



Dr. Michael J. Smith



Questions abound in these parts. Who will come to the fore in these rudderless times? Will the bossiest rule? When will it end?

And why does this have to happen in the first place? The latter question being the most pertinent. Because our beloved vicar has not quit, has not chosen to take a last ride on this West Somerset rollercoaster of topography and human challenge. No. The poor wretch is simply reaching their 70th birthday and the [Church of England regulation](#) (Ecclesiastical Offices (Age Limit) Measure) decrees that if you're 70 your time's up. You're too old. Hop it. See that big, squishy, spongy cake those nice ladies baked for you? Well, once you've blown out all those candles, the C of E official will dunk your head in it and tell you to pack your bags.

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Now I must make it clear that I have no idea how our vicar feels about any of this or what their views are, but I think it's a darn shame. Isn't 70 the new 60, or was it 50? In an era when you can't tell a vegan to shut up and eat their shepherd's pie, how can you tell a person who's 70 that they're past it? If the [leader of the free world can be 81](#), why can't a 70-year-old run a small English parish?

Indeed, in a time of uncertainty and chaos why can't a person with a lifetime of experience, still full of or nearly full, of beans, who knows the ropes, the people and the problems keep the job. After all, they won't get lost on their way to administer the sacrament to an elderly parishioner because they know to ignore signs that say "Road Closed" since all it means is that there is a road closed but it's another road and it's about 10 miles away.

Of course the Church of England introduced these rules to avoid ancient clergy clinging to office; to be rid of ineffectual relics akin to the fictitious Reverend Henry D'Ascoyne, rector of Chalfont in the film [Kind Hearts and Coronets](#). Joyfully shuffling between their staffed-up rectory and conducting evensong in the church at the bottom of the garden.

Except of course that the Church of England sold off all those nice houses – so that yuppies could sandblast the walls, dig up the rose beds and sink swimming pools – and put the vicar in a modern bungalow. And to ensure this was no comfy cushion for a posh spare son, they gave them a stipend that meant they could properly empathise with the poor.

But being behind the curve, or even round the bend, on the age issue is not surprising when you contemplate the Church of England. In its decades-long struggle to become relevant it has made itself even more irrelevant. It has fallen into the same trap to which all failing brands succumb: seeking new audiences while ignoring the core. It has swept aside high church formality, so out went Matins and in came Messy Church. The 1662 Book of Common Prayer was exchanged for a pile of pamphlets and inserts.

There was a new generation of priests recruited who would be more in touch with modern issues and values. In a parish I once lived in that meant a new vicar who drove around in a red convertible mini with the registration REV 1, and who began the service by yelling, "Good morning everyone" and if we didn't scream "Good morning" back they would say: "Come on, you can do better than that" and we'd have to do it all over again.

And how many times have I attended a service, a Family Communion at a time like Easter, where a sermon, sorry "talk", is preached solely at the 10 per cent of children who aren't listening as opposed to the 80 per cent of adults who are.

I like a service of stiff formality, a service you have to work through to deserve your pre-lunch drink, where there are no engaging intros from the vicar, who is but a conduit to the Lord, until after the service, when they become human again and you shake their hand as you leave the church and thank them for playing decent hymns and for keeping the sermon short.

I remain in total admiration for one church treasurer whose high church principles, during an interregnum, saw him conduct a sung Eucharist. He couldn't sing a note. We fought to suppress our giggles. And how sad that whole generations of non-church-going heathens will never experience that sweet torture of trying not to laugh in church.

They're not going to Messy Church and neither will they go to a church once the authorities have ripped out all those stiff Victorian pews, redolent of an age when they banned things like pudding, and replaced them with stackable chairs and a blue carpet so that the place feels like a meeting room attached to a prison.

As other world religions thrive by being increasingly godly, the [Church of England's](#) drive to secular informality and inclusivity continues to empty its places of worship.

They force good clergy to retire early and then enforce a restraining order, or as the Archbishop's Council puts it: "You are expected to move an appropriate distance from your last parish."

As Job puts it (12.12 King James Version, 1611, obviously): "With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding."

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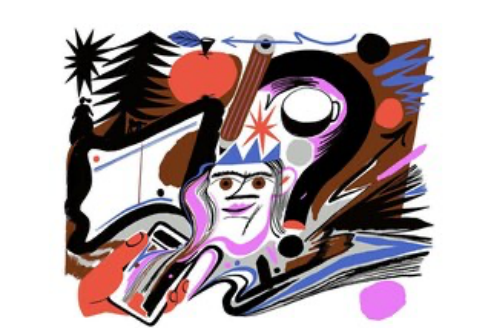
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