



Church needs to fund more vicars to reverse decline

Emma Thompson

Last week a Church of England report confirmed what village communities already know: cutting parish vicars and service provision reduces church attendance (“More than a quarter of churches hold no weekly Sunday service”, April 4). Yet it is astonishing how bishops and diocesan bureaucrats continue to impose clergy cuts as a “strategy”.

They claim there is no alternative, for financial reasons. However, the adage that “the Church is rich” holds true. About 70 per cent of its annual income comes from the parishes, and 30 per cent from an investment portfolio worth billions. Financial volunteers from the network Save the Parish have proved from published accounts that clergy-cutting is not financially necessary but a political choice.

Church leaders’ spending priorities — bureaucracy and “projects” — are skewing resources away from small and rural parishes, although rural parishes donate nearly half the total raised by parish congregations. More managers are being hired. There are 950 clergy in office jobs rather than parishes.

Covid apparently provided an opportunity to “reimagine ministry”. With what evidence, justification or policy discussion? Meanwhile, many parish churches are being deliberately left vicarless (“in vacancy”) for long periods. The report shows that this shrinks congregations; and that merging parishes, spreading clergy thinly, means fewer services.

Studies show that fewer paid priests means lower attendance and giving. Yet congregations appear to be blamed for the fall in churchgoing. Volunteers seem expected to take services instead.

My local church — which provides lunches for the elderly, litter-picks, food bank collections, and support to the lonely and isolated — remains at the village community’s heart. The rector, living among us, is regularly called out in crises. Local churches provide the equivalent of £55 billion per annum of social care, according to the National Churches Trust. In the C of E, it is local parish clergy who foster love, co-operation and trust.

The Archbishop of York has said: “We want the Church of England to grow, and even if it doesn’t, then let our death be a grand operatic death.” But you can’t stage an opera if you start by firing the singers. You can’t expect untrained audience members to do the singing, keep paying for tickets and bring in new supporters.

Why is the Church of England flying in the face of evidence which clearly demonstrates that cutting clergy and merging parishes is the wrong response to decline? It is accelerating its own decline.

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