

Next archbishop should be pastoral, not managerial

Credo

Emma Thompson



Many prayers are being said for the survivors of John Smyth's appalling child abuse, highlighted in the Makin review last month. This has been a sad time for the Church of England, culminating in the resignation this week of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby.

A few months ago I wrote a column in this paper, warning that trust in the Church of England was already low (Thunderer, June 27). People may hesitate to see churches as a safe place to seek help.

Yet an October 2024 National Churches Trust report, *The House of Good: Health*, shows that parish churches provide essential support services (youth groups, food banks, addiction support and mental health counselling) that save the NHS £8.4 billion a year, equivalent to nearly 4 per cent of UK health spending. Society needs this good, localised work to continue.

How can you shake up an institution tainted by scandal, rectify and restore confidence in it? The bloated church edifice above parish level seems mired in process, an inward-looking world of echo chambers and talking shops, reminiscent of Dickens's fictional Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* with all of the downsides of centralisation and none of the gains. This behemoth, where accountability gets lost, needs reform.

An urgent shift towards looking outwards and serving is imperative. There are some 108 serving bishops. The last published Ministry Statistics indicate 980 ordained clergy, including suffragan bishops, working in the church's bureaucracy. Send them out from their 42 HQs, into frontline parishes. Priests and parishioners need to feel the

glow of support from above, not the heat of oppression and regulation. We need healing love.

The Bible includes St Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, which he founded. Paul advised them that by God's grace we are saved through faith in Christ Jesus, which works by love.

The Galatian Jewish and Gentile Christians were arguing over obeying Jewish laws and traditions. Paul saw all the law as fulfilled in Jesus's commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself", encouraging the demoralised: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galations, vi, 9-10).

In chapter vi, verse 10, Paul further instructs: "Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith". This seems to be the origin of the Christian saying "charity begins at home" (Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1642)), a message reflected in Dickens's comic portrayal of Mrs Jellyby (*Bleak House*), the philanthropist who neglects her own children. St Augustine described an "ordo amoris", or order of loves, (*City of God*). It is the duty of church leaders to care first for the household of faith: existing churchgoers.

The home of the faithful, in the Church of England, is most naturally the parish church. This is why providing parish ministry remains the overriding charitable object of the Church Commissioners in applying their funds (a principle traceable directly back to Old Testament tithes providing for the Levite temple servants).

However, the bishops are trying expressly to change this via legislation. The current draft National Church Governance Measure is essentially a power grab to the bishops, impairing accountability — governance reform in precisely the wrong direction.

The church's hundreds of central and diocesan jobs — leaning on a dwindling number of priests, many overwhelmed by their

number of parishes — need radical pruning. Culture change towards the front line would mean halving the size of all non-parish offices, with those who remain at HQ spending at least half their time offering practical and pastoral support.

During Welby's time as archbishop there has been a big resource shift away from parish ministry (manifested by the rapidly growing number of "mega-parish" groupings) towards grant-funded schemes ineffectively trying to grow the number of child and ethnic-minority worshippers. Worse than not working, this is destroying the fabric of the Church of England: the parish system.

Unless this policy is urgently reversed, more and more parish churches will close, with church communities displaced and the national church becoming unavailable to millions. The remnant will be a vast bureaucracy overseeing narrowly focused, failing projects squandering resources originally endowed for parishes.

The media has been bandying about names for the next archbishop, mostly inappropriately from Welby's entourage. Historically, bishops have come in three different "styles": pastoral, theological and managerial. These used to be kept in balance. Under Welby, the managerial have dominated — but not competently, evidenced by many dioceses being in deficit.

Ideally, bishops' calling would be largely pastoral — parish-facing and caring — starting with loving existing churchgoers.

Of the diocesan bishops' statements on Welby's resignation, one — Chelmsford's — impresses by showing concern for parishes. Perhaps the Right Rev Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani, Bishop of Chelmsford, should be the next Archbishop of Canterbury. Whoever is chosen, pastoral is the style of archbishop that we desperately need.

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