

COMMENT

Parish churches sit at the heart of Christian worship. But perhaps for not much longer

Church closures are an inevitable consequence of the CoE’s suicidal new strategy

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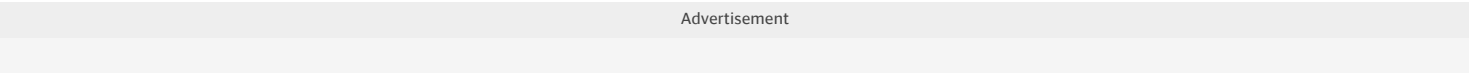
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Church buildings tell the Christian story. They also tell our local story. Before a candlelit carol service, I looked around my Grade II* listed church. Its windows glowed with Biblical images. Its walls showcased memorials to departed local characters.

Here were the names, sometimes even marble profiles, of people who lived here before us. The sense of rootedness in this place, with the baton of worship handed down through the ages, was palpable. That “passing through” feeling makes more sense of the deaths of beloved neighbours buried outside.

Yet some clergy complain that “parish churches are the corpses we have to drag around”, feel “burdened” by being “museum keepers” or describe church buildings as “key limiting factors”. Within the CofE hierarchy, some feel (to quote “Transforming Wigan”, a reorganisation proposal document) that our “understanding of church” needs changing, as it is “overly reliant on expensive buildings... unfit for 21st century mission and ministry”.



Current CofE policy is to fund a back door “vision and strategy”, promulgated in particular by the archbishop of York. Too often, church closures ensue. In Wigan, the Church Commissioners gave £1.2 million to fund a seven-year scheme reorganising the town’s churches into groups while starting new projects.

A recent independent report shows that the £1.2 million “transformation” scheme failed in its objectives to establish sustainable new worshipping communities. By cutting parish clergy and amalgamating parishes, it also drove down church attendance and income by a third. Now, 19 of Wigan’s remaining churches may close.

This “strategy”, unsupported by empirical evidence, is being copied in other places. Dr Alan Billings, a retired vicar who is also South Yorkshire’s Police and Crime Commissioner, describes the “abandonment of the parish system” as a “car crash”. In the *Church Times* a few years ago, he begged the CofE to learn from the police’s mistakes in withdrawing local bobbies and closing police stations. The operating model was radically changed without public consent, causing a trust and confidence gap between the organisation and people: the police were “talking only to themselves”.

Arguably, the archbishops are doing likewise, seeming unwilling to hear groups such as Save The Parish Cornwall, which last week delivered a petition to Lambeth Palace. In Cornwall’s Lizard peninsula, bundling many Grade I listed churches, with others, into a single “parish” (for one vicar to “drag around”) could be the death knell for those buildings.

Even dignitaries go unheard. Sir Philip Rutnam, National Churches Trust chair, says: “Church closures are sweeping Scotland, Wales and increasingly parts of England. Almost half our most important listed buildings are churches. Their future is by far the biggest heritage crisis. We urgently need a national plan to save them.”

Sir Tim Laurence, ex-chair of Historic England, says: “The link between parish church, parish priest and local community is a precious foundation of UK life.” Sir James Burnell-Nugent of the Save The Parish movement, noting that a legislative proposal to facilitate closing churches attracted over 1,600 public objections, comments: “The Church’s response is to produce worse

proposals (numbered GS2315), with reduced representation opportunities”.

Church buildings represent our communities’ soul and history, but are potentially a huge liability. How can the Church expect taxpayers to fund the aftermath of a suicidal strategy? Many churches are being left vicarless, making them more susceptible to closure. A good vicar can be transformative.

As Rachel Morley of the heritage charity Friends of Friendless Churches asks: “Are churches really friendless, or are they vicarless? We need a Church commitment not to flog, demolish, or neglect England’s cultural heritage. A properly developed, implemented, funded plan is essential – and long overdue.”

Emma Thompson is a member of Save the Parish. savetheparish.com

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