

**COMMENT**

The Church of England is neglecting its heart and soul

If church leaders undertook some parish-friendly financial rebalancing, a renewal is entirely possible

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23 December 2022 • 6:00am



At our village carol service last weekend, the candles and the rector glowed. He wrote afterwards that looking into a full church, post-lockdown, brought him hope. In a fragile world, that well-loved service of lessons and carols gave a palpable sense of mystery, continuity, community and belonging.

At Christmas, people of all ages go to church. It shows the value of the parish. The parish church is local, allowing volunteers like me to battle through snow to choir practice, bearing mulled wine against the chill. O tidings of comfort and joy! For many, belting out the Church's greatest hits expresses community as much as faith.

Rural areas host 50 per cent of England's Christmas church attendance. Yet Christmas also highlights [the driven decline of many parishes](#). Some churches have to hold carol services well before Christmas, after being bunched into groups so large that the priest in charge of the group can't get round them all.

Try asking your vicar – if you have one – how (s)he is at Christmas. The “emergency service” they provide may be faltering. Each year our rector charges around seven villages in all weathers, manning five lots of church services, four pub carol sessions, three Christmas fairs, two school nativity plays and one Midnight Mass. Then, he traditionally succumbs to a lurgy.

Many churches are vicarless. Expecting lay volunteers to officiate at this most wonderful time of year devalues priests, their theological training and unique “insider-outsider” status. Devolution is topical; volunteers like flatter structures and the ability to make decisions. However, a churchwarden is not the vicar any more than a soldier is a paramedic.

Much recent CofE decline appears driven by a culture at the centre deficient in evidence-based decision-making. The result is that, perversely, parishes are neglected. “Following the money” (as financially-trained volunteers from the campaign group I belong to, Save The Parish, have done) shows that the majority of 2021 CoE expenditure was not on front-line parish clergy. This is despite the fact that a parish with a paid priest is a proven income-generating model. Rural parishes feel especially abandoned, even though they provide 44 per cent of parish giving.

The cost of bloated Church administration is a self-inflicted wound. The Church is asking parishes for more money in return for reduced service, while doubling the funding it will provide for unproven alternative projects in 2023-2025. Bishops call varying forms of church a “mixed ecology”. It’s not “mixed” if it kills the parishes.

Expecting my village congregation to travel to a “hub” church would discriminate against the elderly, poor, disabled and (carless) Ukrainian refugees. Well-meant emphasis on attracting new, younger members leaves older churchgoers feeling unappreciated. However, churches need older people, too – a 10-year study showed churches with no over-45s struggling to grow.

People do not want parish churches closed. The use of local churches in response to our late Queen’s death made this obvious. Indeed, the best Christmas present the parishes could have would be to be heard. If Church leaders undertook some parish-friendly financial rebalancing, my rector might afford a curate or youth worker next year, instead of being asked to serve an extra seven parishes. That joyous hope of renewal, radiating from him in the darkness, might be fulfilled.

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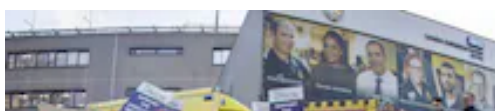
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