

PARISH POVERTY

Reduce the Number of Bishops to Lighten the Load

Donald Clarke

Church Treasurer

I have for some years been battling with the finances of my rural parish which, although relatively well endowed (by chance rather than by our own endeavours), has suffered declining revenues from an ageing congregation, a process accelerated by Covid which leaves our ever-increasing costs uncovered by income, and has resulted in our reserves being steadily eaten away. As the retired Finance Director of a major financial institution I can claim to know about negative cash flows and their consequences if left unchecked.

In October 2020 a national newspaper published a letter from me complaining about the archbishops meddling in politics when they should be more concerned about halting the decline of their own parish system. It attracted huge support, resulting in a letter to the State Commissioners supported by 400 concerned parishioners. Since then a new organisation has emerged - Save The Parish - which is dedicated to raising awareness of our plight and getting something done about it.

I recently read the archbishops' paper in response to the consultation document "Bishops and their ministry fit for a new context." They reached the conclusion that there are two main areas for consideration:

"The structural question around how dioceses are structured, the number and nature of them". And ... "The cultural question around how we seriously reflect on the behaviours and ways of working of bishops".

I am certainly qualified to comment on the first of these.

The consultation process has been a top-down operation, a much-needed and welcome initiative on the part of the archbishops. But it cannot be complete without taking into account the deeply felt and widespread concerns of the parishes, which are the bedrock of the Church of England. The archbishops' response does not refer to them: it is concerned only with the bishops and the dioceses. But the parishes, which should be a major concern, are in mortal danger. Contributing significantly to their decline has been the financial burden imposed on them by the dioceses in the form of the infamous Parish Share - an imposition, although theoretically voluntary, which absorbs two-thirds of my church's income.

Virginia Stourton analysed the problems we face in her article in the March 25th edition, demonstrating how egregiously out of touch the dioceses are by continuously adding non-productive staff to their payroll at the expense of the parishes and their overworked and underpaid clergy. Now we are to have single issue bishops, adding unnecessarily to the existing 114.

I would argue, in answer to the archbishops' question, that they should be instituting a closure programme, reducing the 42 dioceses to an absolute minimum and transferring the majority of bishops and their staff to pastoral duties in support of, and among, the hard-pressed parishes. There can be no possible justification for the continued existence of 42 dioceses with their 114 (now even more) bishops to support fewer than 7,000 parish clergy when 200 years ago only 26 were needed for 25,000 parish priests.

By this process the financial load on the parishes would be drastically reduced, ensuring the survival of many which are on the verge of



collapse, or being forced into the mergers which the consultation document seems to accept but Virginia Stourton forcibly condemns from a parishioner's point of view, arguing that the Church's own research shows it is a major contributor to the decline.

Reducing the number of dioceses will take time, however urgently it is treated, and will certainly face fierce resistance, but without such a radical solution the parish system will continue its decline. The report poses the question whether change by revolution or evolution is more acceptable. The resistance would come from those with most to lose, who are the bishops and their staff, so revolution is the only answer - led by the archbishops.

In the meantime, a practical way of preserving at-risk churches, already working in my own diocese, is for the richer parishes to support the poorer ones by contributing to their Parish Share. It is apparent that there is a huge disparity in wealth between the richest and the poorest. Some have accumulated reserves, perhaps from bequests, from windfall gains on the sale of property or pictures. Many have nothing but the weekly collection, which has diminished over the last two years, at the same time as the fall in income from events. This is a particular problem in deprived areas where the pastoral need is greatest and the resources available for its relief are least.

It is clear, too, that we all have to "sweat the assets", as we used to say in my commercial days. Our assets are of course the church buildings, the grounds and the hall if we are fortunate enough to have one. The current issue of the National Churches Trust periodical draws our attention to their use for hosting musical events: "Churches and music - a perfect match." The organisation Making Music brings together over 3,000 leisure time music societies many of which use churches for rehearsal and performance. There is clearly scope for churches not only to make use of such commercial opportunities but to reach out into their communities, bringing in many who have never been inside a church.

Another interim measure needed to keep the parishes afloat would be for the Parish Share to be reduced to a level at which it covers only the clergy costs, leaving all the diocesan overhead to be met from Central Church resources. This would have the incidental effect of lending urgency to the diocesan rationalisation programme.

We need the archbishops to accept the desperate plight of their parishes, recognising that without them the Church of England is nothing, put their preservation ahead of political interventions and set in motion the radical restructuring of the dioceses proposed here, which is implied but not expressed in their paper. Without it, we in the parishes will continue our slide into poverty and a very worthwhile proposal for reform will gather dust in the beautiful new library at Lambeth Palace.

Open Doors Reports on Persecution in Eritrea

ERITREAN CHRISTIANS MARK 20 YEARS OF CHURCH CLOSURES



Eritrean Christians worshipping

Christians in Eritrea mark 20 years of state persecution this month. The East African dictatorship shut down most of its churches in May 2002, outlawing every religion except Sunni Islam, Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church.

And today, 20 years later, the persecution continues. Release International is calling for full religious freedom in the country, which has been described as the North Korea of Africa.

'Eritrea is like a giant prison,' says Release partner Dr Berhane Asmelash. 'The country is filled with jails. It is like North Korea.'

The government has closed many Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. And even registered churches come under tight control.



Banned

Christians who continue to worship in banned congregations are regarded as enemies of the state. And believers in the armed services caught practising their faith face imprisonment.

Estimates vary as to the number of Christian prisoners in Eritrea. According to partners of Release International there are still an estimated 220 Christians behind bars. In March 2022, Eritrea jailed 29 Christians, after police raided a prayer meeting in a private house.

'Christians are the most persecuted group. It is because they won't stop gathering and won't stop worshipping,' says Dr Berhane. 'It is beyond the government's control.'

Most Christian prisoners are believed to be Pentecostal or Evangelical. Many are detained indefinitely and have been held for more than a decade, often without charge at

locations kept secret from their families. The authorities refuse to release records.

Torture

Some Christian prisoners have been kept in shipping containers, exposed to the searing desert heat by day and cold by night. Some are beaten and tortured to try to force them to renounce their faith.

The prison authorities ban praying aloud, singing, preaching or reading religious books.

One Christian prisoner, 'Elsa', said: 'We were kept in underground cells. Sometimes the guards put us in a metal shipping container to torture us. This became so hot during the day, and then in the night

it became freezing cold. We didn't get much to eat and there was no medical treatment.

'The guards offered to let us go, but only if we renounced our faith in Jesus. We said no.

'One evening we were taken into the bush, and I knew we were going to be beaten. They were going to inflict as much pain on us as they could. The guards took it in terms to beat us. I will never forget hearing the screams of my sister. I never saw her again.'

Eritrea broke free from Ethiopia in 1991 after a 30-year war for independence. Since 1993 the country has been ruled by a dictatorship, under the authoritarian president Isaias Afwerki and his party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Christianity took root in the region in the 4th century. Today, Eritrea is usually considered evenly split between Muslims and Christians, although Pew Research estimates almost 63 per cent to be Christian.



Capital City Asmara