STP Summer Conference 2026
Speech by Rev'd Marcus Walker

"A building, a stipend, and long costly college-based training". You may remember these three things.

Not faith, not hope, not charity but the "key limiting factors" holding back church growth.

As proclaimed at a church planting conference by Canon John McGinley back in 2021, as part of the newly published Vision and Strategy of the Church of England for the 2020s.

10,000 lay-led churches would be funded by the Church of England, freeing our church of the key limiting factors that hold it back. "A building, a stipend, and long costly, college-based training."

Well, buildings, stipends, and college-based education are back. And with your help, they are *here to stay*.

What we have realised, over the last five years, as Save the Parish has got off the ground and started to ask the questions that should have been asked decades ago, is that what we are in danger of losing is not <u>just</u>
some old buildings,
or the clerical stipend,
or one mode of training over another,
but the essence of the Church of England itself.

Who are we? What is the unique ecology of the Church of England, which <u>*we*</u> love so dearly that we have got up and come here on a Saturday morning?

"If the Church of England were to fail," said John Keble, "it should be found in my parish."

Or, listen to Justin Welby, who, I concede isn't often quoted by Save the Parish: "you could lose the House of Bishops tonight…[and] it'd be a couple of years before there was any noticeable impact on the Church of England. Whereas if you got rid of all the parishes and the churchwardens and the laypeople it would be noticeable in about one second."

Well, **we are here** for the parishes and the churchwardens and the laypeople today. And for the priests. (I do declare an interest…)

The burden of decline and retreat has been felt very strongly by the clergy – and so to every priest here, and those watching across the country…. Thank you. You carry the weight of your parishes, of your offices, on your shoulders.

And although we know, as the Ordinal tells us, that we do not bear the weight of this calling by our own strength, but by the grace and power of God… it can feel a lonely task.

I hope that *we*, Save the Parish, will help *us*, the Church of England, get better at this. A joyful, hopeful clergy lifts parishes, people, and vocations, like nothing else at all. You are the greatest recruitment campaign the church has ever had.

Perhaps beaten only by one category – the people of God. The people who come to church week-in, week-out,
who look after the drains,
prepare the faculties,
make sure the fire extinguisher is replaced,
do the accounts,
polish the silver,
carry the cross,
administer the chalice,
sing in the choir,
play the guitar,
organise a bible study, sit… pray… weep… rejoice.

Here is the Church of England. The people who are not only ministered to but who are ministers themselves, every day of every week.

The Church of England *is* its people. It isn't the bishops. It isn't the clergy. It isn't even the General Synod. It's you. The people of God.

Although let's *not* forget about General Synod. There's a reason we've come up to London today and a reason we're offering the church this manifesto.

Because for all the good work that we try and do, each in our own corner of the vineyard, so much is determined at another level. How much time you have to spend fundraising, paper-chasing, online training-enduring… everything, really, other than the Mission of God… this is determined far away from the vineyard.

Let's take some of these in turn. What is it that has driven diocese after diocese into the catastrophic cycle of closing churches, reducing clergy, merging parishes and forcing the parish share up beyond the point at which churches feel that they can pay them?

The withdrawal of the financial infrastructure that ensured the poorest parishes were not abandoned. Queen Anne knew that the poorest communities in the land could never hope to pay for their own priests and buildings; and she knew – being a good daughter of the church – that the Church must never abandon the poor. So she left us a bounty, an endowment, for the "provision of the cure of souls in parishes where such assistance is most required" as the legislation says.

That endowment stands to this day. It stands at £11.6 billion. But its original purpose does not stand. A sneaky little clause in a sneaky little Measure – a Miscellaneous Provisions Measure

no less – expanded its remit to *any* of "the purposes of the Archbishops' Council".

And just like that – hundreds upon hundreds of million of pounds were redirected away from keeping parishes alive. "**To stop subsidising failure**", as the then head of finance of the CofE put it.

But what happened? It caused failure. On both sides of the balance sheet. The old things that were being funded – parishes, often the poorest in the land – cut. Closed. Research has shown that 40% of church closures take place in the 10% most deprived parishes. Church Action on Poverty showed that in the areas they studied, a church in the poorest quintile was five times as likely to be closed as a church in the richest. The poor will always be with us. But will we always be with the poor?

So many dioceses saw their bottom line turn red and they were forced to sell, close, and merge their churches and parishes. Not that it worked. We can see this from the even more disastrous diocesan accounts that were revealed to Synod last year: 35 dioceses running a deficit; 23 holding less than three months' reserves; 13 having no investment assets they can liquidate.

You see, this fire-sale began a doom-loop, a spiral of closures and cuts to clergy that led to people staying home or going elsewhere, and taking their money with them.

The disastrous Wigan scheme,
which saw 29 parishes turned into one mega benefice,
which saw clergy slashed from 24 to 18 to 13,
which wanted great new church plants but were indifferent to the survival of the boring snoring old churches… what happened?

Well a third of the people walked. And giving fell by a third. And the promise… that this would redeem the deanery deficit

and bring in an extra half a million pounds a year… well they got the figure right. It was half a million pounds a year. But the other way. They lost a *further* £500,000.

Kerrier in Truro – 29 churches, two priests. Leicester, Sheffield, Liverpool, … The central planners always have the same design: the more parishes you merge, the fewer priests you need, the better your accounts will look.

But the central truth remains: you can no more cut your way out of decline than you can eat your way out of being fat. *I know, I've tried.*

If you want mission *spoken* about, send for a Vision Strategist. If you want mission *done*, fund a priest.

And this is key. Because the presumption has been that decline – the numbers on the chart going down – is because of a failure of our system. Of our church. And the way to make the numbers go back up is to bypass the old system altogether and fund clever new schemes with clever new grants. Managers can plot the vision and managers can assess the strategy and we can ensure that very clever phrases like 'best practice' and ''fit for purpose' can litter these strategies and then millions – and I do mean millions – can pour into a project… until it stops. And the grant runs out.

The presumption is that you can only make sure priests actually engage in mission if they have measurable and achievable outcomes and grant money to compete for. One bishop was quite clear in last year's debate on this. "I don't want no-strings subsidy for [my diocese] because that would encourage torpor and disincentivise missional imagination."

Well I don't know about you.
But if I've so given up on my ministry
that I'm spending the summer
outside in the garden at St Bart's

sipping a piña colada
instead of getting on with my basic mission,
the last thing that's going to get my sorry backside
off the sun-lounger
is the prospect of filling out a grant application form, in triplicate, for the Strategic Ministry and Mission Investment Board.

And the frustrating thing is that we know that the plan hasn't worked. The hundreds of millions of pounds spent on these schemes have not delivered. Yes, they are able to point to anecdotal evidence of a few high profile success stories, but the audit they commissioned (and fair play to them for doing this) by Sir Robert Chote, the former head of the Office for Budget Responsibility, showed the whole thing to be a chimera.

The first iteration of the plan was to spend £176 million on schemes that would bring in 89,000 new Christians. But by the time the report came out, how many actually had turned up? 12,704. That's £13,854 per new disciple.

Friends: I'd have got a much better result just by using bribery.

Or by trusting the local. The catastrophic loss of confidence in the local clergy and the local people of God calls to mind the poem by Brecht.

Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

Well luckily, they don't get to elect us. But there are elections coming up and a lot of latent power sits in General Synod. We have the power to re-impose a restriction on what Church Commissioners' money can be spent on. We have the power to push the Synod into setting up a review into the whole way the finances of the Church of England work. And, indeed, we've

tried both and… have had some success. But none of it is baked in. The big fight is coming in the next Synod.

So… what are you going to do about it? Because we need people in this room – and watching online – and your friends and relations to get into that room, in Synod, and speak and vote.

But we're first going to need people to vote for the campaign we're launching today, and the commitments we are offering.

The first, is to rebalance the Church of England's finances. That's the big one. It's the one that people are going to fight hardest because nobody whose nose is firmly in the trough likes the taps at the top of the trough being turned off.

But it's not their money. This is money either given directly by the parishes - £319 million a year in parish share – ormoney left in perpetuity to fund parish ministry, handed over by its custodians for other purposes.

Church House has no money of its own, neither does the Archbishops' Council, neither do the Dioceses. There is no such thing as 'central church funding'.

There is only the money that is given *by* parishes or the money that has been left *for* parishes. But the trouble with all these central strategies is not that eventually they are going to run out of the parish's money. They'll run out of people. Sitting on the largest church endowment the world has ever known and nobody in the pews. That'll make the churches much easier to manage too. But the parishes and the dioceses by this point will have gone broke.

But here's the thing. You can't cry about not having enough money while you've increased your diocesan overheads by 29% in three years - that's the aggregate of all the dioceses by the way.

And you can't cry crocodile tears for flogging off parsonages when the number of diocesan employees have grown from 69 to 134 in ten years.

No, I won't name the diocese.

Nor the two which have more employees on their diocesan books than they have stipendiary clergy.

Nor the one that has a Vision and Strategy team with more people in it than any single deanery has priests.

Helmut Schmidt used to say that if a man tells you he has a vision, send for the doctor. Well I say that if a Bishop tells you she has a vision… send her back to the parish. To the ground. To the people.

The greatest vision that we can have is that of our Saviour, and we see him in the faces around us in the pews, and we see him *on* the altar, and we see him in the beggar on the street.

In fact, if a Bishop tells you he has a vision, send for the Gospel.

But even if we do get all the money in the world to spend on funding good old fashioned ministry, it's all in vain if there are no priests to take up the offices.

And for this we have to turn our minds to the safety and well-being of the clergy. Why? Well aside from being the right thing to do, it's the root of our entire recruitment crisis. More priests are leaving the ministry *early* than are retiring – and that's no surprise as 35% of incumbents show signs of clinical depression in the Church's own survey called Living Ministry (a massive, regular, analysis of the state of the clergy undertaken every few years). 40% experience chronic loneliness. *Only 3.9%* view the national or diocesan church leadership as a source of hope. That is within the margin of error of zero.

“I have the diocesan action plan and I’m here to help”. The eleven most terrifying words in the Church of England.

But here’s the thing. We are ordaining more priests than retire at the end of their ministry. If we could stop priests quitting early, we could stop the haemorrhage of clergy.

And if clergy were loving their job, they would be greatest recruitment sergeant for new priests the church has ever known. Which is why it is crucial that we develop a Clergy Charter of Care that focuses the mind of the institutional church on the people who have given their lives to that church.

And we have to train them well. Training should be focused around what the ordinand needs, not what the budget can bear. They need to go where it is right for them, and study what is best for them.

We need well-trained priests because they need to be able to discuss the things of God – *theology* – with a new generation that has hardly heard of him.

Which brings us to our final set of commitments. To the people of the parishes whose love and care keeps this little ark of ours afloat.

For too long the Church has taken you for granted. Has treated volunteering as something which we *generously* allow you to do, for which you jolly well ought to be grateful.

This has to stop. We have to clear the decks of all the petty regulations and paperwork that we have put on the shoulders of our volunteers; we need to make sure you have decent provision of clergy so you can know your priests and they can know you.

And we have to protect the buildings we love. This is one of those places where being on General Synod is so important.

The Mission and Pastoral Measure is the machinery of church closures and clergy redundancies. It is being debated line-by-line in committee at the moment – and I'm sitting at that table making sure your voice is heard. But soon it will be back on the floor of Synod. And we will need votes – lots of votes – to makes sure some basic rights for parishes are added.

For example, parishes need equal access to justice. At the moment the diocese, when it wants to close your church or merge your parish, has unlimited recourse to legal advice – all paid for by parishes. They have no money of their own, remember.

But the parishes? Who, almost by definition, once it's reached this point, are not rich… they go in blind. We need to make sure they have the right to good legal advice. Even if it's to say "don't fight it, you'll lose."

We want to make sure that when the diocese sells off a vicarage, the parish gets some of the proceeds. This is especially true when these parsonage houses were built or paid for by the parish themselves, which every parish had to do under the terms of the Parsonages Act 1836. This isn't abstract or abstruse legalism, this is the difference between life and death for parishes across the country. Imagine if every time a parish was merged and the vicarage sold off, that money had gone to endow the ministry of that merged parish? We wouldn't be in crisis now.

Because what we're discussing now isn't just about buildings and stipends and long costly theological education. This is about the Mission of God. The crisis our church is in is a missional crisis first and foremost – but the mission comes out of a healthy community with a joyful priest in a parish that's still there and is able to survive financially.

Yesterday the Church and Theos published a ground-breaking report, 'Understanding Young Adult Journeys to Faith'. It looks

at young adults coming to Christ from non-church backgrounds. And it repays reading in detail. For a church report, it's brilliant.

And what does it say? It tells of young adults choosing the Church of England because we had a building right there, in their home town, open, where they could encounter the Divine.

"I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," SAYS Dylan, who is 21. "I just found it absolutely fascinating. I didn't quite know what to do with the feeling. So I kept going back to that church…"

The fear of losing it led Nina, aged 25, to join her PCC and now is Secretary. "I don't want to see [my local church] go. I don't want to see it shut down. And because we've had one of our churches shut down in the parish, I think, that could be ours next."

My friends, be like Nina.

And the report talks of a world where doing things *together* in real life is rare, and how important it is to find a priest to talk to. It tells of how they didn't want soft or mushy answers, of a world where so much can be found online but so little of it is satisfying. It tells of a generation that wants full fat faith and how they wanted to be challenged.

In short, it tells us that if we are serious about mission in the 21st century we need to be serious about having churches visible and open in communities across the country, served by clergy who are paid to be there and be present, and who have had the training to allow them to answer the tough questions from a generation that has hardly heard of the faith of their forebears and what they have heard, they've heard online. In short, the key *amplifying* factors of church growth are a building, a stipend, and a long, costly, theological education.

That was what triggered us getting our act together five years ago and it is what fires us for the fight now, in 2026. We have come a long way – and wasn't it wonderful to hear the new Archbishop of Canterbury commit to "be the shepherd to care for people in their parishes"? We have changed the narrative, now we have to change the church. But nothing will change if we don't step up to be a part of that change.

Our manifesto is just the start of a campaign that needs to run through every parish and every diocese; to renew hope in how this church has a future – a future which honours its past, and loves the people that make up its present, and knows that the weight of this calling is not ours alone but God's

So let us transform our church and give it back its future. So that when generations of Anglicans as yet not imagined, have teleported from the moon back to their old parish church, having heard a sermon from a priest as yet unborn, preaching a beauty so ancient and so new, can turn to one another and give thanks to God that back in dusty old 2026, the Church of England decided to put its money where its mouth should always have been, and give thanks that have chosen to save our buildings, our stipends, and our long, costly, theological education.

That we chose, in short, to Save the Parish.