

Clergy cuts and the bishops' platform in Parliament

Julian Mann | 27 May 2023 | 6:03 AM



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Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby is determined to continue opposing the [government's Illegal Migration Bill](#) but for how much longer will Anglican bishops be allowed a platform in Parliament?

MPs' disillusion with the Church of England's leadership, it seems, is being fuelled not so much by political disagreements but by the creation of mega-parishes depriving local communities of their vicars.

The Save the Parish network has posted [on its website](#) a recent BBC Politics South West broadcast in which two regular church-going MPs, one Conservative and one Labour, were fiercely critical of the CofE hierarchy, particularly in Cornwall's Truro diocese where the cost-cutting strategy of amalgamating parishes is being rolled out.

Filmed playing the organ in a parish church and then in the lobby of the House of Commons, Chris Loder, Conservative MP for Dorset West, said: "One of the things I've valued so much in my life is being able to know who the parish priest is and to be able to have a relationship with them and that's very, very important. That's something that is becoming more and more difficult I think, particularly in the diocese of Truro."

He then called on the CofE bishops in the House of Lords to put their own house in order before presuming to "pontificate" about political issues: "I know that when people see here in the Houses of Parliament bishops having very strong opinions – you could say pontificating on legislation here in Parliament – rather than focussing on the health and well-being of the Church of which they are leaders, it understandably is causing great concern."

Labour MP for Exeter Ben Bradshaw joined Loder in criticising frontline clergy cuts. He said: "The Church of England is an extremely rich institution. It is one of our country's major land owners. There are certain dioceses, and Truro is one of these, where there are real concerns that there's money in the pot that's not being used to support and appoint clergy."



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"Parishes are losing their clergy or getting these huge mega-parishes which are unmanageable and people, particularly in rural areas, are not being served."

Controversy is now raging over the formation of mega-parishes, called Minster Communities, in Leicester diocese after the first one was launched on April 30. The Launde Minster Community brings together 35 churches in 24 parishes under one "Oversight Minister", Canon Jonathan Dowman.



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In a letter to the *Church Times* on May 26, Leicester's diocesan secretary, Jonathan Kerry, responded to an article by Canon Angela Tilby which was critical of the scheme. He wrote: "It is incorrect to state that minster communities are an attempt to merge or abolish parishes. Rather, they seek to put them on a footing that is sustainable for mission and ministry in the 21st century and is financially self-sustaining."

But in her letter to the paper Save the Parish campaigner Canon Professor Alison Milbank said the large minster communities in Leicester "might more properly be described as 'monster' communities".



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"How can any proper cure of souls be exercised in such a unit?" she asked.

There are 26 bishops in the House of Lords, called Lords Spiritual, including the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. The CofE has that platform because it is the national Church by law established in England. It is certainly true that regular church-going MPs like Bradshaw and Loder are in a minority in the House of Commons and therefore most MPs do not at present share their strong views about clergy cuts. But once MPs register disquiet from their constituents about mega-parishes, more of them could start piping up.

Furthermore, if the General Election in 2024 produces a Labour-SNP coalition government, that regime would be more favourable to calls to disestablish the CofE than the present Conservative government. Under that political scenario and with growing outrage among MPs about frontline clergy cuts, the bishops might find that being [reliably Left-wing](#) does not suffice to save them.

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