

Church needs to do more to support rural parishes

Credo

Emma Thompson



During the pandemic, the Church of England had a big opportunity to prove itself as a place of refuge and succour for the lonely and fearful. It blew it, frankly. The Archbishop of Canterbury closed the churches with indecent haste, something he now says he regrets. With the cost of living crisis, the CofE has a second chance to display its centrality to communities England-wide. The Queen, addressing bishops at the Lambeth Conference in August, said: “This is a time of great need for the love of God, both in word and deed.” It certainly is, but will our established religion fail the needy again?

Whether or not you are Christian, most communities still operate on a recognisably Christian model. The two greatest Christian commandments are loving God and thy neighbour (Matthew xxii, 36–40). I see this in action at my own village parish church, where a diverse group including widows, the elderly, the lame and refugees from Ukraine gather for fellowship and shared laughter over tea and cake. The 1,000-year-old parish system is the localised “delivery plan” for worshipping God and neighbourly deeds.

Yet, approaching a winter where many face a bleak choice between heating or eating, some CofE bishops are demolishing community. Wanton destruction of the parish system by dioceses is accelerating. Parishes are being bundled into “mega-parishes”, across which vicars are spread increasingly thin, making weekly Sunday services in every church impossible, breaking holy

habits and diluting communities.

The CofE’s own reports show that this policy drives decline in churchgoing (and donations). Your poor local vicar cannot be everywhere at once. One vicar serving 29 parishes (yes, really) is on a one-way ticket to a nervous breakdown. Yet Shula, a clergy character in *The Archers*, is portrayed as disdaining to become “a cosy curate in some country parish”.

Certain CofE dioceses are completely reordering their theology: collapsing the familiar, well-loved parish system for a non-Anglican “resource church” model, funded by lavish central grants. Some “new” churches that appear “more successful” have funding for eight paid staff. Many rural parishes have no vicar, or one vicar serving eight parishes. So, doing the maths, alternative models may be financially favoured by ratios of 64 to 1. Rural congregations cannot fairly be blamed for their driven decline.

In Cornwall, half the parish clergy in some areas are being cut by a church hierarchy appointed from elsewhere with no apparent understanding of local culture.

The “Save the Parish” (STP) movement is a year old. A relatively small, volunteer-led campaign group has “changed the narrative” remarkably quickly. Both archbishops now regularly namecheck the parishes and profess “love” for them. The Archbishop of York recently extolled church buildings in this column. However, as a *Times* commenter lamented that people in communities who pay to maintain these buildings are repulsed by wasteful spending on “layer upon layer of management, ‘new initiatives’, meaningless studies and projects.”

At July’s STP conference in York, the Archbishop of York, although good enough to attend, showed no urgency about cutting the 42 duplicative diocesan bureaucracies we find in

England alone. He claimed that the CofE lacks resources to provide more vicars. But STP’s volunteer accountants and auditors have now consolidated the accounts of the Church Commissioners, Archbishops’ Council and 42 dioceses. They discovered that in 2020, out of an investment income of about £500 million, only £45 million (9 per cent) was spent on parish ministry. Allocating resources to the “front line” is clearly not a top priority.

Financially, collapsing the viable parish system, with its vital localised pastoral care, is unnecessary. Declared diocesan deficits at the end of the difficult Covid year 2020 were trifling compared with the archbishops’ plan to spend £1.2 billion in 2023–25. It is also illogical; in 2020, rural churches with 24 per cent by population contributed 44 per cent of parish giving.

The CofE is funding a speculative model. The recent, independent *Chote report* showed that of £176 million allocated to create nearly 90,000 new “disciples”, £74.5 million spent produced fewer than 13,000, around 14 per cent. Can new projects become sustainable? The “Transforming Wigan” project, funded in 2014, does not evidence the dramatic transformation promised by documents full of managerial hyperbole.

The church has money and opportunity. At a time of national calamity, what would Jesus’s response be? Surely not the strategic blindness of funding 42 diocesan bureaucracies. More money should urgently be redirected to the front line, liberating clergy and volunteers to provide the support and sustenance that is desperately needed.

This is the Church of England’s chance to redeem itself by deed as well as word, through the parish’s local, loving and unifying power.

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