

Campaign intensifies to ‘save the parish’

Rural Anglican churches across the country are in danger of being closed down, but an organisation is fighting a bruising battle with the bishops to keep them open



St Mary’s, Merrymeet, Cornwall, is among the rural churches that have shut their doors

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Emma Thompson makes for an unlikely rebel. Her Christian faith was nurtured through Anglican choral music and the Book of Common Prayer. She teaches Sunday school and conducts a choir in her church.

“The local level, in my book, is where all the good happens — the love, the looking after your neighbour, the delivery plan for being a Christian,” says Thompson, a former City solicitor and now a company secretary and freelance journalist.

Her passion for local parish churches is fierce to the point that, she says proudly, the two most senior clerics in the Church of England have described her as a “rascally voice”.

Attendance in the Church has fallen by nearly 40 per cent since 1979, according to the British Religion in Numbers online data resources, and by more than 15 per cent alone since 2013.

During the coronavirus lockdowns, a group led by the Archbishop of York, the Most Rev Stephen Cottrell, decided to grasp the nettle. Noting even pre-pandemic, around 40 per cent of parishes were subsidised by their dioceses, they wrote in an internal document for bishops that many diocesan leaders believed it was time for “radical changes”.

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Alarmed by reports of dioceses heaping financial pressure on churches and fed up with the closure of the churches, Thompson wrote an article for The Spectator in early 2021 accusing the church’s leadership of planning “to dismantle the parish network”, and referred to planned cuts in the diocese of Chelmsford.

A riposte followed from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, and Cottrell, who, without naming Thompson, rejected her accusation, said at least 100 congregations had been planted or renewed in recent years, and decried the “rascally voices around who want to undermine the Church”.

Then came two developments of concern to Thompson and a growing alliance: what she called the “Church Closers’ Charter”, a review of how parishes are organised and churches closed. Noting that four dioceses alone were considering closing more than 150 churches by 2026, it called for “faster processes” for closures to be managed.

Second, Cottrell outlined a vision for 10,000 new “worshipping communities”, just as an Evangelical church-planter, Canon John McGinley, aired plans for 10,000 “lay-led churches” that would “release the church from key limiting factors”, because clergy often require “a stipend and long, costly college-based training”. An official clarified that Cottrell’s vision was separate from McGinley’s, but it was too late.

McGinley’s comments proved the last straw, and Save the Parish was formed, spearheaded by Fr Marcus Walker, rector of St Bartholomew the Great in London, and Canon Alison Milbank, canon theologian at Southwell Minster and professor of theology at Nottingham University. A website was launched, a steering committee formed and priests and lay people alike invited to share stories of “pressures currently being placed on your parish by the diocese/central CofE”. To date, Thompson says, “thousands” have, including clergy.

Then came a major victory for the campaigners. Surprised by the strength of feeling of respondents, the Church Commissioners opted to delay producing legislation for closing churches. Lay and clergy respondents, it explained, felt “anxious and in many cases angry, about the direction they feel the church is taking”.

Save the Parish argues that the Church's financial woes are not solved by cutting clergy but by spending more sagely the money within the Church's labyrinthine financial structures. Armed with numbers crunched by their financial scrutiny team, Save the Parish campaigners have communicated their conclusions in the press and in parliament.



Emma Thompson has been described as a “rascally voice”

SARAH COCKERTON PHOTOGRAPHY

At a meeting in parliament in April, Admiral Sir James Burnell-Nugent, a member of Save the Parish's steering committee, criticised the management of the Church's investment income and the dioceses' spending on admin, with some 980 clergy having been redeployed into back-office diocesan roles?

Showing MPs and peers a diagram of the Church's financial structures, he told them that just 19 per cent of the Church's investment income gets to parishes; he said in 2021, dioceses spent 20 per cent of their income on admin, which was almost twice the proportion spent by the RNLI and Oxfam.

Milbank also spoke at the event, highlighting the economic worth of the parish. She cited research by the National Churches Trust that church buildings provide more than £55 billion of social and economic value to the UK each year.

Save the Parish singles out certain dioceses for specific criticism, chiefly Truro and Leicester, for creating “mega-parishes . . . disregarding the evidence that merging parishes drives decline”; and Carlisle for having a ratio of 55:45 of paid parish clergy to staff in HQ. A spokesman for the diocese of Carlisle said the ratio there “is actually 75:25” with the 75 “including stipendiary clergy, network youth church leaders and pioneer ministers”.

Leicester has introduced a model of “minister communities” — groupings of parishes led by a team, headed by an ordained oversight minister with the first of eight benefices launched on April 30. The move was supported by 72 per cent of the diocesan synod.

The diocese is also allowing clergy numbers to fall by 20 full-time equivalent paid posts to balance the books. The Bishop of Loughborough, a suffragan in Leicester, the Rt Rev Saju Muthalaly, said: “Far from seeking to replace or abolish the parish structure, the goal behind Minster Communities is to put them on sustainable footing.”

As for Truro, suffragan bishop Rt Rev Hugh Nelson said: “The church in Cornwall is not flourishing”. He said the pattern of the last 30 or so years, of clergy looking after more and more parishes, was “not working any more”.

After a lengthy consultation called On the Way, deaneries in the diocese expressed an interest in either so-called “mega-parishes” or “local” ministry, where a small church is led by a local lay or ordained volunteer, who calls in a priest if necessary for the sacraments. Two out of Truro’s 12 deaneries have opted to form groups of around 25 parishes under a team led by a rural dean or “oversight minister”.

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After the announcement that the Bishop of Truro, Philip Mounstephen, was being translated to Winchester, Save the Parish Cornwall, an associate group, met earlier this month with Bishop Nelson and urged him to “press the pause button” on Truro’s restructuring plans. He declined. A diocesan spokeswoman told The Times that the plans had been “approved by the legally constituted diocesan governance structures”.

Frustration and suspicion persist on both sides in this battle. Thompson, is, however, cheered by two independent reports. The Chote report (2022) found that they had proved a “lightning rod” for mistrust and had only counted 14 per cent of the hoped-for number of new disciples, although two of the seven years surveyed (2014-21) were disrupted by the pandemic.

The second, published on September 21, evaluates a £1.2 million reorganisation in Wigan deanery in the diocese of Liverpool. It recorded advantages of merging 29 parishes into seven, in one benefice. Rationalisation of parish roles had made it easier to engage with the local council in social action projects, for example. However, it also noted “a tension that established churches have been neglected” and that newcomers have been slow to become regular donors, while some disenfranchised worshippers have withheld their giving.

Striking a balance between looking after dwindling numbers of generous, lifelong worshippers and reaching out to potential new ones is thus far proving expensive and vexatious. At the very least, Save the Parish’s campaigning has sent a clear message to the bishops that despite headlines about declining attendance, many people still love their local church.

At this summer’s General Synod a measure was passed that replaced the so-called Church Closers’ Charter, and lets churches lie “fallow” for a time rather than being sold off. One bishop who worked on the measure says he has “benefited from [Save the Parish’s] campaigning”. The Right Rev Dr Andrew Rumsey, Bishop of Ramsbury in the diocese of Salisbury, favours churches being “creative” about their uses, for example by also opening as post offices.

As for Wigan, Liverpool’s diocesan secretary Mike Eastwood said: “We knew that Transforming Wigan would produce a great amount of learning that we, and the national church, could benefit from. We are determined to do that.”

Which lessons are learnt remains to be seen. Save the Parish will be watching closely.