

Mr Chairman, friends,

I crave your indulgence for just a few minutes. I have three things I should like to say. Firstly, I would like to pay a warm tribute to Brigitte who has run the church so efficiently, and with good humour and good sense, in the last few years. And that, despite being a lone churchwarden, which is a heavy burden for anyone, as I am just about to find out for myself. I'll try my best to be as efficient. However, since I have a reputation for scattiness, I'm not holding out much hope.

Secondly, if I am to take up this major burden, I should like to be able to set a smaller one down. I have edited the Newsletter for a number of years, chasing reluctant contributors and sometimes having to knock streams of consciousness into comprehensible English sentences. I have been very fortunate in having Pauline design the copy and the newsletter comes in for a lot of praise as a result. I know I haven't made this job sound very alluring, but it is a very useful, even important, means to help build up our common life, which is our Christian duty. Is there anyone on the PCC who feels sufficiently confident about the proper use of apostrophes who is prepared to volunteer? Or who knows someone outside the PCC who would? If so, please do let me know.

Thirdly, I don't want to sound a more serious note, but I feel I must. I have to say that the rural church is in an existential crisis. It does not need to be, but it is. For decades, the centre has starved the periphery of money, without which the periphery cannot do its job properly. Indeed, I resigned from the PCC three years ago because I was in such despair about the way the Church of England hierarchy was behaving. Sadly, the situation now is even worse. You may not know this but the Church Commission, which is separate from the Church of England, but whose function is to fund its parishes, has £10.3 billion in its funds. I'll say that again, £10.3 billion. The dioceses between them have an additional £6 bn. In 2022, the Church Commissioners had £486 million to spend. The money rightly belongs to the parishes. Most of it comes

from Queen Anne's Bounty, originally, founded to fund clergy. It's simply not getting through. At the moment, only 17% of Head Office investment income goes directly to parishes.

Instead, for a number of years, much of the interest from that enormous fund has gone into eye-catching, but not properly evaluated, and often downright counter-productive, projects, instead of ensuring that parishes receive the money they so desperately need and deserve. The latest, and most egregious, is the request of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce for £1 billion to fund reparations for transatlantic slavery, which was abolished by the British government more than two hundred years ago. They've already been awarded £100 million.

The result of this starvation of funds to the parishes is a thoroughly demoralised, outrageously underpaid, Church of England clergy, who cannot do the two things that make for church growth – provide weekly Sunday worship and carry out energetic visiting, not just of the sick and bereaved, but all the parish – which studies show is the only sure way to grow church attendance, and therefore grow the money to keep our churches afloat and thriving. I feel enormously sorry for the national clergy; they are simply not given the tools to do the job.

It seems that the Church of England, which now has a more bloated bureaucracy than at any time in its history, intends simply to manage decline. 6,000 churches have closed in the last 60 years, and 300 last year alone. The trickle is becoming a flood. I volunteered to be churchwarden this year, after a retired archdeacon told me that churches without churchwardens were at a high risk of being closed by the Bishop. I love this congregation – of good, faithful Christian people – and it is very important to me that they are able to worship here, Sunday by Sunday, for as long as they can. That is why I volunteered, and I will do the job to the best of my ability until age and frailty overtakes me. But I reckon that we have no more than ten years left – perhaps

a little more, perhaps a little less. Our congregation numbers are slowly declining and there's practically nobody coming up behind us.

As I have said, it does not have to be like this. Save the Parish, founded two years ago, which is the only organisation prepared to question what the Archbishops are doing, or allowing to be done, have computed that, if the Church Commission wanted to, it could provide money for an ordained minister in every single parish in this country. Every single parish. How transformative would that be? The reason why there are few or no applicants for vacancies in rural benefices round here, is because it's soul-destroying to be a part-time minister to as many as seven parishes. That's the fate, presently, of the benefice of Stoke Doyle, Wadenhoe, Pilton, Achurch, Aldwinckle, Titchmarsh and Clopton, as I've been told by one of the churchwardens at Stoke. If anyone were to apply, which is highly unlikely, they would spend most of their time in the car, never getting to know their congregations, let alone minister effectively to them. Canon law decrees that ministers visit their parishioners diligently, as well as provide regular and frequent services and teaching, not just in sermons. How can they possibly do that in these circumstances? There are too few shepherds, and the sheep are scattered.

I do encourage you to look at the Save the Parish website; you will find it illuminating and, depending on your personality, either depressing or invigorating to find that we are by no means alone in our anxieties and dread about the future. There is still a great deal of good will towards rural parish churches and congregations and, in a secular society, a longing for spiritual refreshment, which is going unanswered. But it's downhill all the way unless the Archbishops, Bishops and Church Commissioners come to their senses.

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