

# CHURCH TIMES

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## Letters to the Editor

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### Christian heritage and ethnicity

*From Mr Michael Cavaghan-Pack*

Sir, — As someone who finds evensong in a country church with the sound of the harvest coming through the open door appealing, I was surprised to discover that I would be indulging in a regrettable nostalgia connecting me with England's colonial past ([Comment, 4 February](#)).

To be told that the horrors of colonialism are not in, fact, rooted in the past, but recreated in the present whenever bells are heard and wood smoke is smelt on the country air, seems somewhat far-fetched. Nevertheless, there is a point being made that needs to be addressed.

Before considering the place of ethnic-minority Christians in an English church setting, we need to clarify the understanding of Christian heritage. Heritage is a shared experience that binds us into a community and links us with our past.

This will differ according to our location and, indeed, our tradition. The experience of a Christian attending a city church will be very different from that of someone worshipping in a country parish; and that of an Anglo-Catholic will again differ from that of an Evangelical whose worship is extempore and spontaneous. And each will be bound to their respective communities through that common heritage.

Clearly, ethnic-minority Christians whose previous church experience was in, say, Jamaica or Nigeria will have their own indigenous heritage, which continues to live in their imagination, but may not be entirely reflected in the pattern of church life in which they now find themselves.

For Dr Renie Chow Choy, this is a real problem. But I wonder how much this is created by her looking exclusively “through the prism of identity and belonging” understood in nationalistic and racial terms. Given the variety of Christian worship available in most of the communities in which ethnic minorities may find themselves, there is surely scope for most to find a home in a tradition that, while it may not entirely reflect their own heritage group, nevertheless meets a great deal of their expectations, from Pentecostal worship to the more rigorous liturgical worship of those who come from a high-church tradition. The fear that others will “foist a separate lineage” on them as a means of integrating them into an English church community seems to be without much substance.

I was interested that for some of Dr Chow Choy’s ethnic-minority students, Christian heritage is essentially ahistorical and about deep Christian values, such as scripture, justice, morality, and humility. And perhaps it is this seriousness and sense of the Christian profession as a matter of life-changing importance that is the key to meeting and communing with ethnic-minority Christians.

We others need to recover a similar seriousness in our worship and practice, and learn to share their willingness to speak unashamedly to others of the truth of the Gospel. In other words, both the problem and its solution have little to do with nationalistic and racial connotations that need to be stripped from “our” Christian heritage.

And, thankfully, if that is so, I can continue to enjoy evensong in a country church with the scent of the harvest pervading the air, in the knowledge that it in no way precludes my meeting other Christians in love, from wherever they come, and sharing with them a seriousness of purpose to do God’s will and to extend his Kingdom on earth. And that is surely the heart of the matter.

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## **The religious element in funeral ceremonies**

*From Mr David Jennings*

Sir, — As a celebrant who has conducted well over 1000 funeral ceremonies, I read with interest Madeleine Davies’s report ([News, 4 February](#)) concerning the religious element in [funerals](#) and the growing popularity of funerals conducted by independent celebrants.

There are, in my view, several reasons — not least, linked to the decline in regular church attendance — for the continuing decline in the popularity of funerals conducted by a minister. There is now a much greater demand for ceremonies to be a celebration of a life, with a consequent reduction in the specifically religious elements as a percentage of the ceremony. What might have been, for the great and the good, provided for by separate funeral and memorial services, is now largely encompassed within a single ceremony.

It is clear from earlier correspondence that some clergy find this difficult to accept and wish to re-establish the primacy of the elements of salvation and resurrection. Or, as it was expressed to me after leaving one church ceremony: “There was an awful lot about God and not much about Fred.”

Almost everyone I have dealt with as a celebrant has wanted a tribute — and, in most instances, for me to both prepare and deliver it. Members of the clergy are not always willing to do this. I delivered a tribute at one religious ceremony at which the priest officiating had declined to give the tribute — for a very senior figure in his church and in the wider community — on the grounds that, if he were to do so for one person, he would have to do it for everyone.

While many families ask for some religious content, this has almost always been limited to the Lord’s Prayer. Without exception, when I have asked which version they would like, the answer has been: “The one with ‘forgive us our trespasses.’” I would not wish to speculate on why a prayer has been included, but, without ever asking for reasons, I have, nevertheless, been offered the following: sometimes, because people coming to the ceremony might not think that it was a proper funeral without a prayer, but, perhaps most often, because the deceased had fallen out of love with the Church, but not necessarily with God. I suspect, however, that Pascal’s wager — even though not articulated or even identified — plays a significant part in choosing some religious element.

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## **Church teaching on sexuality**

*From the Revd Dr Charlie Bell*

Sir, — While it is good finally to see at least some movement in the Ghanaian Church’s position on [LBGTQI](#) criminalisation ([News, 4 February](#)), we ought not to overstate matters. Their statement was hardly timely, or unequivocal; and it remains a matter for concern that “a

transformational agenda”, which appears to refer to conversion therapy, remains their prescription for LGBTQI people.

Something else is also striking: the Ghanaian bishops tell us that “traditions, values, cultural and social frameworks must not only be regarded but respected and appreciated.” This is quite the contrast to the pieties so often espoused by “conservatives” in our own context, who attempt to make a virtue out of specifically opposing the mores, views, and freedoms that the “world” grants to LGBTQI people.

Is it the case, then, that culture should indeed be respected and appreciated? If so, we have a lot of catching up to do in our own society — not only theologically, but sociologically, too.

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Sir, — Celibates face stigma in a church setting, as do the LGBT+ groups referred to in the survey ([News, 4 February](#)). “After holding hands, what?” ([Features, same issue](#)) examined sensitivities around the way in which sexuality and sexual practice are discussed in church youth groups. What may link both pieces, the whopping elephant in the room, is the failure to connect sexual activity with procreation.

Anglican liberals appear ready to jettison or disregard Lambeth ’98 Resolution 1.10, while Evangelical hard men (or women) sometimes obsess about the sinfulness of same-sex intimacy. This occurs against a background of a global abortion genocide, said to claim one life per second. The abortion genocide may be responsible for more than 40 per cent of yearly global deaths.

The scale of deaths is stunning. The average man or woman resting in a stupor against a bar counter on a Friday or Saturday evening recognises the difference between mass murder and heavy petting. Might same-sex attraction be seen as a sideshow concern, once our bishops grasped the scale of global abortion: ten million deaths in the UK alone?

Name & Address Supplied

**Attitudes to, and funding for, rural parish ministry**

*From Andrew Bradstock, the Revd Alison Morley, and four others*

Sir, — As so often, Canon Angela Tilby hits the nail on the head ([“Rural-and-urban gap is widening”, Comment, 28 January; Letters, 4 February](#)).

Here, in Canon Tilby’s home diocese, we have had a feasibility study to restructure our parishes in response to a diocesan plan.

Throughout the process, [rural](#) congregations that are not experiencing numerical growth have been described as in a “critical’ state” and “a cause for concern”. One has a gold Eco Church award, but that’s not how “success” is measured. Church buildings, though valued and used by their communities, have been treated as entirely expendable and ripe for sale.

Thus defined in this process, and told there is no money to fill clergy vacancies, churches have been encouraged to see an [HTB](#) plant as the cavalry coming over the hill: a resource church that will “rejuvenate congregations . . . that are struggling for critical mass”.

Our concern is not the plant *per se*, but the injustice and short-sightedness of a policy that allows such initiatives to be resourced by Strategic Development Funding, while neighbouring churches, left priestless or served by an increasingly stretched incumbent and lay team, struggle on unsupported. What couldn’t we do with such funding?

As centuries of faithful witness and service in rural parishes slowly expires, and churches and vicarages disappear, how will the Church ever reconnect with countryfolk with neither the means nor inclination to travel to the nearest town or city every Sunday? Or live up to its strapline to be “a Christian presence in every community”?

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### **Choice of both kinds**

*From the Revd Dave Thompson*

Sir, — In response to Steve Vince’s comments about the common cup ([Letters, 4 February](#)): his suggestion has been the norm in the two parishes of the Walmersley Road Benefice since Freedom Day last July.

Our ministry team felt that to offer the chalice for those who wished to partake was a sensible and straight-forward response.

Of our weekly communicants, about 100, 35-40 people receive the consecrated wine. I am surprised that so few other parishes do likewise.

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