

Emma Thompson

The Church Closers' Charter must be torn up

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Over the past few months, the Archbishops of York and Canterbury have repeatedly assured us that they love parishes and parish churches. ‘I am passionate that the parish is essential,’ the Archbishop of Canterbury told the *Church Times* recently. The Archbishop of York went so far as to describe the parish as ‘the beating heart of community life in England’. So why are they supporting a change to church law to make it easier to close parish churches?

The paper which proposes the change is at stage one of a three-stage approval process. It has the unsexy name GS 2222, so I call it the ‘Church Closers’ Charter’. Its introduction is written by someone whose

job title is Head of Pastoral and Closed Churches, and she writes that the purpose of the legal change is to simplify existing legislation so as 'to manage the disposal of churches no longer needed for regular public worship', for which there needs to be 'faster processes which would allow for an increase in closures over time'. The need for simplification, she says, was identified 'after discussion with dioceses'.

The Church of England's comms teams have mastered the art of shrouding significant changes in bureaucratic language so dull that few bother to read on to discover what is actually happening — hence GS 2222. The proposal made its first General Synod appearance in July. It is now at the stage of public consultation (which ends on 31 October) before it goes back to General Synod in February. A close reading of the document shows that it very much does not just propose to simplify existing legislation. It is an un-transparent, anti-democratic piece of proposed legislation which will, if implemented, shift power from the local (parishes) to the centre (dioceses). It is a stealthy power grab.

The document reveals that the Church's dioceses are, collectively, considering tripling the rate at which churches are closing. It confidently earmarks up to 356 (unspecified) churches for closure, and implies that dioceses may have their eyes on many more. It also envisages more clergy dispossessions (dismissals) and considers 'possible limitations of rights of representation or appeal'. The dioceses, in other words, would be made less accountable, just at the moment when many wanted to hold them to account.

Parishes own vicarages, but the dioceses take the proceeds if vicarages are sold. Currently, parishes have the power to push back, but if the proposals of the Church Closers' Charter are enacted, it will be much easier for dioceses to sack vicars and sell their vicarages, as well as to close churches and sell parish-owned buildings. Parishioners would have little right to object.

I can see why bureaucrats want GS 2222 to pass. If you were in charge of closing churches in a diocese, you too might want to speed up and simplify the system. The idea of endless devoted locals holding up what you see as an inevitable process would be exhausting. Perhaps you'd convince yourself that elderly, church-going congregants are anyway dying out, being replaced by net natives who don't care about buildings.

The tragedy is that the pandemic proved this assumption is false. A University of York survey found that, during Covid, even 75 per cent of the non-churchgoing public wanted churches open as places of solace and reflection. The reality is that millions of non-churchgoers value their local church even if they don't visit much, and they count on its continuing availability for the joyful and solemn human milestones of births, marriages and deaths. And if there must be church closures, there needs to be a proper national plan and a proper discussion, rather than this self-serving attempt to license dioceses to flog our heritage piecemeal.

The C of E is missing a chance for real reform. What it should do, instead of eliminating parishes, is reduce bishops and central bureaucracy. It should give power and agency to the parishes from the dioceses, not vice versa. It should enforce accountability and listen to the voices of parishioners, who know what their parishes need.

Are there any churchgoers who want to see their donations fund more communications officers? How much more logical it would be, spiritually and financially, if the Church leaders embraced people's love for what's local: the vicars who live among us, the buildings which are part of our heritage.

The demise of the parish system is not inevitable. If the Archbishops are truly 'passionate' about the parish, they should tear up the Church Closers' Charter. As it is, it's as if they are denying that the revolution is coming, even as they build the guillotine.

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