

COMMENT

Out-of-touch bishops are pushing the Church to the brink of ruin

The church is losing its attachment to local people — and with that, its diversity of thought

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Look at their actions over recent months and you could be forgiven for thinking that Anglican bishops are on a mission to alienate their flocks, run down their parishes and ultimately give up their special place in British public and spiritual life. How else to explain the actions of the Bishop of St Davids, Joanna Penberthy, who has been forced to delete her Twitter account and apologise after tweeting, “Never, never, never trust a Tory”?

I am not theologically trained, but I cannot remember Jesus telling us to love our neighbours unless they are Tories. Our country is becoming unhelpfully polarised along age, North/South and rural/urban lines. It is the Church’s job to remind us, in crisis times, of our common humanity.

There is nothing new about Left-wing bishops being out of touch with their congregations. The trouble is that the political divide between bishops and laity is not the only issue driving a wedge between them.

This is most keenly felt in the [decline of parish churches](#). Last month, the Bishop of Winchester, Tim Dakin, was forced to “step back for six weeks” after an extraordinary revolt by both clergy and laity. Bishop Dakin appears to have prioritised resourcing urban Evangelical “megachurches” while rural churches have been harassed with demands for growth, in money and attendance. Winchester diocese is cutting clergy numbers, proposing to merge village churches into ever-larger, geographically awkward benefices. Similar plans are being pursued around the country by bishops who have come up through a bureaucratic system and seem distanced from lay members.

Crockford’s Clerical Directory reflects that many Bishops, early identified as “high-fliers”, spend their careers mostly in non-parochial jobs or large suburban churches, leaving them lacking in hands-on experience. This hierarchy now appears to view Covid as enabling a welcome [technological and cultural change](#): more middle managers, fewer local clergy. This is despite the fact that the Church thrives on social connection. What of the poor and elderly, more likely to be excluded by the move away from physical services? A friend’s vicar recently got up at 3am to bless a dying baby; she had known the family for 20 years and lived nearby. She retires in 2022; the diocese has said that she is unlikely to be replaced. What then?

Rural dwellers love their parish church buildings. This attachment to local people, place and parish is, sadly, almost portrayed as part of the Church’s problems. Properly understood, it should be part of the solution. A recent report from the University of York found that, post-pandemic, even 75 per cent of non-churchgoers wanted access to churches, as places of quiet reflection and comfort.

Large organisations need diversity of thought; the Church’s breadth used to be its strength. Bishops insulting potential donors, and withdrawing parish clergy without listening to the people, reminds me of the old joke about the tinker’s donkey: “He had just taught it to go without food when it died.”