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C of E's crisis is about more than money

31 DECEMBER 2021



Behind financial problems lie existential questions about purpose and vision, argues *Paul Hackwood*

I WENT a couple of weeks ago to a consultation on the [diocese of Leicester's](#) new strategy ([News, 8 October](#)). Was my diocese abandoning the parish church as the primary location for [mission](#), and downgrading the place of clergy as set aside and theologically trained for [ministry](#)?



In fairness, what I heard at the consultation was a good attempt at dealing with some difficult, pressing realities. Much of the theological comment had been addressed, and, given the resources available, what I heard made good sense. [Covid](#) has exacerbated existing [financial](#) strains, and there is an urgent need to regroup and reorganise.

The reality, though, is that, no matter how sharp the strategy or how brave the bishop, this crisis cannot be put right in a diocese. The Church of England now faces, in most of its dioceses, significant challenges, which have no easy answers.

The crisis presents itself, at first sight, as a financial one. But financial crises are often a proxy for other things. Behind the money problems lie deep existential questions about purpose and vision. I wonder how many people can say with confidence what the Church of England is now for? Furthermore, there are the

cultural change of the past few years, and the chronically low levels of morale and self-confidence that it has created. Covid can be blamed, in part, as can the damage to reputation caused by [safeguarding](#) scandals; but much of it derives from the generalised anxiety that pervades the institution, linked to an obsession with a particular and very narrow kind of [growth](#).

DURING the past 20 to 30 years, the culture of the Church of England has radically shifted. There has been a journey from the local to the central, from autonomous parishes to “C of E plc”. Structures were reshaped upwards. Clergy numbers have been scaled back, and spans of responsibility and workload increased.

But, along with the expediency of this cost-reduction response, there has also been a conscious and deliberate choice to take this centralising route. The evidence, if any were needed, is the reallocation of [Church Commissioners’](#) funds, and the shift from supporting parish clergy to supporting diocesan projects (often called a more strategic approach).

Its origins lie in the observation made by the former First Church Estates Commissioner Andreas Whittam Smith, in the Commissioners’ 2013 annual report, that the rate of decline in churchgoers was likely to be fatal to the institution in the medium term. From that point on, centralisation has accelerated (and anxiety has increased), and several programmes have emerged that have been directive and controlling, attempting to manage growth and renewal from the centre, based on a single understanding of how to bring about change and “do [evangelism](#)”.

After eight years, and the recent election of a new [General Synod](#), now is the time for reflection on whether this process has accelerated decline rather than reversed it. The question remains: how do we move forwards? Is there an alternative to “more of the same”, or will anxiety drive another round of top-down programmes and more centralisation?

Certainly, the urgent need now is to restore financial stability for the medium term. But the Church also needs an antidote to the chronic lack of confidence and its crippling effect on growth. This will require a compelling purpose and vision that the majority can buy into, which will capture the imagination and mobilise the faithful. We do know for sure, though, that the faithful are not going to buy into

something that comes from the centre and that they do not get to play their part in shaping.

Certainly, bishops need to worry about the money. On the one hand, disgruntled parishioners puzzle about why central projects are being funded when they are struggling to keep the parish-level show on the road. Many parishes are now holding back their giving and refusing to draw on local reserves to cover diocesan deficits.

Parish clergy are taking on more and more parishes, besides coping with conflicting expectations, and some are now saying “Enough is enough.” On the other hand, although the growth strategy has not delivered, much of the money from the Commissioners still comes to dioceses with strings attached, which makes it difficult for them to use for the purposes for which they need it.

Crucially, it seems that those funds that shifted from supporting parish clergy to supporting diocesan projects had a high degree of marginality: i.e., these funds were the necessary top-up that kept diocesan finances stable. Without the top-up, and now that reserves have been used up, diocesan finances have become unstable. A quick look at the accounts of a few dioceses makes it clear that their current deficits are roughly equal to what they lost when the allocations were changed. This needs to be addressed, but, ultimately, it is not the main issue.

AN ORGANISATION’S purpose and, from it, its vision are the glue that holds it together, setting parameters and creating the sense that we are all in this together.

In a diverse and highly distributed organisation such as the Church, purpose can be thick, but it needs to be both inclusive and clear. During the past few years, we have seen the C of E’s purpose shift to a very specific and narrow understanding of discipleship which is very Protestant, highly confessional, confident, metropolitan, and self-perpetuating. Sociologically, it comes from a place that is both wealthy and privileged.

There is much to say about this, but, for now, let us briefly explore why it has become so comprehensively normative. Certainly, it owes more in its formation to a response to the cultural anomie of 21st-century UK society than it does to the direct line back to Jesus which is claimed for it.

The reason that it has become normative is not, however, because it is in some way God's preferred option, but, rather, because it has become coupled to funding. At the root of the more strategic approach is a concern about getting best return on investment (it's there in that 2013 annual report). This has inevitably influenced the way in which the new discipleship has embedded itself in the institution.

My suggestion is not that this has been done cynically, but simply that money is a powerful shaper of policy. It is worth noting, however, that, historically, when money and salvation become linked in this way, the Church usually comes a cropper.

The new discipleship is clearly counter-cultural to the wide and thick purpose that the C of E has traditionally called its own. It has been a hegemonic project that is now presented as the only legitimate way to be Christian in the Church of England; certainly most (though, thankfully, not all) bishops have been appointed because they agree with it.

Yet it has had the effect of significantly narrowing the options and limiting growth. What is now needed is a general mobilisation in which people work to their strengths and get an opportunity to play their part in shaping the future of the Church. The new discipleship needs to take its place as a movement for renewal alongside other ways of being church, with a wider sense of vision and purpose, and a more public vocation.

Next week, I will set out an alternative to the "more strategic approach" — an alternative that, in my view at least, has more chance of securing the sustainable future for the Church of England which we all long for.

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