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The Church of England's death knell is ringing

Until the Church decides to redirect its money and its manpower towards front line parish ministry, churches will close

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“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” This would be a good line for the leaders of the Church of England to wake up to today. This week three different studies make clear how loudly the death knell is ringing for the Church we love and serve.

A study of clergy shows that around half are not sure that their churches will be holding regular Sunday services in a decade's time; 40 per cent of priests under 70 feel overworked or overstretched; a fifth of clergy have seriously thought about quitting. [The Telegraph's survey of Church of England data](#), which shows the fastest rate of church closures since records began. A bombshell dossier from ordinary laity in Cornwall reveals how diocesan authorities are pursuing their quest to impose a catastrophic new model of the church.

How do these all tie together? Let's take a look at what the Diocese of Truro is trying to do. It is forcing dozens of parishes together into giant benefices and starving them of regular priests.

What does this mean? For the laity, absolutely zero chance of having communion each week, or hearing a sermon preached by

someone with theological education. What are the chances of finding a priest to bury your father, marry your daughter, prepare you for confirmation or chat with you as your marriage goes through a difficult patch? The church has essentially withdrawn its core services from you.

For the clergy it destroys the joy of being a priest. Getting embedded in a community; christening the grandchild of a man I buried the month before; being there at the highs and the lows and everything in between of people in a community that I am a part of.

But is this a consequence, not a cause, of failure? I’m afraid the opposite is the case. The Church of England has been ordaining more priests than have been retiring for over a decade. We don’t have a shortage, we have a deployment problem, with 980 priests (well over 10 per cent) serving in roles in diocesan and national HQs.

We don’t actually have a money problem. The Church Commissioners are the custodians of the endowments which are supposed to be spent, almost exclusively, on parish ministry. £10.2 billion of endowments. In the last decade, the church has torn up this commitment from the past to the future in order to defund actual parish ministry and invest eye-watering sums in fancy new schemes.

And the Church of England’s own studies show what this means. Their own report, “Going Deeper”, said: “The change in the number of clergy per church in the parish has a significant effect on growth in that parish. Where there is an increase in stipendiary clergy, there is a greater likelihood of growth, a decrease in stipendiary clergy is more likely, on average, to lead to decline.”

In short, this is driven decline. A doom loop. Until the Church of England, at a national level, decides to redirect its money and its manpower towards front line parish ministry, churches will close, clergy wellbeing will collapse, and the laity will walk. If they don’t change tack, they may not be able to ask for whom the bell tolls, because the church in which that bell should be tolling will be closed.

Rev Marcus Walker is co-founder of Save The Parish

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