

The C of E needs to be leaner and fitter

10 JULY 2020



There is too much control from the centre, and power should be returned to parishes, says *Stephen Trott*

THE difficulties posed by the [coronavirus](#) crisis have exposed many fault lines and weaknesses in organisations around the country — and the Church of England is no exception.



Its already tightly strained [finances](#) are under immense strain, with every church in lockdown for months and no income from church collections or visitors, but still a significant monthly payroll to be funded. Eighty per cent of its income comes from generous giving and donations. Unlike some Continental state Churches, it receives no funding from the Treasury.

The problems have been accumulating for many years. In the 1970s, with the best of intentions, most of the financial assets accumulated by the parishes over 1000 years were nationalised by the [General Synod](#), to ensure that all the clergy received the same, modest stipend. Previously, there was a market among “livings”, in which some clergy enjoyed many plums, while others struggled to feed their family or to keep warm in winter.

But this apparently benign reform had unexpected consequences. Transferring the money to central bodies signalled a dramatic shift in focus from the local church as

the centre of gravity to the diocese. The parish church had always been the centre of church life. It says so in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, part of the Church of England's DNA, identifying the local congregation as the visible Church, where the word of God is taught and the sacraments are administered.

Once proudly independent from all but the essentials of episcopal oversight, the parish system began to find itself dependent on the diocesan board of finance, and increasingly micro-managed by burgeoning numbers of bishops, archdeacons, and accountants. Having surrendered the resources that had formerly paid the stipends of their clergy, the parishes were now, in addition, asked to contribute increasing payments each year — the quota — to fund both the clergy and the growing staff of the diocese. Today's congregation is expected to give significantly more than the cost of supporting a full-time minister.

For some time now, the criteria for assessing the viability of a parish have revolved around the quota rather than its spiritual, pastoral, or missionary outreach. Thousands of parishes have now been grouped into increasingly large benefices, many losing in the process their most precious asset — their parsonage house — which has been transferred to the diocese instead, rendering it almost impossible to recruit their own minister in the future.

The quota is a blunt instrument, ensuring that many smaller congregations, especially in rural and inner urban areas, are increasingly being threatened with the closure of their church, despite the fact that it costs relatively little to maintain, if looked after carefully.

IT IS hard to exaggerate the significance of these buildings — or, indeed, of the local congregation, however tiny. They continue to represent the Church of England's aspiration of being a spiritual presence in every community. When closed for worship and sold for other purposes, they speak loudly of the failure of the Church to those who pass by each day.

Church attendance has fallen by more than 200,000 in the past decade. Forty years ago, two-thirds of the population described itself as Christian; today, it is one third. The missing congregation is not being reached in many places because there is no longer a priest living there, and no vicarage, and church services are infrequent. The

obvious solution is to recruit and deploy more clergy, and open or plant more churches, not to employ more specialists at the diocesan centre.

During the past 50 years, a significant proportion of the funding now administered centrally has been vired into the appointment of many new senior clergy posts. The Church of England, a country one third the size of Norway, now has some 143 archdeacons, 117 bishops, and 42 dioceses, while Norway has just 11 dioceses and bishops. Many of those 42 dioceses were created in the 20th century, each requiring its own cathedral and diocesan administration, all of which have to be funded: the vast bulk of the money comes from giving in the parishes.

During the coronavirus crisis, while churches were tightly locked on the instructions of the diocesan bishops, clergy and congregations have been forced to adapt to new ways of worshipping, mostly online for those who have computers or smartphones. Many church members do not. Much has been made of the numbers “attending” online services, although it is impossible to know the extent to which everyone watching is engaging with the worship. There is talk of not needing church buildings after all, although nobody has yet worked out how to receive holy communion virtually, or to baptise a baby or ordain ordinands, online.

The experience of many in parish life during these past ten weeks has also led to the question: to what extent is the diocese any longer required, since the parish is delivering the ministry that can be provided? Soon, the lockdown will be lifted, and church services will resume in church buildings, led by their clergy and congregations. The church buildings are needed, the clergy are needed: what else do we need?

THE economy of the Church of England, which has evolved since the 1970s, is manifestly in need of radical change if it is to reconnect with people in their locality where the word can be preached and the sacraments can be administered.

The best way of doing this is threefold. First, the balance of power and initiative needs to be returned to the parish church. The best way of doing this is to scrap the quota system, and make parishes once again responsible for funding their clergy. Most are already capable of doing so, if the additional burden of funding external administration is taken away.

Some parishes will never be able to pay the full cost, but we are no longer a Church in which all the clergy are full-time ministers: that, too, has changed greatly since the 1970s. We need to recruit tent-maker clergy who are in secular employment, part-time clergy, and retired clergy, who would occupy the vicarage in return for their ministry.

The second necessary reform is to make the diocese once again a primarily spiritual rather than administrative function in the Church. This will require radical pruning of bishops, dioceses, and their staff from the current 42 dioceses to something more like the historical 26 dioceses, and with, perhaps, 40 bishops to ordain and confirm, in place of the current 117 engaged in managing many activities that we now see are not required.

Many of the burdens that hinder parish ministry are laid on it by legislation conceived and enacted during 100 years of synodical government, designed to exert ever tighter control and scrutiny of clergy and churches, which is time-consuming, expensive, and unnecessary. One has only to compare the operation of our ecumenical partner Churches to see that a light touch is possible, and does not require ever more archdeacons. The General Synod should meet sparingly and less frequently, and devote itself to reducing rather than increasing the load.

A LEANER and fitter Church of England will emerge from such a rebalancing: one that can focus resources raised locally on local ministry rather than struggle to maintain the illusion that the diocese is the local church.

Subsidiarity is often mentioned approvingly in General Synod debates. The time has surely come to put subsidiarity into practice, and to empower the local church to be once again what it always was: the Church of England.

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