

The parish system is at the heart of the Church of England, and is designed to serve the entire community, but an Anglican priest and scholar argues that it is at risk of being destroyed / **By ALISON MILBANK**

The power of parochial thinking

CATHOLICS SEEKING greater lay representation in ecclesial decision-making may look enviously at Anglican synodical structures and established lay ministries. But despite this apparent democracy, the Church of England's archbishops have imposed a radical evangelistic strategy on the whole Church which has barely been discussed by the General Synod, and which is likely to destroy the parish system. If the Church of England has a distinctive charism, it lies in its presence in every community, through the parish priest holding the cure of souls. The incarnation of Christ hallows every place, and the parish church symbolises the sacredness of the local and particular. Its presence tells the rundown ex-mining village or urban wasteland that it is holy ground and that its people matter.

Twenty years ago, just as secularism began to bite, the Anglican Church began to abandon

this vision. Rightly, the Church responded to the falling away of religious practice with experimental modes of outreach. But these "Fresh Expressions of Church" were to be kept separate from the parish, which was now regarded as "inherited church" and therefore of no value in the missional endeavour. This gulf has widened in the recent "Vision and Strategy policy", which envisages two parallel systems of parish and "new worshipping communities", the aim being, in Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell's words, "to be able to recommend [to a friend] an expression of Church locally that would really suit them". This marketised choice approach has meant that £174 million has already been redirected from parishes into these new missional projects, with little real effect, as a report by Sir Robert Chote revealed in March 2022. Despite up to 10 ministers or more being assigned to new resource churches, initiatives "witnessed" under 12,705 "new disciples"; their target had been 89,375. The report noted that these projects "are of their nature disruptive to the existing church ecology".

For the central feature of a parish is that it gathers the People of God in that place, bringing diverse ages and classes together. Moreover, the liturgical movement in the Catholic Church mediated through the Second Vatican Council, which sought to make the whole congregation realise their participation in the eucharistic celebration, had its Anglican equivalent. The Parish and People Movement led to parish Communion becoming the main Sunday service for most Anglican churches by the 1960s. Parishioners understood themselves as an inclusive liturgical community.

All this is now put at risk. Church planting in the sense of building new churches where people need them is a venerable practice, but now evangelical Churches are being allowed to "plant" into churches that are eucharistic. Often those churches need reinvigoration, but the model is highly imperialistic, so that the existing culture is replaced by soft-rock worship with no discernible liturgical structure. Such church plants rarely offer baptism and funeral ministry to the whole parish, which is their legal responsibility. They turn the parish into a gathered community and the whole ecclesiology is changed. There are examples of Anglo-Catholic churches "grafting" into churches of the same tradition, which is respectful and appropriate, but more common

is a middle-class evangelical planting into a working-class parish, which becomes particularly egregious when the planters are white and the recipients black, as in one south London project.

CENTRALISED managerialism drives another fund of many millions to amalgamate parishes, and here Catholics should take note, because similar projects are in train in at least one Catholic diocese in the United States. The Anglican Diocese of Leicester is the direction in which many are heading. It decided to solve its deficit by cutting the number of clergy (while employing hosts of "mission enablers" and project managers) and organising parishes into Minster Communities, such as Launde, with 23 parishes and 35 churches. Launde will have one priest as "oversight minister" and an administrator. Only if the money contributed by parishes is doubled will it gain any more stipendiary (paid) clergy. The diocese blithely states that even if there were no

financial reason to cut clergy, it would follow this policy because it empowers mission and lay ministry. It does not value the Eucharist and will deprive parishes of pastoral care. And who is to train and care for the lay ministers to fill the gaps is quite unclear, as is where they are to come from. Parishioners already run their churches; they raise

thousands to sustain ancient buildings, and many take services. For one strategy that has been followed here and elsewhere is to abandon parishes in vacancy without a parish priest for years, to sink or swim, relying on retired clergy for any sacramental ministry.

This mega-parish model will not work and is a way of driving decline. After the first major reorganisation in Wigan, financial contributions fell eightfold and worshipper numbers declined. Funeral ministry which parishioners had enjoyed organising is now centralised on a taxi-rank system, so that faithful worshippers can easily find themselves buried by a stranger. Evangelical worship has been imposed on traditional parishes, and lay readers who take matins and evensong feel sidelined. Little value is placed on the Eucharist. Now they are talking about closing over half of the churches. Once gone, they are lost to this and later generations for ever. And yet, while believers are few today, who knows what the future will bring? Already African and Chinese heritage

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Christians are reinvigorating urban parishes.

Catholic Social Teaching and Anglican guild socialism alike stress the importance of intermediate institutions. Paradoxically, at a time in which all our national institutions are struggling, we need an intermediate body like the parish as never before, as a place of connectivity and resistance to atomisation. The National Churches Trust estimates the annual social benefit of Christian churches as £5 billion, and this huge figure is due to the reach of local churches, which can respond effectively to the needs of their area. The late Queen told the General Synod that the role of the established Church should be one of advocacy for all faith traditions, and that is particularly important at the local level, where the parish church can offer a hospitable site for conversation and transformation across a community. One example is St George-in-the-East, which invited councillors and people of other faiths on a rogation walk to see what potential lay in the Shadwell area of London; this led to a collaboration with a Jewish charity to build social housing on a forgotten strip of land near the railway.

It is precisely from the parish church as the site of challenge to the instrumental reduction of human life, the place where the Christian community meets to intercede, reconcile and share the life of Christ in word and sacrament, that renewal will come, so long as we understand the Eucharist missionally as the offering of all life to God for transformation. An example here is the Estates Network, an outworking from parishes into their large social housing estates. This is small-scale and modest, but often creative, encouraging people to value themselves and where they live. St Michael's on the huge Paulsgrove Estate near

Portsmouth is involved in transformative work through a co-op and a community garden, which is of a piece with the outward-focused character of their worship.

Catholics and Anglicans share the belief in the parish as what Andrew Rumsey calls "a school for belonging". With *Laudato si'*, Catholics are learning that this "belonging" encompasses all God's creatures. For parish has an ecological dimension, to which Anglican poets and parson naturalists have borne witness. There is so much potential for a wider parochial vision in a fractured uncertain world, where we feel powerless in the face of great social and environmental challenges. Parochially, however, we can begin to work in small ways where we are, so that our vulnerability becomes an opportunity for sharing with others in collective action.

Sadly, there is a loss of nerve in our episcopal leaders, who have lost faith in their own practices and who believe that an embrace of centralised management techniques will serve us in an era of unbelief. Renewal will come, however, authentically, as we intensify our prayer, our relationships and our service, making a virtue out of our weakness to join with others to seek the common good. We should, indeed, be truly eucharistic, in the sense of being thankful for the gift and communion of the parish, which is not an embarrassing heirloom to be consigned to the attic but a treasure of inestimable value for the future.

Alison Milbank is professor of theology and literature at the University of Nottingham and canon theologian and priest vicar at Southwell Minster. Her latest book is *The Once and Future Parish* (SCM Press, £19.99; Tablet bookshop price £17.99).

The annual social benefit of Christian churches is estimated at £5 billion

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