

THE SKATING MINISTER



COMMENT

The Church leadership is destroying the CoE I love

There are two institutions: the Rev Dr Jekyll of parish volunteers and clergy, and the Rev Mr Hyde at the top

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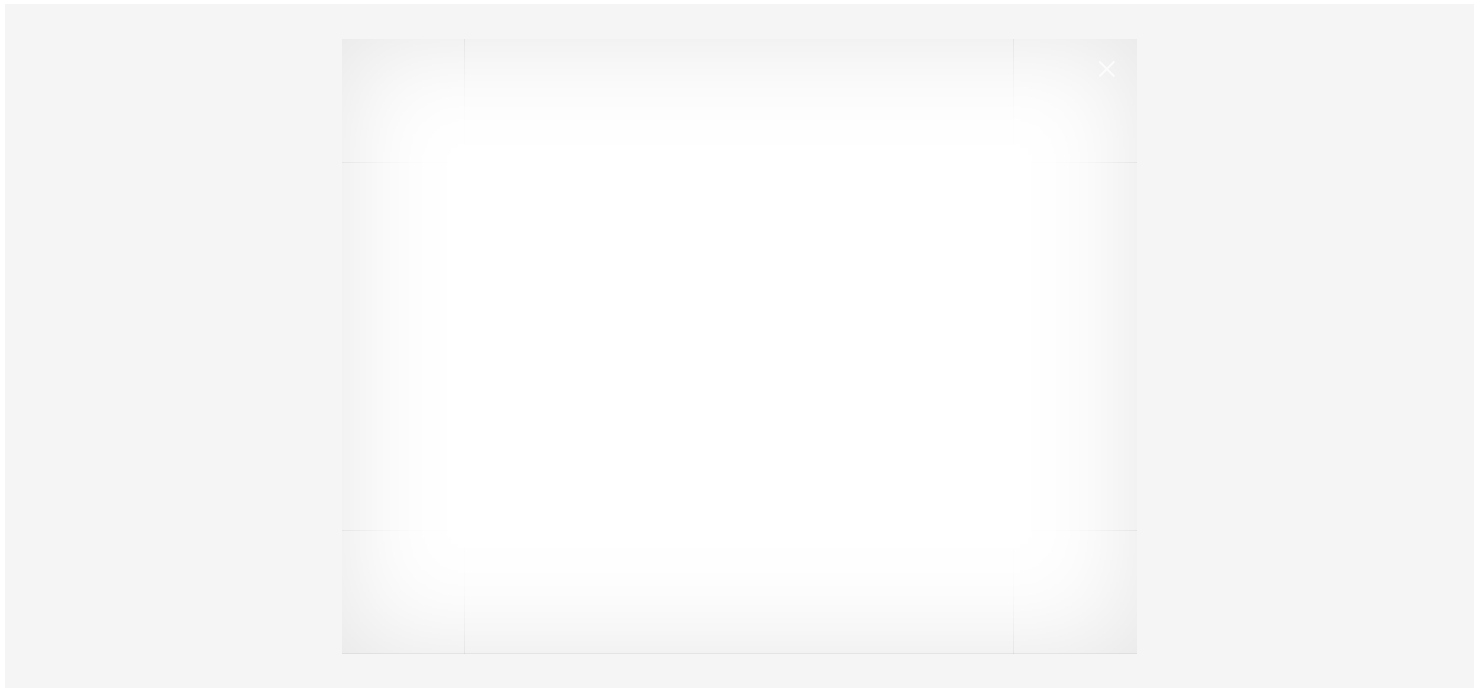
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For an organisation that prides itself on bringing the Good News to people, you can't move for terrible headlines about the Church of England; from the Diocese of Birmingham's hunt for a "deconstructing whiteness" officer, to the Church Commissioners' report calling for the fund of £100 million earmarked to atone for historic slavery to be increased to £1 billion.

Incidentally, the report also calls for the CofE to apologise for "seeking to destroy diverse African traditional religious belief systems" and replace them with Christianity. In a crowded field, this might be the most insulting part of all. Each year, thousands of Nigerian Christians are murdered by groups like Boko Haram for a faith that the report apparently believes wasn't worth spreading.

Some, who mistakenly view the Church of England as a unified, coherent body – may therefore delight in the shrinking congregations and generally low morale that defines it nowadays. I delight in none of these things, because I love the CofE.

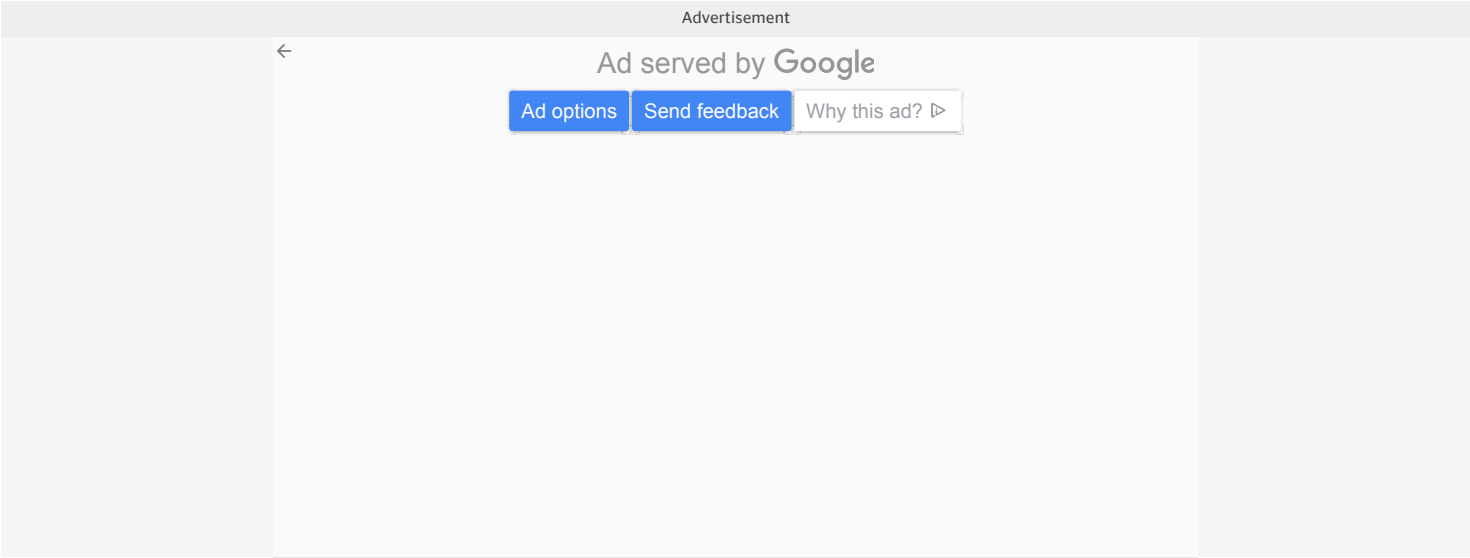


Look more closely though, and you’ll realise that there is not one Church of England – but two. There’s the Reverend Dr Jekyll, the one who performs invaluable work on the ground; burying the dead, visiting the sick, educating more than a quarter of our nation’s schoolchildren to a much higher standard than the state normally achieves.

This Church manages the food banks, playgroups, dementia cafés and loneliness workshops. It does its best to protect some of the most valuable parts of our nation’s physical and cultural heritage. Its parish priests do this for little money; its thousands of volunteers do it for none at all.

Then there is the other Church of England – the Reverend Mr Hyde. This is a church of unaccountable committees and upward failure, resulting in perhaps the least impressive bench of bishops since Pope Gregory first observed “*non angli, sed angeli*”. Members of this caste speak in identikit managerial jargon, which from an institution that has provided some of the most beautiful cadences and turns of phrase in the English language is depressing.

Even more depressing is the fact that nothing they say or do gives the impression they are running a church at all, rather than an NHS trust or local council. The former Post Office CEO Paula Vennells (who, lest we forget, was reported to have been Justin Welby’s choice for bishop of London) embodies this second Church: an individual with no obvious link to its parishes or grassroots work yet catapulted into its upper echelons.



She symbolises a wider, more striking issue: Mr Hyde’s contempt for the ordinary people in the pew. In Galatians, St Paul talks about “false brethren” who posed as members of the church in order to bring it “into bondage”. I always wondered who he meant. Wonder no more.

It is increasingly clear that these two churches cannot both survive; that this second Church of England, which controls all of its money, runs its internal organisations, manages (read: stitches up) appointments, is doing its utmost to destroy the other one.

This has been going on for some time; in the 1970s, under the banner of “fairness”, the Church stripped parishes of their assets and centralised their funding. It was claimed that this would result in a “more equal” church for the nation.

Instead, dioceses invariably use these sums to fund more diocesan officials and vanity projects, all at the expense of the parishes that provided them. Meanwhile, your average church scrabbles around in a desperate attempt to keep the roof up and the lights on.

The institution owes its existence to the unpaid, unappreciated labour of parochial church council members, church wardens and congregants. Many buildings wouldn’t survive at all without charities such as Friends of Friendless Churches, which supports more than 60 abandoned places of worship across England and Wales.

In the face of this, Church of England PLC is invariably stingy; its long-running refrain to parishes up and down the country is “if you want a vicar, you’ve got to pay for it yourself” – which naturally favours wealthier areas over poorer ones.

Which is why developments like the search for a “deconstructing whiteness” officer to join an 11-person West Midlands “Racial Justice” team are particularly grating. Not only does this directly contradict Christian teaching that we are children of God, made in His image – there is the sheer cost of it.

Having claimed poverty, suddenly the CofE is awash with cash for nonsense-jobs. Nor will finding £100 million down the back of the ecclesiastical sofa to devote to “reparatory justice” endear the CofE to its hard-pressed congregations.

Some no doubt imagine that embracing radical thinking will attract younger worshippers; the Bishop of Dudley recently boasted to the General Synod that every parish representative in his diocese must now undergo compulsory “unconscious bias” training.

More likely it will irritate the dwindling number of volunteers who sustain the Church, and further demoralise clergy who depart from this way of thinking.

But this is par for the course; so much of the hierarchy’s language and decision-making seems designed to alienate. Robert Conquest famously noted that the “simplest way to explain the behaviour of any bureaucratic organisation is to assume that it is controlled by a cabal of its enemies”. Nowhere is this truer than in the Church of England.

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