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Inside The Game

Behold the Bishop of Brexit as church models itself on politics

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Church leaders could be appointed to full-time cabinet-style roles such as “Brexit bishop” or “Covid bishop” under proposals seen by *The Times* for the biggest overhaul in centuries of how the Church of England is run.

The ecclesiastical map of England

could also be redrawn via mergers between the 42 dioceses, the creation of new constituencies for bishops based on cities or counties, and the appointment of senior “regional” bishops to oversee large areas of the country.

The church has been accused of wanting to form a “shadow government” because of proposals that some senior bishops could be detached from

geographical regions to serve as spokesmen or women on political matters.

A consultation document commissioned by the church’s three top leaders, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of London, sets out a wide range of ideas for “significant changes to the shape, structure and number of dioceses and bishops”.

The dossier, marked as a “confiden-

tial briefing prepared for the College of Bishops”, suggests radical changes are needed because of the dire financial situation of many dioceses, the fact their historical boundaries “do not reflect current population patterns”, and the need to free bishops from “managerial time demands” to concentrate on the “mission” of the church. It notes: “The changes this document contemplates

are considerable. If implemented, they will have a significant impact on culture, roles and responsibilities and the structures within which the Episcopate [body of bishops] of the Church of England operates.”

The document suggests “a reduction in the number of Lords Spiritual”, the 26 bishops who sit in the House of Lords, **Continued on page 2, col 3**

though does not say to what number. Some senior bishops who no longer want to serve a geographical diocese could be appointed spokesmen on “special topics” about which they have “a very particular passion and knowledge”.

Some diocesan bishops comment on areas in which they have expertise, such as gambling reform, but none do so full time and all remain in charge of a regional territory. The church could “expand the number” of “non-territorial bishops”, the document says, adding: “These roles could be fixed term. Examples might have been the appointment of a Brexit bishop or a Covid bishop.”

Linda Woodhead, a professor of moral and social theology at King’s College, London, said of the document: “It’s really quite dramatic. Nothing like that has been thought about [before].” She said it made sense to reduce the number of dioceses because each “has a huge staff and costs a fortune” but said of appointing bishops to political-style roles: “The Archbishop of Canterbury would become a prime minister with a cabinet of people. That’s not just unfortunate, that’s wrong. That’s making the church into a shadow government.”

The Rev Marcus Walker, a rector in London, said that proposals to save money in struggling dioceses were “eminently sensible”, but said: “The church doesn’t need bishops acting as shadow government ministers, it needs bishops who are being pastors to their flocks.”

There are 42 diocesan bishops and 72 more junior bishops. Bishops are paid more than parish priests and given free housing and larger stipends depending on seniority, receiving up to £46,180 compared with about £27,000 for parish priests. Church leaders are discussing whether this system could be abolished to “diminish hierarchy and break down deference”.

The document considers imposing a seven-year term-limit for diocesan bishops “renewable for a further term”. At present bishops serve until retirement or resignation. Critics said that

this could make bishops less likely to speak out against church policy or leaders and increase the power of the Archbishop of Canterbury, who sits on the nomination commission for bishops.

Each of the church’s 42 dioceses has a “structure of boards and councils” for everything from staffing to finance and schools. The document warns that 27 of the 42 are “operating on deficit budgets”. It suggests merging up to two or three in some regions or pooling “back office” functions to save money. It adds, however, that: “Fewer dioceses should not necessarily mean fewer bishops.”

It suggests that groups of up to six dioceses could be brought under large umbrellas overseen by a new more senior form of “regional bishop”. Beneath them could be bishops in charge of the “largest urban areas” and others operating “within county boundaries”. Junior “suffragan” bishops could be given mini-constituencies, and the church could allow bishops to serve part-time or in a “job share”.

The document was developed by the Bishop of Ely with two church officials after speaking to bishops. It noted some concerns, warning: “Ministry grounded in a place was considered important and there was concern that this might be compromised by an over-enlargement of episcopal areas or the development of more specialist ‘cross-border’ forms of episcopal ministry.”

Any changes are likely to take place over ten years.

William Nye, secretary-general of General Synod, said none of the ideas in the document had been approved or ruled out but said: “I am not anticipating lots of examples of bishops for particular political issues.” He said: “It’s right for bishops as the leaders of the church to be thinking about what the implications are for how they work and how local churches are best supported.”

The General Synod meets this week and will discuss a review of the church’s governance but is not expected to be presented with the consultation document seen by *The Times*.

Episcopal interventions in public debate carry dangers, leading article, page 27