next month, when the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby begins [a three-month sabbatical](#), become the de facto most senior churchman in the country. While Cottrell insists that Welby's departure 'won't make a huge amount of difference – we work as a team', there's no doubt that his temporary time at the top is ruffling a few feathers within the Anglican community, many of whom have also been perturbed by his elevation to Archbishop.

Like Welby, Cottrell is seen by many Christians as a too-eager adopter of the 'woke' agenda, and guilty of trying to adapt Christianity to it, rather than the other way round. One vicar I speak to refers to the triumvirate at the top – Welby, Cottrell and [Sarah](#)

[Mullally, the Bishop of London](#) – as ‘unimpressive RE teachers: trendy, Lefty, paisley-shirted weekend vicars’. Many are concerned that the three are presiding over the wholesale destruction of the parish system, with stipendiary priest posts in smaller, poorer communities not being renewed when a vicar retires, leaving their worshippers bereft and the remaining parish priests stretched terrifyingly thin. And criticism abounds of a top-heavy, managerial approach from the well-funded centre which has little concern for the average struggling clergy worker. ‘I think Stephen Cottrell needs to start listening, or there won’t be a Church left,’ one rural parish volunteer tells me, grimly. ‘They [the C of E] have got the same problem as the National Trust and the BBC – they don’t like their audience.’



Cottrell with the Archbishop of Canterbury | CREDIT: Paul Grover

Cottrell, of course, is having none of it. ‘I want to make a big plea to say come on, cut the Church of England some slack, it’s incredible what we do. We still have a branch in 16,000 places. We really do punch above our weight – and we’re the church for everyone. There is such diversity in the Church of England, and although many of our parishes are struggling and small, actually what they achieve in and for their local community is absolutely amazing.’

My conversation with the Archbishop has been precipitated by the publication of his latest book, *Dear England*, which came out last month. The idea for it was born on a train journey from London to Cardiff after a chance conversation with a young woman at the

Caffè Nero coffee stall in Paddington station, when she asked him what made him become a priest. Pondering her question on his journey, he decided to write a book in response ('I churn them out – I'm one of those people who doesn't know how to think, so I do it by talking or writing'), calling it Dear England because he didn't get the chance to find out the woman's name.

Subtitled Finding Hope, Taking Heart and Changing the World, it is aimed primarily at the non-Christian reader and, like Cottrell himself, is a strange mix of the political and the divine. 'It's written for people who don't know the Christian faith and it's saying please have a look,' he explains. But it is very much a tome of our times, with multiple references to Brexit and the Covid pandemic, and how these events should make us rethink our attitudes. 'We've been so used to being divided as a nation in recent years, we often don't notice what unites us,' he says.



Cottrell at his enthronement as Archbishop of York | CREDIT: PA photos

Cottrell denies that either he or the book is explicitly political, telling me that ‘the Church should avoid as best it can siding with any political party or any specific agenda’, and that he himself is not a ‘political leader’. ‘I simply don’t think in the Left/Right terms that I realise is the way most people think,’ he says. That said, there are passages in the book that read distinctly as welfarism – when, for example, he writes somewhat disapprovingly about the ‘drawing back of the state’, and whether wealth is ‘distributed fairly’. The franchising out of healthcare provision, he argues, is partly why ‘we were underprepared [for Covid] compared to some countries’.

He protests when I tell him that these sound like pretty clear Left-of-centre views to me. ‘There are other bits of the book that speak very powerfully about the family and the

importance of the family as a unit in society,' he points out. 'Lots of people will see that as very Right-wing. There are parts of the book that question the propriety of spending money on nuclear weapons, which puts me out of favour with all political parties'. Except perhaps Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. Nevertheless, he says, 'The book is not a political manifesto. I'm not suggesting anything other than these are some ideas that we need to consider. And I won't apologise for the fact that I think there should be greater consensus in our politics. I don't find the adversarial style very helpful – it's certainly not very edifying.'

In person, Cottrell certainly comes across as distinctly un-adversarial. Unshaven, wearing a dark-grey half-zip sweatshirt over his black shirt and clerical collar, he looks, with his twinkly eyes, boyish grin and occasional wry asides, like a balding Santa Claus – far from the elder statesman one might imagine an archbishop to be. He is at pains to stress to me that his longing 'is for unity in the Church – a Christian has to be a peacemaker'. Despite this, his rise to the top has been, in its latter phase at least, marked by division – between the Church and its members, and within the Anglican Communion itself.

The C of E has faced considerable difficulties over the past year – not just in [the emotions stirred up in reaction to lockdown](#), but more pragmatically, in the lack of cold, hard cash. Even while online congregations soared, collection plates were left empty and tourist admission income dried up. Many of the 42 dioceses across the country (which are responsible for raising much of their own income) face enormous funding shortfalls – including Cottrell's former diocese of Chelmsford, where 61 stipendiary positions are not being renewed, and another 80 are on the chopping block. There is much confusion, anger and sorrow at this state of affairs – not least because, higher up the ladder and quite aside from the 116 archbishops and bishops whose salaries are funded separately by the Church Commissioners fund (with assets of £8.7 billion), there appears to be an explosion of diocesan and middle-management jobs available, often at a much higher salary than the circa £20,000 paid to a stipendiary priest. In Chelmsford, for example, a chief executive job was recently advertised at between £80,000 and £90,000 a year.

The Archbishop of York photographed at Bishopthorpe Palace, March 2021 | CREDIT: Tessa Bunney

Cottrell appears relatively un-discomfited when I ask him about this, and trots out what seems like a well-rehearsed line on the current situation. 'The national church is working very hard at the moment both to renew our vision about what the Church is for, and to look at how we can do our very best to ensure that no money is spent at the so-called centre that isn't absolutely necessary so that we can put all our resources into front-line ministry,' he says. He denies that priests are being made redundant, arguing that dioceses are merely being 'reorganised', and points out that there will be more clergy ordained into the Church of England this year than in almost any in living memory. He is also unapologetic about [the managerial roles](#). 'Any large community requires organisation, otherwise it would collapse. If you have clergy, you need to pay them and house them – so you've got to have a housing department and a finance department. And because of our failures on safeguarding we've absolutely got to have a safeguarding department. And because we need new clergy we've got to have a training department. And because of the world we live in then yes, we do need a HR department.'

That said, although he won't spell it out explicitly, he does tell me that right now, the Church is 'doing precisely the thing that people say we are not doing, which is that we are looking at how we can be more effective; how we can ensure that every penny goes to front-line ministry. There are all sorts of groups meeting at the moment who have not yet concluded how best to do that but are making precisely the kind of savings others say we should be making – and I agree with them.'

But there are other, arguably even bigger clouds on the horizon. Next year, Justin Welby will convene the 15th Lambeth Conference, a gathering of bishops from around the world to reflect, pray and discuss the Church and world affairs. It promises to be an explosive event. Just before my conversation with Cottrell, Welby issued an official condemnation of the language used by the Archbishop of Nigeria, Henry Ndukuba, to describe gay

people; Ndukuba wrote that 'the deadly "virus" of homosexuality has infiltrated ACNA [the Anglican Church in North America]. This is likened to a yeast that should be urgently and radically expunged and excised lest it affects the whole dough.' It's fair to say that homosexuality, and how the Church should approach it, is a minefield of an issue, and one that threatens to rip the global Anglican Communion completely apart.

Cottrell himself is on record as supporting church celebrations for same-sex unions, and was a supporter of Jeffrey John, who made headlines in 2003 when he became the first person openly in a same-sex relationship to be nominated as a bishop – of Reading. Whether he is in denial about the possibility of same-sex relationships being the rock on which the Anglican church will founder, is being disingenuous on the issue or is simply more faithful than most is uncertain; nevertheless he doesn't 'think it inevitable' that there will be a schism. 'I don't underestimate how difficult it will be,' he adds. 'But the great hope the Christian faith offers the world is that it is possible for people who disagree with one another to love one another. I know that can happen because I've seen it.'

With the Queen on her visit to Chelmsford's cathedral, 2014 | CREDIT: Tessa Bunney

Cottrell himself comes from what he describes as a 'normal, fairly ordinary' family. He was born in 1958 in Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, the second of four; his father was the director of a print company and his mother a counsellor and a keen pianist. 'People assume if

you're an archbishop in the House of Lords you were at public school and Oxbridge, which always makes me smile,' he says. In fact, he went to a secondary modern school 'where basically you left at 15 and that was it. I was the first boy from my school ever to get a degree, I think.' He went on to the Polytechnic of Central London to do media studies, where he 'got quite involved in Left-wing politics'.

His family was only peripherally Christian; he got 'drawn into the orbit' of the Church thanks to his sister, who joined the girl guides and went to church parade services, but later, at university, he got into a heated argument with one 'firebrand Left-wing' lecturer – 'a lovely man, but like a caricature out of a David Lodge novel' – and realised that Christianity was his 'worldview'. 'I remember, in the course of that conversation, thinking yeah, but your assumption is that everybody's good and they will do good things, and my assumption is not that everyone is bad, but that actually, the human heart is a rebel – we have an inbuilt tendency to put ourselves first and to exclude others. Dare I say it, I think we are sinners in need of repentance.'

His own 'Damascus road' moment came a couple of years later when, having graduated and worked for a while in the film industry, he went for a job interview one day, and had a sudden realisation that 'this is not what I'm supposed to do with my life'. He went to see one of the priests from his childhood with whom he'd kept in touch ('I wasn't going to church much at the time') and said, 'I think I need to be a priest.' He went to work for a year at St Christopher's Hospice in south London 'because I felt I needed to test my vocation, and the only way to do that was to face some sorrow and suffering and darkness – although of course, the experience was the total opposite of that'. In 1981, aged 23, he entered St Stephen's House in Oxford to train for ordination, and since then has 'served all over the place', from Chichester and Huddersfield to Essex and now York.

He met his wife, Rebecca, a ceramics artist, during their student days – she wasn't a Christian at the time but was, 'like so many people, actually quite interested in this'. They have been married for 36 years and have three sons, aged 30, 27 and 25, and a new grandson. Their eldest son is training to be a vicar in Durham; the other two – 'well, I think they're still at that arm-wrestling-with-God stage'. He is evidently not the judgmental religious parent – in 2017, Cottrell tweeted a picture of his son Sam, then 22, bearded, ear pierced, cigarette hanging from his mouth, wearing a mortarboard and texting. 'Breaking my usual habit and tweeting personal stuff. But Sam graduated! There must be a God.'