

Our Loose Canon...

Managing decline is pure humbug

with Canon Eric Woods DL



It must have been about 15 years ago that I received a telephone call from the Bishop of a large rural diocese, on the opposite side of the country. He was enquiring if I would like to join his senior staff as one of his two archdeacons.

Now, I must confess that, after over 40 years of ordained ministry, I have never really understood what archdeacons do, or why they do it. It is a promotion of sorts, with an increased stipend and the rather amazing title of 'The Venerable'. As someone who never wanted to be other than a parish priest, working with people in my parish, I simply couldn't conceive of leaving them to become a kind of middle manager. However, the diocese in question was where my family came from, where

some of my relatives still live, and which I have always enjoyed as a holiday destination. So I played for time. I asked the Bishop if he would send me the paperwork. It duly arrived. Masses of it. I read the first sentence of the covering letter: "The Archdeacon of W will work with the Bishop of X, the Suffragan Bishop of Y and the Archdeacon of Z in managing the decline of the Church in the Diocese."

That did it. Straight into the recycling bin it all went. I have never worked in a declining church in my life, and I certainly wasn't going to spend the final chapter of my ministry managing 'decline'. That all came back to me recently when I read of a speech given by the new Archbishop of York, Stephen

Cottrell, to the General Synod of the Church of England. Whilst expressing his confidence that the CofE, after 70 years of decline, will grow again, he told the Synod "Even if it doesn't ... let our death be a grand operative death. Let it be something fantastic. Let's not crawl into a corner."

Now, I wasn't there, but I do not begin to understand what he was talking about. The Archbishop is someone who, as Bishop of Chelmsford, ordered massive redundancies in his parochial clergy in order to balance the books. "Doing a Chelmsford" has entered the vocabulary of the CofE, even in a piercing novel about a fictional diocese written by the wife of a serving diocesan bishop. It means cutting the parish clergy who are the

Church's keyworkers whilst expanding the managers and middle managers who are supposed to 'manage the decline'. It is humbug. The parishes – the backbone of the Church of England – are now regarded as little more than the milch-cows providing through the Diocesan Share a crippling tax which allows the centre to experiment with more and more alternative models which are simply failing to deliver new worshippers.

We need to return to our roots and do what we do best: faithful prayer, faithful worship, and faithful pastoral care. I am grateful that, in 'retirement', I am allowed to assist with just that. No gimmicks, no trendiness. Just faithfulness to the Gospel. And it works!



GILLINGHAM & SHAFTESBURY SHOW

17 AUG 2022



LIVESTOCK • STEAM ENGINES • HEAVY HORSES • POULTRY • LOCAL PRODUCERS

This Christmas give the gift of a day out!

EARLY BIRD ADULT TICKETS FOR JUST £10! OR GIVE AN EXCLUSIVE DAY OUT WITH MEMBERSHIP FROM £25

SPRING
COUNTRYSIDE
SHOW

23 & 24 APRIL 2022

Bring Spring to Life

gillinghamandshaftesburyshow.co.uk

01747 823955