

How to honour the Queen: by maintaining the parish

By Rebecca Chapman

As the Coronation approached seventy years ago, the then Archbishop of Canterbury presented the Queen with a book of daily Bible readings and prayers, including 'four oaths: to the Commonwealth; to execute justice and mercy; to preserve the laws of God, and the true profession of the gospel; and to maintain the Church of England'.

This May the Church Commissioners announced a significant increase in funding for the work of that Church. The current Archbishop of Canterbury promised the 'bold investment' of £3.6 billion over nine years for 'frontline ministry of the Church of England'.

This will provide an increase of 30 per cent in funding for the current three-year period, and a plan to maintain this level of funding in the subsequent six years. The money will help dioceses address 'racial justice', the Church's carbon footprint (£20 million initially for the former and £190 million over nine years for the latter).

No less than £388 million of the funding announced will be used for 'strategic national investment' - for making real the bold outcomes and strategic priorities of the Vision and Strategy that Archbishop Stephen has been sharing increasingly over the last 18 months. During the announcement he admitted 'we've learned, we've listened'.

We've changed our mind' as it was confirmed that rural parishes can now bid for funding, in a response to the February Chote review into Strategic Development (SDF) and Lowest Income Communities (LInC) funding. Money is to be released for the poorest communities, for mission-focused on children and young people and schools' chaplaincy.

It is sometimes said that the devil is in the detail, and piecing together what we know my heart began to sink like a deflating jubilee balloon. I'm not sure this money will help 'maintain the Church of England'. There are several reasons why my initial optimism is waning - distribution, diocesan focus, and discipleship. This announcement seemed to promise a lot, but the details we have had to date are not reassuring.

Firstly, distribution - who will decide where this money is spent? Investing in the local church will be done via dioceses, rather than going direct to parishes. But a leaked consultation paper in



February highlighted data that "strongly suggests that the majority of dioceses are not capable of sustaining themselves". The funding will be allocated 'in line with the Church's Vision and Strategy'; over a billion pounds promised to deliver outcomes that General Synod hasn't even nominally rubber stamped, to be delivered through dioceses desperate to cut costs due to rising deficits. Will this mean more staffing at a diocesan level to manage the funding bids, or pay for things which are already happening (racial justice, net zero) or other non-parish projects?

At the York 2021 Synod where this Vision and Strategy was presented, Archbishop Stephen assured us that "taking note of the report was simply entering into discussion: it did not prevent breakout groups in the next Synod, which could continue to shape this work".

While General Synod was scheduled to do this in February, it was scrapped due to time pressures. Nor is Vision and Strategy group work on the agenda for the July Synod. Yet the Archbishop has said this money will go "towards the agreed priorities of the whole church".

He promised Synod in

November, "Our job together is to draw the map, to work out what it means to be the Church of England in and for this day and in this age." Yet the vision and strategy by which this significant spending is to be allocated doesn't seem to have been done in this way. How much power will go to dioceses as they divvy up the pot?

These unknowns create concerns about confidence and trust. Those who have observed the allocation of previous strategic funding - described by the Chote review as acting as a lightning rod for "a broader lack of trust" - know this only too well. Sir Robert noted that some clergy had "suspicions of funding bias" towards resource churches and charismatic evangelicals. We were promised a true mixed ecology, not one that allows parishes to decline then be replaced with plants.

Secondly, the focus of dioceses - dioceses will now be seeking the next potential project following Archbishop Stephen describing his 'hunches' about new ways to build Christian community. He's expressed hopes that this funding "will encourage a great flourishing of innovation and experimentation so we can find out what works best". As we share the gospel

afresh, we will need to invest in new initiatives. But if it is difficult to meet the demands of your parish share, if you are threatened with the loss of your priest or parsonage. While mission might be your priority the urgency of repairing the roof may be overriding the important.

These everyday realities aren't reflected in this announcement. For those in parishes relying on volunteers rather than paid staff, finding the resources to plead with the diocese for new initiative funding may be impossible. We might have a mixed ecology, but is it a level playing field?

Much of what is proposed is positive, but it shouldn't be at the expense of existing parishes flourishing. There is a very real need to release some of those Church Commissioner billions directly to those parishes that are struggling, their deficits growing, and at risk of losing their parish priest. If diocesan overheads could be met from central church resources, parish share could be reduced, and in turn this would hasten any diocesan rationalisation programme.

If we abandon parish churches to closure, we will all be poorer. Empty or converted churches signal loud and clear the failure and withdrawal of Christianity in those places. The essential nature of the Church of England as a broad church will be lost. The Commissioners' investment accounts for approximately 20 per

cent of Church funding, whilst the biggest contribution continues to come from the faithful and generous giving of those in parishes across the country. If the parish system is allowed to collapse, we risk a lot of giving disappearing, but more importantly, we risk losing worshippers who don't transfer to other forms of church.

This brings me to my final area of concern - discipleship. It can be a challenge to 'close the back door of the church' - retaining those who have come in once we have flung the doors wide-open with social action projects, hospitality, and courses like Alpha and Christianity Explored. We long for more people to know Jesus. But we also long for them to commit to being part of a growing church; growing not only in numbers but in depth, and in discipleship.

The Vision and Strategy outcomes include ten thousand new Christian communities, truly a wonderful ambition. But let us not forget those already in our churches. Social action and social justice are important, but so is investing resource in the preaching, teaching, pastoral ministries that many would love to devote more time to if only the struggle for parish survival wasn't so terribly real.

I'm praying that the 'hunches' and new initiatives of which Archbishop Stephen speaks prove fruitful and lead to revival. We have been told that parishes are at the heart of what the Church of England does, and that this splashing of the cash is for 'supporting local parishes and growing many more new worshipping communities'. It needs to truly do both. We must support existing parishes, especially those that are struggling, and not give in to the temptation to purely resource the next new project.

One of the greatest joys and strengths of our Church of England is its parish structure - we have a presence in every single place. What a mission opportunity this is. Like the Head of our Church, the Queen herself, our Church serves the whole nation. As we celebrate her 70-year reign, I wonder what will be left of our Parish system in another 70 years without many more of us stepping up to fight for it.

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