

Anger over plan for ‘mega’ parish with just three priests

Changes in Leicester will bring 23 parishes under the Launde Minster Community, which some church members claim is unsustainable

By Neil Johnston
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 49

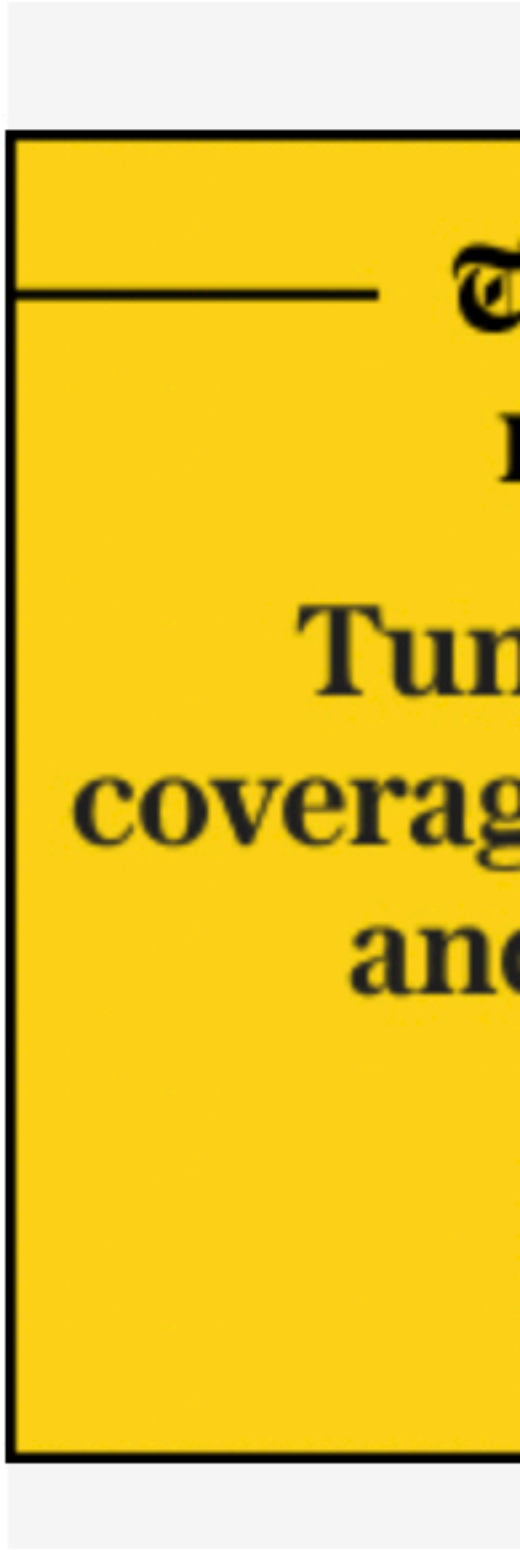


Canon Angela Tilby wrote: “In emergencies, people want a priest, not an answer phone or a promise to call back”

The Church of England is facing a backlash over the merger of nearly two dozen parishes into one community with only three ministers.

Changes in [Leicester](#) will bring 23 parishes under the Launde Minster Community, which some church members claim will mean just one full-time minister will represent the congregations.

About 600 worshippers within the parishes would be affected, said the Church, in an area with a total population of 7,800 – smaller than many other places in the country.



Plans were first announced two years ago, for [Leicester](#)’s 234 parishes to be brought under 20 to 25 “minster communities” to ensure “a financially unsustainable future” for churches.

However, the diocese is now facing questions over whether enough ministers have been assigned to the new communities.

Writing in the Church Times, [Canon Angela Tilby](#) said each of the new communities would only have three priests, two of whom were only pioneer ministers.



She said the diocese would “parish share, along with a lot of sold-off parish assets, to solve its deficit” and merge small parishes, which would involve “gobbling up the assets of parishes that are really working”.

‘Insensitive to theological difference’

Canon Tilby said the new model was “insensitive to theological difference” and “what Leicester is doing simply contradicts the Ordinal, which makes clear that such ministry is the lifeblood of the Church”.

“In emergencies, people want a priest, not an answer phone or a promise to call back,” she wrote.

Canon Tilby said parishes often did not realise they could say no to plans and argue that a scheme would not work.

“They can stand on the evidence that the scheme is unlikely to work: cutting the numbers of clergy usually means a loss in both numbers and giving. The diocese may be broke, but the C of E isn’t. It is not too late to divert the central funds,” she added.

Her concerns were echoed by campaigners at [Save The Parish](#), who said the new community was a “mega parish” and unsustainable.

Emma Thompson from Save The Parish said the changes were “against the evidence which the Church of England itself has put out in the public square about how to make churches grow”.

‘Exhausted’ clergy

“Leicester Diocese has one of the worst ratios of diocesan staff to parish clergy and should look to cut diocesan staff before cutting clergy.”

“Clergy are already exhausted from being stretched too thinly over huge geographical areas.

“How can one Oversight Minister, although there is no such role in ecclesiastical law, possibly take a personal interest in such huge groups of churches and their congregations? Only clergy can give Holy Communion – lay helpers can’t,” said Ms Thompson.

“Those attending will have fewer services, less vicar time and be expected to travel (if they can) to services in churches other than their own. [This impacts most on the elderly and poor](#). Not many bishops have been rural parish priests.”

She added: “If this new Minster scheme goes through, the ancient, proven, localised parish priest model is finished in Leicestershire.”

‘Financially self-sustaining’

The Diocese of Leicester said it was not seeking to “abolish parishes, but rather seek to put them on a footing that is sustainable for mission and ministry in the 21st century, and are financially self-sustaining”.

It said there was no set number of churches for a Minster Community, and this would be “decided in conversation between local churches and diocesan officers”.

A spokeswoman said the Minster Community framework came out of an extensive research exercise and 400 local conversations and it was approved by the diocese’s synod, with 72 per cent of members in favour.

She said the number of clergy was “not a fixed number” and the framework could be adapted.