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Church faces a stark choice for the future

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The drive towards centralisation is not working. Power must be shifted downwards to parish clergy, argues *Paul Hackwood*

AS I indicated last week ([Comment, 31 December](#)), the Church of England has been on a relentless 30-year journey of shifting power upwards — but what if this thinking were turned on its head? What if, instead of centralising and creating a command-and-control



structure, with [mission](#)-strategy decisions pushed upwards and away from the coalface, they were pushed downwards, with an associated shift in resources and an increase in local clergy and suitably qualified lay people to renew local [ministry](#)?

This would require trust from above, and an assumption that clergy in their local contexts are best placed to decide, with their people, how they minister and help their churches to grow. We can say with some certainty that, with everything that has been said and done since the Decade of [Evangelism](#) in the 1990s, they now know that they must take [growth](#) seriously.

The arguments for this approach are compelling. If the people of England are saying anything clearly at the moment, it is that the places where they live, and the communities in which they live, are important to them.

[Brexit](#) demonstrated that locality plays a significant part in the formation of

identity, and that local communities are where significant numbers of people find the meaning that gives purpose to their lives. Covid has also demonstrated that our most important relationships are local.

Why, then, place the action somewhere else? The local church is still where most of the money comes from, and where there is most potential for future sustainability. Giving to their local church is more attractive to parishioners than giving to central bodies, and presents the most attractive opportunity for fund-raising from individual donors, public bodies, and social enterprises.

Local responses also have the potential to be much more dynamic, as society continues to change. If management responses are important, it is worth noting that companies such as Google and Apple are successful because they recognise that the wisdom and creativity are at the bottom of their organisations rather than the top.

SO, WE require a wider purpose and a broader vision. A rethinking of *cura animarum* — the cure of souls — provides a good foundation. Although it has an ancient and archaic ring, it is a surprisingly contemporary idea. Its origins are Roman and about authority in a particular place; but its expression comes from the Saxon idea of the Church's underpinning the formation of the nation, as a function of the spiritual, moral, and material welfare of the people.

This idea of general welfare is gaining traction as our culture changes; “well-being” is increasingly spoken of in the workplace and in civil society. Not coincidentally, this is what most clergy in the Church of England see as their purpose, and the horizon of their mission, and it gives meaning to what they deal with every day. Well-being and welfare are a strong foundation for evangelism and growth.

A shift from a directive, top-down strategy to something more adaptive and collaborative, working with the grain of the Church rather than against it, has potential to improve morale and build confidence, ridding the institution of the lingering smell of desperation. As I know from my own teenage years, the desperate need for a relationship is not attractive. I wonder how far the current depressed culture of the Church undermines the joyful message that it is supposed to be spreading.

A CLEAR and inclusive purpose and a cultural shift to the local will take time; and so the financial issues remain — but, fortunately, there is no shortage of money.

It is likely that, in 2021-22, the [Church Commissioners](#) will have a good year. They manage the third largest charitable fund in the country, at £9.1 billion, and are likely to return about £1 billion by the year end — maybe more. To give some idea of quantum here, if a decision was made to ring-fence just £1 billion from the significant gains of the past few years, that could pay for 100 clergy in each diocese for the next five years.

Supporting the parish clergy of the Church of England is, after all, the money's primary purpose. The Commissioners' funds come from two sources: Queen Anne's Bounty (given to the Church by the Crown after the Reformation) and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The Bounty's Charter makes clear what the revenues are: "To be applied . . . for the augmentation of the maintenance of such parsons, vicars, curates and ministers officiating in any church or chapel within the Kingdom of England. . ."

The Ecclesiastical Commissioners were formed after the Reform Act of 1832, which created two commissions charged with rationalising church structures and funding. Section 67 of the 1840 Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act described the purpose for which the funds were to be applied, including the sharing of resources between bishoprics and between cathedrals; but, again, ". . . Provision shall be made for the cure of souls in parishes where such assistance is most required."

Both funds focus on the support of parish ministry, and, until recently, this was where most of the money went. When the Rt Revd Richard Harries, then Bishop of Oxford, brought his case against the Commissioners over their ethical stance on investment in the 1990s, the judge in the case, Sir Donald Nicholls, made his judgment on the basis that 85 per cent of the income of these funds was supporting parish ministry.

SINCE the Commissioners are a [charity](#), and arguably their primary purpose is supporting parish ministry, there is an obligation on them to provide this sort of support at this time of crisis. They should not be let off the hook. The spending of these funds is a fiduciary duty of the trustees, who have a responsibility both to the

Charity Commission and, ultimately, to [Parliament](#), for what the money is spent on. This is a responsibility that cannot be passed to another body.

Pensions are well covered, and the liability has been carefully calculated. In 1998, the [Pensions Board](#), which had hitherto been a sub-committee of the Commissioners, became established as a separate pension fund, and it now carries responsibility for funding pensions after this 1998 cut-off. This makes the liability on the Commissioners for pensions, in relative terms, both measurable and limited. This responsibility has now been passed to the diocese, which has itself been a massive shift of wealth from the local to the central. In the Church Commissioners' 2020 accounts, the pension liability is measured by the actuaries at £1.6 billion; so there is no real problem there.

A £1-billion top slice is no risk to [cathedrals](#) or bishops, and neither is it likely to jeopardise the future of the fund. The actuaries referred to this in a carefully tangential way in their report to the Commissioners in 2020. There is some possibility that equity growth will stall in the medium term. Equities are certainly overpriced, but this has been a risk for some time.

One thing that you can be sure of: the able people who handle the Commissioners' investments today will have it covered. The trustees of several large endowment funds are recognising that these are exceptional times, both in terms of fund growth and people in need, and are increasing the funds available for their charitable objectives.

WHETHER or not it is widely recognised, there is now a stark choice before the Church: between a radical and sustained shift downwards of power, resources, and people (as well as blessing and generosity), or more of the same centralising trend that has so depressed the Church in recent years.

Can those who have been leading the drive towards centralisation and “command and control” have the courage to recognise that it is not working, and that a new approach is needed?

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