



Thanks to C of E accounting, parishes are disappearing James Burnell-Nugent

Last Saturday was a sad day for the Church of England. In Leicester diocese, the governing body voted in favour of a plan to fold 234 parishes into the embrace of 20 to 25 huge groups, called minster communities, by 2026. One in five local vicars will disappear, creating what sounds like a clerical car pool. "Thank you for calling the minster community help line. Press 1 for help with a very sick relative or friend. Press 2 for help with bereavement. Press 3 to arrange a funeral." This could be the future for the people of Leicester's historic parishes.

An alternative option, to cut Leicester's diocesan administrative costs by 10 per cent, was rejected. The C of E behaves like a socialist republic: demanding increasing "tax" (parish share) from dwindling numbers of churchgoers, then spending too much of it on its own bureaucracy. Moreover, as *The Times* reported last month, in 2017-2020 it spent £248 million on "renewal and reform" projects that failed to increase church attendance.

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Bureaucracy and waste deter donors. Yet Leicester hopes to increase giving by 2 per cent — how? The church's own studies show that donations correlate to numbers of paid clergy. The one identifiable Christian in the community is a priest in a dog collar. Grouping parishes empowers dioceses to sell parish-owned assets, incontinently using the capital to pay their own running costs, but it disincentivises donors. A 1,000-year-old system of independent parishes could be collapsed by short-term panic thinking and inadequate projections.

Other dioceses are considering the minster model. Better to wait and see how Leicester fares over the next five years. The church's growth policy report, *From Anecdote to Evidence*, confirms what rural parishioners like me witness: that parish amalgamations and building sales establish a spiral of decline. Selling a parsonage signals "game over" and leaves a community unlikely to have a vicar again.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has said, "I am passionate that the parish is essential." In the Archbishop of York's current General Synod update GS2223 he calls for "priest and people working together". These exhortations from our spiritual leaders, the trend towards localism and the church's own empirical evidence are all being ignored.

Admiral Sir James Burnell-Nugent is a churchwarden and member of savetheparish.com