

SAVE THE PARISH

November 2022 By Emma Thompson

BACKGROUND

As a member of the laity, I'm often in awe of the work so many priests do to keep their churches open and thriving. I see priests struggle with far too many parishes to be feasible, driving themselves into the ground dashing between multiple communities. I can see why the clergy have the second highest suicide rate of any profession and why so many priests leave ministry before retirement.

I say this not to be depressing, but because so much of the survival of our Church and of Christianity in England rests upon their shoulders. Lay people like me feel concerned by what they see. This is why so many of the laity have risen up over the last year in support of parishes and their clergy in the "Save the Parish" ("STP") campaign. Let me tell you how it started.

Personally, as a journalist and rural churchgoer, I was dismayed by the closure of churches in the pandemic. I felt that the Archbishops had 'missed an open goal' when they closed church buildings instead of insisting that churches provide an 'essential service'. However, since I live in a village with a visible church community, I

saw it continuing with good pastoral work. At Easter 2020, I tried to cheer people up despite the absence of church services (and the furloughing of Dylan, our Palm Sunday donkey!) by writing a feature for the Daily Telegraph. My article described how some parish priests around the country were giving wonderful pastoral care.

There were thoughtful, priest-led community initiatives (such as delivering 'Church-eroo' hot meals cooked from donated beef) to tackle fear, loneliness and financial hardship and give isolated people hope. One Gloucestershire vicar who left baskets in his large church porch found them overflowing with hundreds of prayers (most from non-churchgoers) written on luggage labels supplied for the purpose, which he tied to a 'prayer tree'. Another vicar delivered prescriptions to the elderly, commenting: 'People are really pleased to see you when you give them their drugs'. At grassroots level in many places, the great commandment to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' was being lived out in localised service.

In October 2020, my interest was sparked by a letter from lay parish treasurer Donald

Clarke which was printed in the Daily Telegraph. Donald (the former financial director of 3i) highlighted the need for the Church of England to reduce the financial and administrative burdens imposed on parishes by its bureaucracy. He wrote of the Covid-related income crisis in parishes which had been unable to hold fundraising events, yet were still being pressurised by dioceses for parish share payments. He warned that many village churches would go 'to the wall'. Thus began a reader postbag so large that, unusually, letters on this topic were printed for three weeks. One letter from Len Palfrey ('Where the Church of England's money goes') noted that the £900m income being distributed by the Church Commissioners from their historic investment portfolio, which had comfortably been mentioned by three Bishops in a letter to the newspaper which Len described as 'tendentious', was already earmarked with £230m going to dioceses and the rest to pensions, bishops, training and cathedrals. None was going to parishes.

I was struck that the volunteers in a Christian organisation felt forced to appeal for understanding and help through the newspapers. If the Church Commissioners were distributing huge sums of income, why was so much going to the dioceses

rather than the parishes where the mission work is done? It is in the parishes that goodwill, church attendance and consequently income from donations – just under £1 billion per annum in recent years – are all generated. The parishes pay for the dioceses, which are consumers of resources and supposedly there to serve parishes rather than the other way around. A Daily Telegraph report of 30th October, and leading article of 31st October 2020 entitled "Protecting Parishes", supplied some answers. The report confirmed that the parish share system was being overloaded with bureaucratic costs. While numbers of stipendiary clergy were being reduced in many dioceses, paid diocesan jobs with grandiose titles (such as Southwark's £40,000 Head of 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation') were being increased. It seemed obvious that a member of the General Synod was correct in telling the reporter "We need localism, not managerialism". However, worryingly, the Synod member asked to be anonymous, with the report describing a culture of secrecy and enormous pressure to 'toe the party line' on CofE policy. Clergy spoke of a bullying culture which treated the Church as a business, with pressure from dioceses to bring in new Christians as well as funds.

Unfortunately, the leading article concluded that the "fear" was that the Church's leaders were ignoring their people's concerns because its **"future model was a streamlined organisation: sell off church buildings and concentrate its efforts in urban areas"**. The newspaper called for the Church's leaders to pay more attention to parishes "which, without fuss, week after week do the good work of maintaining Christian witness in the countryside".

TWO 'ANTI-PARISH' STRUCTURAL IMBALANCES

Examining where money is going showcases where the Church's priorities lie. Its money flows need rebalancing in favour of the parishes. Two structural imbalances, which drive parish decline, remain of serious concern to congregations, non-churchgoers and clergy in parishes (not only rural ones). The first imbalance is that too much of the donated income from 'front line' parishes is being consumed by the costs of duplicative, bureaucratic diocesan middle management. The second imbalance is that Church Commissioner investment income is being channelled away from parishes into diocesan projects. (This also enables the characterisation of diocesan offices as full of bureaucrats to be

vehemently contested by those behind diocesan desks, who would say they are doing 'mission'.)

The effect of both imbalances is that diocesan consumption of resources is setting up a vicious circle of driven decline and income loss in the parishes. Driving decline risks killing the golden goose, since the parishes provide about 70% of the Church's total annual income. About 30% comes from income on the historic investments – from the gifts of past generations – managed by the Church Commissioners.

First, there are the costs of bureaucracy and mismanagement. There were some risible attempts by dioceses to dismiss the October 2020 Telegraph articles as the concerns of 'right-wing' press. To anyone with financial or business experience, regardless of their political leanings, the CoFE has a ridiculously top-heavy and expensive management. This is particularly inappropriate in charitable organisations. Two hundred years ago, when I believe 10 times as many people went to church, there were only 26 bishops; now, there are about 115. The Church's own figures tell us that 980 trained, ordained clergy are working in non-parochial posts (such as for the seven National Church Institutions). There are 42

duplicative diocesan administrations. The diocese of Oxford alone has five communications officers. Financially speaking, for the parishes, all of these people represent overheads.

By contrast, front-line parish clergy who care for people directly in their communities attract donations, generating income. Published evidence links the presence of stipendiary (paid) clergy directly to church attendance and giving. A diocesan survey between 2006-11 showed a clear correlation between reduced clergy numbers and increased parish decline. The Bishop of Peterborough in a 2014 video made his view clear that reducing clergy was directly connected to the Church losing 100,000 worshippers a year. From a lay volunteer perspective, bloated, distant diocesan bureaucracy which presses for the supposedly-voluntary parish share payment and intervenes to 'manage' the local relationship between pew and pulpit becomes not only expensive, but also a time-consuming annoyance and a distraction.

Yet many dioceses persist in driving parish decline by reducing stipendiary clergy posts and/or increasing the number of often-better-paid diocesan jobs. There is neither spiritual nor financial logic in doing

so. It is also unfair to cut clergy stipends because the parish share and glebe/endowment income (also originally from the parishes) provide enough income to pay for stipends, as calculated by my financial colleagues.

On the operational front, amalgamating churches into benefices, which suits dioceses because parishes can share clergy and 'surplus' parsonages can be sold to swell the diocesan coffers, not only exacerbates the pressure on overstretched clergy, but actively drives decline in attendance and giving. The Church's 2014 report on church growth "From Anecdote to Evidence" concludes that declining churches are more likely to have an incumbent who is also responsible for other churches and "the larger the number of churches in the amalgamation the more likely they are to decline". It quotes a vicar who used to give much time to preparing people for baptism and confirmation but who spoke of her sadness at "going from having two parishes to having five and suddenly feeling I can't do any of this any more". Many parishes have also been left in interregnum for long periods; last week a Norfolk parishioner told me of being surrounded by 19 churches in interregnum. Research by Goodhew, Kautzer and Moffatt states "There is considerable evidence to suggest that

vacancies (interregna) are a crucial...cause of church decline.... Evidence strongly suggests that the longer the vacancy, the bigger the decline".

Financially-minded laity also recognize the strategic short-sightedness of allowing dioceses to sell capital assets such as parsonages and, instead of banking the capital to generate future income, pouring it away on their own running costs. The organisation "Save Our Parsonages" has been pointing out for years that this amounts to 'selling the family silver'. Selling parsonages shrinks the Church's infrastructure, meaning that a village without a parsonage will never again have a priest dwelling among the people, and is of course unsustainable. For many communities it feels tantamount to theft of parish buildings, often built at the local community's expense. Undeniably, it represents the physical withdrawal of the Church from their midst. It is not a hopeful scenario, at a time when hope is much needed.

The second imbalance which drives parish decline is when dioceses hoover up funding from the investment income on the portfolio managed by the Church Commissioners. This income is being channelled away from parishes into speculative diocesan initiatives which may not become sustainable. It is a strategic gamble to send funding to dioceses

(supposedly the parishes' support systems) for their own 'visions' and 'mission', so that they channel much Church money and support staff time into setting up, staffing, energising and generously resourcing new 'resource churches' while neighbouring parishes struggle to survive. The imbalance of where resources are being focussed creates a false comparison of comparative 'success' in the eyes of onlookers who do not know about the funding inequality. Crucially, it will ultimately undermine not only the parishes' morale but their ability to generate income, while fully-funded new initiatives may or may not become sustainable without future grant funding. This is like the Church sawing off the branch on which it sits without being sure that it has a safety net in place.

The problem lies in the Archbishops' Council's taking Church Commissioner income and passing it on to dioceses, who bid for it, in the form of grants. A clue why a policy of spending on new diocesan initiatives has been prioritised over spending on the parishes lies in some unkind comments made in 2015 by Canon Dr John Spence (chair of the Archbishops' Council Finance Committee and CofE Strategic Investment Board) when the 'Darlow formula' policy for income distribution was changed to begin "Strategic Development Funding" ("SDF")

for diocesan mission initiatives. Dr Spence spoke of not wanting to subsidise parish 'failure'.

While seeking church growth is of course desirable, blaming dwindling congregations and thinly-spread clergy for their own decline seems most unfair when this has been caused by management policies. Income and capital have been pumped out of the parish system by the dioceses. Rural parishes have been amalgamated (a total of six parsonages have been sold in my benefice) into a model which drives decline. Another way of looking at it would be that the Archbishops' Council in 2015 made a deliberate choice to divert funding away from day-to-day pastoral ministry embedded in local communities (despite that fewer people go to church because society has secularised, meaning that the Gospel is more needed than ever). The Council is in theory a democratic body but leading members of the Council such as the Archbishops and Dr Spence seem to control it and seem strikingly indifferent to parish protests about the outcome.

With some honourable exceptions, the dioceses increasingly seem to see themselves as regional head offices, supervising local branches, many of which are struggling. Closure (like pubs, banks and post offices) may look like the rational

'business' approach. It is in fact abandonment and asset-stripping. It ignores the chief purpose of the Church and is inconsistent with the view that the C of E is an 'ecclesia' for everyone, faith or no faith.

Dr Spence's attitude to the parishes contrasts with the comments, also in 2015, of Bishop James Bell in a report for the Rural Affairs Group: "A Christian presence in every community is more than a strap-line - it is the heart of English Anglicanism. It is the expression of our obligation, as the church for all the people of the nation, to leave no community untouched by the gospel of Jesus Christ, lived out among the people of every place...". Yet ecclesiological understanding seems degraded. Diocesan bishops increasingly seem to behave as if they were junior middle managers under the direction of the Archbishop. Archdeacons seem to act as if they were merely bishops' officers (and not ordinaries in their own right, with jurisdiction that is inherent in their offices and not received by delegation from the bishop). The autonomy of parish clergy and PCCs with respect to the pandemic closure of their church buildings was overruled.

Even if the Church is reordering itself around a 'business' model, financially-qualified lay people and business leaders comment that it is an inept and outdated one, reminiscent of 1970s managerialism, with far too much administration and alienating use of management-speak. In November 2020, The Archbishop of York announced proposals entitled 'Vision and Strategy for the Church of England in the 2020s'. These were launched in a numbers-free document, with diagrams and incomprehensible expressions, such as being called to be a 'Jesus-shaped' Church, which made it hard to understand what was actually being proposed. Its modish-sounding phrases, such as 'mixed ecology' Church, could not alleviate fears that the broad CofE will cease to be 'mixed' if the strategy kills the parishes. The foreseeable outcome is that, when donors see the full tragedy of what is being imposed on parishes, they will not want to pay the parish share or leave legacies to their churches.

RESPONSE FROM THE TOP

On 31st January 2021, a Sunday Times article asked whether the CofE was using the pandemic as an excuse to abandon the parochial system. A leaked internal Church

pandemic report called 'Money, People and Buildings' had been sent to the 42 diocesan secretaries, making it clear that parish clergy cuts were on the agenda. It included this smoking gun: "Many diocesan leaders believe that the financial challenges being exposed by the pandemic mean this is the moment to embark on radical changes to reshape existing resource patterns and ministry structures". In February 2021, I was commissioned to write a Spectator cover story. This was how I first met The Revd Marcus Walker, who subsequently founded STP. Fr Marcus as a member of the clergy was asked to write a shorter piece alongside mine.

My article ("Holy relic: The Church of England as we know it is disappearing") was a lay perspective on parish sadness over Covid church closures, parish treasurers being publicly bullied for parish share 'arrears' before being allowed a new vicar and the clergy-cutting which was happening then in Chelmsford Diocese (and is still happening in many other dioceses now). Chelmsford's bishop had been promoted to become Archbishop of York; it was without a Bishop at that time and in deficit. Every parish had been cruelly RAG-rated (categorised red, amber or green) on its viability and ability to pay

the parish share - implying that clergy posts would be prioritised in rich parishes over poor. A programme of 61 parish clergy cuts had been announced. However, in an illogical and crass piece of timing, the diocese was simultaneously recruiting for a CEO at an annual salary of £85-90,000. It had also launched a Generous Giving campaign, threatening 49 further clergy cuts to follow by 2026 if giving did not increase. As Canon Tiffer Robinson has written on Twitter, a diocese can cut its parish clergy costs or can campaign to increase giving; but it seems unviable to do both. People in parishes have choice about their charitable giving and seek evidence of value for money. Who feels motivated to donate more money in return for less service?

Fr Marcus ("All that is sacred") wrote of "the impression that the national church does not understand or value the little platoons that give it its life: the parishes, people, and clergy spread across the country ministering in the midst of death, mental collapse and financial chaos". He wrote that "this matters to the nation".

Our articles struck a chord with readers, evidencing that the national Church did matter to the nation. There followed a noticeable increase in Spectator

subscriptions and the largest reader postbag the Spectator letters editor could remember. The following week, the Spectator printed a whole page of church letters, almost all in support of Fr Marcus and me. Mr William Nye, Secretary-General of the Archbishops' Council, posted an angry letter on the Church of England website, writing of "an imaginary national plan to roll out cuts" and dismissively describing concern over pandemic church closures as an "old canard".

The Spectator also printed a furious joint response from the Archbishops ('There are no plans to dismantle the parish network'), which only rather proved the point. For example, the Archbishops made the defensive 'straw man' comments that 'There is no central plan for all of this. How could there be? Each diocese is its own legal and charitable entity and makes its own decisions'. Yet the diocesan secretaries had all received the same centrally-issued document. What was the decision to replace the Darlow formula funding for parishes with SDF grants to dioceses, if not a national or central plan? Neither was the Vision and Strategy the result of local decision-making.

Their and Mr Nye's emphasis on the word 'plan' struck me. A STP colleague who is

an ex-civil servant cynically warned that the words "There are no plans to cut..." represent 'the oldest trick in the ministerial handbook'. Cuts will be the consequence, but are not 'planned' yet. The Archbishops also wrote: "There are rascally voices around who want to undermine the church — it was ever thus." My children laughed out loud at the idea that people like me, who have volunteered for and funded my local church for many years, or Fr Marcus who runs a thriving church, could be 'rascally' and treated as the enemy. Yet all my and even Fr Marcus' views appeared to be falling on deaf ears. Given the financial logic, why was this?

Anthony Jennings, the former Director of Save Our Parsonages, writes (in an essay featured on savetheparish.com under the heading 'STP Publication/Essays') of years of experience that the dioceses treat anyone who proffers constructive criticism or feedback from the grassroots as "little more than adversaries". He concludes: "The unsatisfactory nature of our relationship seems to stem from the continuing centralisation of powers in the central Church institutions over the years. The Church institutions have become unreceptive to input and impervious to unsolicited ideas. They have no real wish to engage and they feel no need to."

Worse than centralisation is the arrogance inherent in making diocesan mission initiatives a financial priority and assuming that the dioceses know best how to create growth without localised knowledge and relationships. They seem to regard getting the word to the heathen people of English cities as a numbers-driven mission, like being a missionary to Africa in days of yore. Those who are driving this plan, in an attempt to turn around church numbers, are therefore dismissive of any other suggestions. Of course, all Christians want more churchgoers, including more families and young people, and could not argue against such 'motherhood and apple pie' aims. Having a plan to grow church numbers is entirely reasonable. However, undermining the ancient parish system, including even well-attended parish churches, in order to resource and implement that plan is not.

A Civitas report in June 2021 observed the hierarchy's distraction from the CofE's basic purpose and described Covid church closures as a "golden opportunity" which had been missed. It commented that the CofE was "losing its ability to minister at local level because it is making expensive appointments at diocesan level while closing local parish churches and making vicars redundant..."

Seeking higher level intervention, in June 2021 some of the Daily Telegraph correspondents and I organised a letter to the six 'State Commissioners' (MPs and Peers who are ex officio Church Commissioners). By word of mouth alone, 400 signatures to the letter from around the country were obtained in a few days. It raised issues which we felt were of obvious concern to Parliament: the unaccountable, costly bureaucracy in the 42 dioceses (which naturally had no interest in reforming themselves, although significant reduction in the duplication of administration was requested by the General Synod in 2018); recent York University research showing increased post-pandemic community need which would be incompatible with parish clergy cuts; and the need to have a proper national discussion about the future of church buildings, rather than allowing them to be closed and sold by dioceses piecemeal.

I was put in touch with Admiral Sir James Burnell-Nugent, who had read my Spectator piece and had organised a petition on change.org with 1,600 signatures to go to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Those signatures, raised within a matter of weeks from strangers, were another indicator of the strength of

grassroots concern about how parishes were being treated. The petition read: "We the undersigned are pleading to the Archbishop of Canterbury to stop plans to diminish the role of the Parish in the Anglican Church in England. Please reconsider how the Church can give top priority to Parishes and similar ministries such as hospitals and prisons. This is the core function of the Christian Church and should be the focus for senior leadership, resources and energy. Gathering to worship in our parish churches is what fuels the fire of faith".

The Archbishop wrote a personal reply stating that the redeployment of ministers [away from parishes] was "in the interest of a more flourishing faith across our nation". Well, that is not across the 27% of the population who live in rural areas and provide 44% of the total annual giving (to quote from the answer to a Parliamentary Question by Ben Bradshaw MP in August 2022). The sum they give is more than the Church Commissioners provide from the income on its investment portfolio. It seems self-evident that this scale of giving needs to be encouraged by appointing more clergy to rural areas, thereby holding up or even growing this essential source of revenue to the Church as a whole, rather than squeezing the rural churches out of

existence.

LAUNCH OF THE STP MOVEMENT

Among the ambitious targets set by the Archbishop of York in his Vision and Strategy was the establishment within the next 10 years of 10,000 new, predominantly lay-led 'worshipping communities', apparently envisaged in sitting rooms large enough to hold 20-30 people. One might be forgiven for wondering who these people can be, with the leisure time and the mansions in which to hold large gatherings free of charge, and what the safeguarding arrangements would be. In July 2021, at a conference on church planting, Canon John McGinley announced the Myriad project for another new 10,000 lay-led churches (which Canon Dave Male confirmed to the Church Times on 9th July were separate and additional to those planned by the Archbishop of York to 'emerge' from 'revitalised parish ministry'). So that would be 20,000 new 'churches', when there are currently 12,500 parishes in the CofE. How would these be funded if not once again at the parishes' expense?

Canon John McGinley said this: "Lay-led churches release the Church from key limiting factors. When you don't need a building and a stipend and long, costly

college-based training for every leader of church... then actually we can release new people to lead and new churches to form. It also releases the discipleship of people. In church-planting, there are no passengers."

There was understandable outrage from parish clergy and congregants at being rudely described as 'key limiting factors' and 'passengers'. Clergy asked whether people would expect to rely on untrained surgeons or pilots. On 10th July 2021, Fr Marcus Walker wrote in the Spectator ("Breaking faith: Is this the last chance to save the Church of England?") that "Once you've ditched the buildings, the clergy and theological education, you don't have much of a church left". He concluded that a building, a stipend and clerical training should be the CofE's key spending priorities; "That sounds like an ambition worth having – and a more plausible and desirable one than 10,000 mansion churches led by the untrained super-rich".

Thus the campaign known as "Save The Parish" ("STP") was launched on 3rd August 2021. About 100 of its first supporters gathered together in the City of London, at Great St Bartholomew, church of The Revd Marcus Walker. Fr Marcus explained how the parishes were under threat. An excellent talk by Canon

Professor Alison Milbank (co-author with The Reverend Dr Andrew Davison of the book "For The Parish") set out the ecclesiological and historical importance of the parish.

The Reverend Stephen Trott, a Church Commissioner and longstanding member of General Synod, cogently explained the traditional status of the Church of England. With its local buildings and trained local priests living among the people, to know and love them as Jesus did and provide them with pastoral care, the Church of England provides a localised 'presence in every parish'. Its services are available to 'everyone, everywhere': as of right to every parishioner (of all faiths or none). Fr Stephen also provided an interesting exposition of the role of Parliament in overseeing England's Established Church. There were over 5,000 views of STP's launch online (the number currently stands at 5,799). If you are a website-user, you can still view recordings of these talks on STP's website, savetheparish.com, under the heading "About". The same website page sets out STP's Mission Statement and Manifesto. The website's home page displays a document entitled "What Do We Seek?" In brief, STP's *raison d'être* is to put the parish back to the top of the queue in the allocation of resources. In September 2021, I wrote another

Spectator article drawing attention to a green paper numbered GS2222, which I nicknamed the 'Church Closers' Charter'. It was a new attempt at a power shift to dioceses. The document revealed that dioceses were, collectively, considering tripling the rate of church closures and would like more power to hurry the process along. It envisaged more clergy dispossessions and possible reductions in rights of representation and appeal, making the dioceses less accountable.

The CofE, perhaps accustomed to its legislation 'going under the radar', seemed surprised by the scale and force of the public response. There were 1,686 responses to the public consultation, which were overwhelmingly hostile. People care about the future of church buildings. The response has not prevented the continuation of an adjusted attempt to amend the 'Mission and Pastoral Measure', the 2011 legislation governing pastoral reorganisation schemes; this needs watching closely.

Supporters who attended STP's successful launch were recommended to stand as candidates in the forthcoming General Synod elections of October 2021. The results saw an estimated 150 people elected to the Synod, after expressing a wish to save the parish in their manifestos.

Little did we know, at the stage when our representatives were elected to the General Synod, that Synod was being increasingly bypassed. For example, the Archbishops' Council three-year budget takes no input from General Synod. It is constructed by just 11 people, most of them ex officio rather than elected. It has committed £1.2bn in spending of income from the Church Commissioners over the three years 2023-25 – supposedly in line with the 'Vision and Strategy' promulgated by the Archbishop of York (and described by him in a recorded interview at Easter 2021 as "only a set of proposals"). However, the Vision and Strategy itself has barely been discussed in General Synod. Workshops held, even schoolchildren consulted, 'updates' have been given, there has been a 'take note' debate (entailing no commitment) in November 2021 – but it has not been put to the General Synod in the form of a policy for discussion followed by agreement or rejection. One of my STP colleagues who is an elected lay representative on the General Synod comments: "By July 2022 the Vision and Strategy was more or less a fait accompli, with money already spent on attempting to deliver it, millions more promised and staff structures rearranged to suit it. The technique used is to work around formal structures rather than work with them, and instead use soft power and

other mechanisms to change the 'culture' and hope you never need a formal vote, and if you do, by that time resistance is clearly futile."

If the CofE (which belongs in a broad sense to the people of England) is being refashioned there should, as Fr Marcus wrote in the Spectator, be proper debate. The Church's current leaders have custody of billions of pounds. Committing huge sums to support an unapproved plan is not a satisfactory way of undertaking financial governance.

FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMBALANCES

To generate financial evidence for STP's views, we have assembled a powerful financial scrutiny team of volunteers with accountancy, audit and actuarial qualifications, which we call 'Finscrute'. Finscrute has produced a consolidation of the 2020 and 2021 accounts of the 42 dioceses and various National Church Institutions, to create a financial overview which the Church of England's own finance people have confirmed to be correct. Finscrute's figures and comprehensive analysis have allowed us to analyse where money is being squandered.

The total 'income' of the CofE is £1.4bn (in

2020). Parishes provide just under £1bn, the Church Commissioners £320m and Diocesan Endowments (much of it from glebe, i.e. originally owned by the parishes, and therefore restricted to stipends) £130m. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in an interview with the Church Times "We've got a lot of money." He also said: "It's usually not in the right place."

Very substantial sums from the c30% of income which comes from the Church Commissioners are now being spent on diocesan-run mission schemes. These new initiatives have been funded for some years now, so are they working? The first Head of the Office of Budget Responsibility, Sir Robert Chote, was asked by the Church to conduct an independent review into Low Income Communities Funding and Strategic Development Funding ("SDF"). SDF supports "major change programmes or activities which fit with dioceses' strategic plans, and which are intended to make a significant difference to their mission and financial strength".

The "Chote Report" dated February 2022 (available on savetheparish.com under "Studies") found that £177m of SDF grants allocated "to support growth" had aimed to achieve 89,375 "new disciples", but had only achieved 12,704, of which between

40% and 60% were from existing congregations. So, these schemes are falling disastrously short of their objectives – while leaving less money for parochial ministry whether that result is 'planned' or not.

A competitive bidding procedure leads to dioceses making impressive-sounding proposals in order to win funding. Yet process – launching a certain number of projects on a certain timescale – is not a useful measure of performance; one needs information on outcomes to assess the usefulness of the results which those projects delivered. In paragraph 3.12 of the Chote Report, the writers make clear that their conclusions have been hampered by inadequate information: "Performance against the objectives set by the Archbishops' Council is summarised in Figure 6. These objectives generally focus on process rather than outcomes..."

Comments in the Chote Report's Introduction and Priority Recommendations point to poor project discipline from the start, leading to lack of accountability. Paragraph 1.11, main bullet point 3, makes it very clear that the writers are not happy for governance purposes with the clarity of the SDF objectives initially set by the Archbishops' Council. It recommends "specific measurable objectives" and "metrics and reporting

mechanisms". In the following bullet point it also recommends "greater intentionality in ensuring that support is deployed across the full range of traditions". Paragraph 3.5 points to organisational confusion and "insufficient communication between national, diocesan and local about the funding and its delivery".

One of my STP financially-trained colleagues describes the Church Commissioners' income as a "precious gift from the past which is not being spent wisely". It is being diverted to church plant experiments, funding them to pay many staff, which are often in competition with local parishes and seem unlikely to become sustainable. This cannot be brushed off as a complaint of affluent rural churches. We at STP have seen examples of urban churches in poor areas, for example in Winchester Diocese, left to decline in extended interregnums apparently because of their tradition, while neighbouring church plants are heavily funded with large numbers of staff paid for from SDF grants. There is not a level playing field.

A fraction of the huge sums spent on SDF, for little return, would be a lifeline for many struggling parishes. Although the 'Vision and Strategy proposal document gaily asserted that there was "no conflict between parish ministry and becoming a more mixed ecology church", the Chote Report found that SDF schemes were

"disruptive to existing church ecology". Its writers were "struck by a broader lack of trust and unity of purpose".

MEGA-PARISHES LACKING IN PASTORAL CARE

Small wonder that trust in management is lacking when resources, in the form of clergy and money, are being withdrawn from parishes, especially small and rural ones. Across dioceses from Truro to Liverpool, current parishes are being grouped into 'mega-parishes', typically of deanery size. If approved by the Church Commissioners, these collections of churches will in some cases be designated a single 'parish' with a single PCC. This entails current PCCs losing control of their parish assets, making it possible for the original PCC to be outvoted. It also permits misleading assertions that the CofE is honouring its commitment to 'a priest in every parish'.

A supporter wrote to me: "In our Exeter Diocese the (unpublished) plan is to put all rural parishes into a "Minster Model" centred on market towns, such as Totnes or Newton Abbot. They would essentially be urban benefices, with surrounding rural parishes having no say and at best becoming festival churches, possibly having a single representative on a "Joint Committee" but with none of the powers

currently vested in PCCs."

Too many current parishes are agreeing to these schemes, on the presentation of partial information claiming that they will reduce administration and will improve the 'service' available from the clergy. How? Clergy are being reduced in number, aggregated into a 'pool' and, crucially, separated from direct engagement with former parishes. Such a 'Deliveroo' configuration could not possibly offer 'better' pastoral care (as claimed in response to a Parliamentary Question in March 2022). Indeed, Diocesan Synod Paper 3b of 9th October 2021, the document voted on in Leicester, conspicuously lacked a plan for this: 'We are grappling with questions as to how to best be present as Christian community within the parish and locality.' Neither does it offer baptism, marriage or burial from a vicar who is known to the family. When my father died this year, a clergyman who said he worked for Winchester Diocese and had not known my father cold-called me to offer to take his funeral. A detached priest was not comforting at a time of grief. Instead, I sought out the retired ones who had known my father personally at his rural church, who understood pastoral care. They expressed anguish over the changes to the parish system being pushed through in

Winchester (notwithstanding the removal of the bishop by the Diocesan Synod).

An interesting aspect of my involvement in STP has been learning more from the clergy on the Steering Committee (who come from across the spectrum of traditions and political allegiances) about the legal and theological framework of my own Church. Having discovered that I, as a lay person, am entitled to the pastoral care which local clergy provide, it seems that the clergy need recalling to their pastoral role. "Receive this cure of souls which is both yours and mine", says the bishop to every new vicar in a parish. This represents the personal aspect of episcopal ministry: the clergy are the people who are charged with the responsibility of being in touch with the people being entrusted to their care. In the ordination service, priests are instructed "to set the pattern of the Good Shepherd always before them as the pattern of their calling". The shepherding is entrusted to the parish priest because the bishop, who knows the clergy, cannot possibly know all the people in the diocese as well. Chapter 10 of St John's Gospel tells us that the sheep will follow the shepherd because "they know his voice". However, they will not follow strangers but will flee, "for they know not the voice of strangers". How in practice are priests to live the pattern of the Good Shepherd on the Deliveroo model without losing the

sheep?

Yet the parish priest's 'cure of souls' is badly-needed. A recent study by the National Churches Trust found that parish churches deliver social care in communities to an annual total value of £55bn. Dismantling this delivery system during a post-pandemic mental health crisis when localism is in vogue seems counterintuitive and countercultural.

These proliferating mega-parish schemes are, as STP's financial scrutineers found, not necessary financially (there is plenty of money, but it is being wasted). They do not achieve growth or improved cure of souls (ask congregations in Wigan or Wales: statistics are not being published, but paragraph 35 of the Church Closers' Charter publicly acknowledged that 'Anecdotal evidence from Wales suggests a super-parish type model has not worked well'). Moreover, they create a further layer of administration to the governance arrangements of every church, as each church still needs to be managed at the local level. Clergy and people in parishes need to be warned to read the small print.

Sadly, many of these mega-parish 'reorganisation' schemes are still forging ahead unhindered. This is often due to what it is hard to call anything but trickery

at Deanery Synod level, with parishes not being made sufficiently aware of their rights to object being steamrollered. From anguished emails sent by congregants to the STP website, we have heard very sad stories from Leicester, Wales and Cornwall of old people being effectively locked into chilly churches until they agree to diocesan proposals. Parishes are between a rock and a hard place: if offered six clergy or four clergy for a mega-parish, the "least worst" arrangement (namely six) gets voted through despite that many parishes in the deanery do not want a mega-parish but want their own identifiable vicar. The diocese, while sometimes claiming its scheme to be a bottom-up exercise or 'self-determination', does not offer that choice. Once a Deanery Synod has been pushed into voting for a reorganisation scheme, the Bishops can tell objectors at the Diocesan Synod that the Deanery Synod wants it. This will also carry weight when the scheme is assessed by the Church Commissioners.

Trust is also being undermined by diocesan sleight of hand with language, which 'moves the goalposts', making it difficult to frame Parliamentary Questions to obtain accurate information. For example, the narrative seems to be shifting from priests to buildings. In Truro there will clearly be clergy cuts, so the official line to

the media is now: 'no church closures are planned' – again, the civil-service-type use of the word 'plan'. However, if in real terms the priest is much more shared, and the building will struggle to be open and used, what does it mean 'not to close' – is this purely a decision on paper?

We are now assembling a strong legal scrutiny team, 'Lawscrute', to analyse legal issues. This will be a group of qualified personnel who can provide legal support to STP's campaign and provide support and advice to parishes and clergy who feel under threat (particularly in relation to pastoral reorganisation schemes). Parishes desperately need legal help when they are confronted with pastoral schemes, all too often proposing to dissolve their parish completely. The dioceses often seem careless about telling parishes their rights and make procedural errors (particularly on the various stages of consultation) which make good grounds for challenging these schemes. It is also possible that some of the schemes being prepared by dioceses may breach the Church's own Representation Rules. It is noteworthy that parishes are not allowed legal representation at Church Commissioners' hearings, but the Commissioners themselves have legal support available. Here is yet another imbalance of resources against the parish, despite that it is a key

source of funding. Lawscrute will also consider the possibility of challenging decisions via judicial review or charity regulation. It will comment on new legislative proposals, such as a forthcoming white paper on the Mission and Pastoral Measure (which we hope will not be 'Son of GS2222') and proposals called the 'Governance Review' which appear intended to impose further central control.

THERE IS A POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE

In case this makes STP sound negative, although our volunteers have limited time available and 43 paid communications teams pitted against them, we have tried to build a positive case for 'what good looks like'. My Finscrute colleagues estimate that an adjustment (swing) towards parishes of even 3% of the annual funding of the CofE could revitalise many parishes. This does not seem unreasonable, considering that parishes produce 70% of the Church's income.

At the local level, people in parishes write emails to our website expressing their joy that Save the Parish 'gives them a voice' where they felt they 'had no voice'. Where they have been told that 'there is no alternative' and that this is for financial reasons, our research has proved that the

money is there and that, in fact, there is. At diocesan level, support for STP's campaign from the clergy is key. Not all the dioceses apply groupthink. Canon Tiffer Robinson wrote on Twitter in October 2021: "In this diocese [St Eds and Ips] we went through a massive culture shift. We separated the won't pay parishes from the can't pay, and gave positive and constructive support to the latter, along with share waivers so they didn't feel demoralised. We also had a commitment from the bishop that the diocese was no longer going to cut clergy indiscriminately to solve the financial situation, as this just leads to a spiral of decline."

He wisely noted: "... you cannot build trust with parishes if they are always under threat... Diocesan strategies which talk about moving clergy away from one model or context towards another might excite the diocesan team, but on the ground they just destroy all trust you might have had with parish clergy and PCCs... Don't pretend growth is possible without stipendiary clergy. And please can senior leaders stop saying they value parish ministry while taking steps, however well intentioned, which will undermine it. Parish ministry is only valued when resourced with adequate levels of stipendiary ministry."

Bishop Guli, the new Bishop of Chelmsford, has clearly changed the culture at Chelmsford Diocese which so alarmed me when my Spectator article was written. In October 2022, she addressed her Diocesan Synod thus: "You will have heard me say, possibly several times now, that for the foreseeable future there will be no more initiatives imposed from the so-called centre. Everything will be invitational and driven by the local context. The mental image I have is one of seeking to tip the traditional pyramid of organisational hierarchy on its head." She added: "I'm encouraging Diocesan staff to think of themselves as support staff, there to enable, strengthen and serve the local context, acting in ways that demonstrate respect, honesty and transparency."

Reading such positive comments on a potentially transformative return to Anglican ecclesiology, honesty and service was hugely welcomed by many. Her encouraging words were widely circulated. Holding the dioceses accountable to the parishes which fund them is a hugely positive attitude to rebalancing power, to support and re-motivate lay volunteers and donors. It is music to the ears of the grassroots. It gives them hope to hear someone 'sticking up' for the parishes.

At our recent Westminster meeting, Fr Marcus spoke of how, after the death of Her Majesty The Queen, "the single most watched event in the entirety of human history was an Anglican service in the traditional language: is that not something to be proud of?" Moreover, "parishes around the country leapt into action. There were places where people could go to pray, to share their respects. There were services, held at almost a moment's notice, where people were singing and crying at the same time. It was amazing, and that was a parish at its best. It was a community, in a community, building, at its most local". People in parishes, although often blamed for not doing well enough or working hard enough, should be proud of their generous donations "even as there are serious questions about how [their money] is being spent".

Fr Marcus concluded: "There is hope, because there is an alternative".

STP'S ACHIEVEMENTS

In national campaign terms, STP has addressed itself to Parliament, the Synod and the media. Parliament's Ecclesiastical Committee participates in the approval of Church legislation. Parliament is the ultimate authority to which the General Synod as a delegated legislature is

accountable. MPs can ask Parliamentary Questions about the Church via the MP Andrew Selous, who as Second Church Estates Commissioner is an ex officio Church Commissioner. STP supporters can prompt their MPs to ask Parliamentary Questions.

STP's achievements are ongoing. We quickly achieved a great deal of visibility. Probably our biggest achievement is in raising the profile of our campaign and, by extension, that of the parish. Every Bishop has heard of STP, General Synod members have heard of us... Journals such as The Critic and Country Life have run supportive letters or articles. We regularly feature in the Church Times, including overt support in their leaders (or comment sections). STP and Fr Marcus Walker get name-checked at General Synod to an amazing degree.

The Archbishops' Council Triennium Budget announcement of SDF for 2023-2025 was carefully choreographed, in a way which suggested that it was directed at STP. The announcement and subsequent questions and answers made it clear that rural and small parishes would be able to apply for grant funding. This apparent new direction of generosity was, sadly, caveated by stating that grants would only be made if they were consistent with the (unendorsed) Vision

and Strategy. In other words, applications from small/rural parishes, if they could summon the human resources to apply, would be unlikely to fit that category and succeed in a competitive process. The Diocese of Leicester has already made it clear at their Diocesan Synod that they would not be supporting grants to such parishes. Making announcements which prove to have been misleading would further erode trust.

The hierarchy and bureaucrats keep a close eye on our meetings. When we held our second supporters' meeting, in July 2022 in York, the Archbishop of York invited himself to come. In November 2022, STP held a briefing meeting in the Houses of Parliament, hosted by Chris Loder MP, a churchwarden and bellringer. At our November meeting in Parliament, people from Lambeth Palace unexpectedly attended (probably using their Parliamentary passes to gain access). Canon Angela Tilby, in an address, pointed out the limitations of diocesan mission slogans - "You cannot sustain a national Church on adjectives" - and of Deliveroo ministry. She depicted the paradox that "Current policy is actually driving the decline it seeks to halt. It is contributing to the demolition of community, to the breakdown of that vocation to which the Queen's 2012 address calls us, and to the

hollowing out of the C of E into a narrow little cult, run on business principles where decisions are made by well-paid employees in their remote offices and the people are abandoned by those who should be caring for them, praying with them, and giving hope. We are going to need that care and that hope in the economic and social crises that lie ahead." STP is influencing the narrative. We are more or less accepted as the official 'opposition' to the prevailing policy of parish clergy cuts. We know that the dioceses watch our social media and website. We feel that they are beginning to take into account the position of STP in their own calculations.

WE NEED MORE CLERGY TO LEND THEIR VOICES

This might sound like progress, and it is. Yet what we do not have - yet - is visibility in every parish. Many dioceses have been operating a 'divide and rule' policy which leaves many people in parishes feeling very alone. Reorganisation schemes are often put forward during interregnums, while the parishes are leaderless, preoccupied and, legally, at their most vulnerable. We need every parish to hear of us, because (although the clergy have trade unions, which they are increasingly joining) the parishes have no

representative trade body. People in parishes are not sufficiently aware of their rights; and some dioceses do not properly inform them.

We also lack enough active support - yet - from clergy. We know that serving clergy feel under pressure to comply with reorganisation schemes, for fear of career jeopardy. Many clergy send messages of support but are not willing to declare it overtly. Although this strikes me as horrifying in an organisation which should be governed by love (for if I have not love, I am nothing), from what I have seen I sadly conclude that this fear is justified. The culture of bullying identified in the Daily Telegraph report of 2020 still persists.

We therefore need the longstanding clergy with Permission To Officiate and the non-stipendiary clergy, who are not frightened of anybody, to speak up for the parish. We need you, the practitioners, to speak and write about the importance of the local, the duty to provide pastoral care and what the cure of souls means to people in times of need. It is you who can tell us why the bereaved, the lonely and the sad all need to know their local vicar, why the ancient model of parish, parson and pastoral care is key. Society needs to understand why vicars cannot work on the car-pool clergy basis which the mega-parish model entails.

We need MPs, senior clergy and everyone in this nation, parishioners all, to hear from you about just why the presence of the local vicar, living among people in their communities, matters. Please lend us your voices and help us to Save The Parish - and to give people hope.

Emma Thompson is a journalist and rural churchgoer who is on the Steering Committee of Save The Parish.