
Retreating Church

SIR – In his Christmas speech, King Charles paid tribute to the many churches that operate in this country for their outreach work, which provides people with food, love and support, among other things ([“Core values endure with King Charles”, Leading Article, December 26](#)).

The Church of England is a major contributor to this work through its parish system and the dedication of so many parish priests and their supporters, who give of their time and expertise largely on a voluntary basis.

The value of the parish system comes from the fact that it can reach out to all sections of the community across England. Yet, as many of your correspondents have pointed out, the parish system is under threat – not, as you might imagine, from external forces, but from within.

Due to financial pressures there is a move in many dioceses to accelerate the closure of parish churches, including many in rural areas, and move to bigger parishes (with some being described as “super parishes”), and reduce the number of clergy. These moves fly in the face of all the evidence, which clearly demonstrates that once you remove the “local” from a community, support in all its forms drops away.

It would be naive not to expect some churches to close, but surely there is a strong argument to resource and build on a system that has been tried and tested for over 1,000 years and is still capable of delivering. If, however, the Church continues to withdraw, there will be consequences for the country. The social outreach work undertaken by Church supporters is bound to diminish.

“The House of Good”, a report by the National Churches Trust, estimated the monetary value of the work undertaken by all churches in 2021 at about £55 billion per annum. At a time when pressure on social services is increasing, the gap as volunteers fall away will have to be filled and the public purse may have to pick up the bill.

The time has come for Parliament, which has devolved power to the Church, to scrutinise what is happening.

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