

The Church is acting like the police

Officers and vicars no longer understand their communities

BY [Giles Fraser](#)



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The sleepy pages of the *Church Times* may seem an unlikely place for a bad-tempered exchange about policing. But it seems that both the church and the police are in the process of undergoing surprisingly similar, and perhaps similarly disastrous, transformations.

The Revd Canon Alan Billings, who used to be a parish priest — and taught me theology at Vicar's training college — is now the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Yorkshire. He recently wrote a piece, [in which he suggested](#) that the Church could learn a valuable lesson from the mistakes made by the police.

Both organisations, for example, require visibility in the community. But the police, under financial pressure, have closed one local station after another, and replaced "bobbies on the beat" with hubs covering increasingly large areas that serve multiple communities. The Church, he argued, is about to try something similar. And it will end in tears.

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In response, Michael Mulqueen, Professor of Policing and National Security at the University of Lancaster, wrote a letter to the paper, [accusing](#) Dr Billings of being "unfair". He praised the way the "officers and staff [have] creatively formulated new, good-quality, high-value solutions to police increasingly complex communities". For example, Professor Mulqueen thinks it perfectly acceptable that "digital neighbourhood policing services" can be used to compensate for reduced officer headcount. In his view, ordinary citizens find face-to-face discussions with officers "too daunting or dangerous a task".

This latter comment echoes the language used following the murder of Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens, a few miles from my parish. If women don't trust the police, perhaps then it is safer to engage with the police online. But there are safety issues here too. Only this week, one of the women who was arrested at the vigil for Sarah Everard [described](#) her discomfort after 50 police officers contacted her on Tinder.

Suggested reading

[There will always be bad men in the police](#)

By Tom Chivers

The case for digital policing, according to Professor Mulqueen, is that it enables the police to "reach more people than we otherwise could, while reducing cost and carbon footprint". Yet for Professor Billings, this strategy has opened up "a gulf between public and police, as trust and confidence in police ebbed away".

The two boroughs of London with the highest gun and knife crime are Southwark and Lambeth. I live on the border of the two. But the only time I ever see a police officer is in a car going sixty with its lights and sirens flashing. I never see an officer walking around my parish, still less get the opportunity to speak to one, except when I report a crime to a call centre or when they come when called — which, I have to say, they do.

Isn't this all we should reasonably expect, some might argue? Why waste valuable police resources on chat and public relations? We should free them up to chase the baddies. "Bobbies on the beat" is just sentimental nostalgia.

This is where the comparison between the police and the Church of England is instructive. There are 45 territorial police forces in the UK. There are 42 dioceses in the Church of England. Both are cash-strapped. Both seek universal service provision. Both are expected to have a presence on the ground across the



country.

The so-called “British way of policing” — growing out of community consent — and the Church of England are the building blocks of localism. And localism is still being lauded as the answer to our problems: “Localism is the key to levelling up Britain,” wrote William Hague in *The Times* this week.

But for all the high-profile public defence of localism — and the PM was at it in his speech to the Tory Conference, defending the broken windows theory of crime prevention — experientially, localism seems on the decline. I have no idea what the name of my GP is anymore. I never see the same person twice. Getting into the surgery is a bureaucratic nightmare. Meanwhile, the police whizz by. And now the Church — most recently in the [Diocese of Leicester](#) — is proposing to relocate vicars to regional hubs.

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Why women fear the police

By Julie Bindel

Rationally and perhaps economically, all this makes a certain sense if these jobs are understood in purely instrumental terms. But as well as being crime fighters, the police exist to reassure the public. And here there is no substitute for presence, for the face-to-face encounter. In church terms, it is the Ministry of Just Wandering Around, of being seen and available.

I recently bought one of those fancy new electric bikes with a box on the front so that we can take the children to school. It’s something of a godsend in the *Mad Max* dystopian world of petrol-less south London. But the best thing about it is that I have rediscovered the joys of community vicaring. “Morning!” I shout out breezily to Mrs so-and-so as she pops out to the shops. Sometimes I pass by with a wave. Sometimes I stop for a chat. It is in these chance encounters that you really find out what’s going on in the parish, who has upset who (often me), who has gone into hospital and so on. It is the basis of establishing trust.

Is this a waste of time and money? Should the Church be paying me and should the police be paying its officers to wander around my neighbourhood with a vague sense of semi-purposeless benevolence? The bean-counters in head office think this can be achieved more efficiently. But the problem here is that so much of what we do does not fit into a strict job description.

The doctor isn’t just a glorified drug dispenser. She listens to the concerned; she gives people time to express their hidden fears. Things often emerge in conversation that reveal where the real issue lies. There is no substitute to giving people time. Efficiency directives from head office rob people of this opportunity. And defending all this is not simply some reactionary nostalgia for the 1950’s — bobbies on the beat, vicars out in the parishes, GP’s chatting with their patients. It is defending the human scale of things.

Localism isn’t regionalisation. It is the presence of people, over time, and geographically rooted, committed to a collection of streets, building up relationships layered by years of daily encounter.

All this has been collapsing for years, but Covid has accelerated the change. The pubs are closing — we no longer speak of going to the “local’ for a pint. The village church is empty, so too, soon, the local vicarage. The GP hasn’t time to see you. The police fly by, always in a hurry.

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Only chaos can redeem the Church

By Giles Fraser

My own instinct is that, one day, some of this will have to return. A regionalised church will collapse for want of local support and new forms of local church will spring up, hopefully reclaiming the ancient buildings that have been abandoned.

But for now it is time to hunker down, and sit out this social and emotional winter. Those of us who want a return to what we had will have to keep the memory of it alive. Innovations will have to be survived and endured.

Forty years ago, the great moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that “what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us”. He wrote those prophetic words two years before the official invention of the Internet and decades before the dreaded Zoom.

These have superficially brought us together, yet also fundamentally separated us in ways that he hardly could have imagined. Fractured and disconnected as we are, with social solidarity continually fraying through lack of real face-to-face contact, the new dark ages are indeed already upon us.