

Save the Parish campaign clashes with the Bishop of Truro over church spending priorities

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The row between a group of Church of England parishioners in Cornwall including one lay member of its legislative body, the General Synod, and the Bishop of Truro has some elements of Trollopean farce but there are serious issues at stake.

According to a [press release](#) last week from CofE campaign group Save the Parish, (StP), Truro Bishop Philip Mounstephen 'curtly' refused to meet its supporters because they had gone to the press with their concerns about clergy cuts and 'costly evangelical initiatives like Transforming Mission in five towns in Cornwall'.

Truro Diocese then defended its Transforming Mission programme in the press. In Friday's [Church Times](#) the suffragan Bishop of St Germans, Hugh Nelson, said that all TM work was 'happening in and through local churches, and is an investment in the life and ministry of the parish'.

He [claimed](#) that in a diocese reporting the lowest number of children and young people engaged in church life the TM churches in Cornwall were doing 'outstanding work to connect with that demographic'.

But Anglican evangelicals traditionally have worked their parishes conscientiously. So, if StP is suggesting that evangelicals, with their theological convictions about the supreme authority of the Bible in Christian faith and conduct, the centrality of the Cross in salvation and the priority of evangelism, are anti-parish ministry, that would not be accurate.

If by evangelical StP means evangelistic, that is what evangelicals are. Knowing themselves to be 'miserable offenders' according to the Book of Common Prayer's *General Confession*, they want to reach lost people with the good news of the forgiveness of all sin through faith in God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Bishop Mountstephen is an evangelical, but he has limited frontline parish experience. According to his [profile](#) on the Truro Diocese website, he was a parish vicar for six years in the 1990s in Streatham, south London. In 1998 he joined the Anglican evangelical agency, the Church Pastoral Aid Society, becoming its head of ministry and then deputy general director.

In 2007 he became chaplain of St Michael's Church in the centre of Paris, 'a multicultural church with a congregation who spoke around 40 different languages'. So not your average CofE parish church then.

He became 'executive leader' of the Church Mission Society in 2012 where he 'oversaw the operation of all CMS's mission in 40 countries, leading a community of around 3,000 members and supporting around 350 people in mission around the world'. He became Bishop of Truro in 2018.

Bishop Mountstephen's CV raises serious questions for those responsible for appointing bishops in the CofE. How can just six years' experience of frontline parish ministry be adequate for the person appointed to be the senior Anglican pastor in a mainly rural county like Cornwall?

Frontline parish ministry is tough and getting tougher. Clergy cuts mean ever greater demands on the dwindling band of vicars or 'priests-in-charge' often running around several churches. How many CofE bishops know how it feels looking after multiple churches with the growing burden of bureaucratic demands from diocesan HQs?

Bishop Mountstephen is not among the diocesan bishops with personal experience of that because he was a vicar of only one parish church for a limited time. Surely, no bishop should be appointed without at least 10 years' experience as an incumbent?

StP would seem to be wrong in equating 'evangelical' with anti-parish in its recent press release. But the row in Cornwall raises grave questions about the CofE's senior appointments system.

Julian Mann is a former Church of England vicar, now an evangelical journalist based in the UK.