

CHURCH TIMES

Leader comment: Jury still out on SDF strategy

11 MARCH 2022

CHURCH TIMES

A CORRESPONDENT whose letter is published this week suggests that something that the [Church Commissioners](#) should do with the resources that they hold in trust is “allocate a tiny fraction of their capital gain of £550 million in 2020 to clear the £12-million deficit accumulated by parishes in 2020 owing to Covid. This would bring immediate relief to those parishes hardest hit and reset a grave lack of fairness.” The sense of unfairness felt in English parishes in recent years, and expressed with growing incredulity in all forms of media since the [pandemic](#) began, has been prompted by the enlargement of bishops’ teams at a time of parochial retrenchment, and at seeming failures to curtail the [budget](#) for advisory and archidiaconal posts when [PCCs](#) were being told to spend their reserves (if they had any) to meet the parish-share requirement during the Covid crisis.

But the sense of unfairness also relates to the outlay of national grant funding on resource churches whose efforts are greeted with fanfares that those in ordinary parishes suspect could be theirs, too, if they were given a similar financial advantage. The connection of many of the projects supported to [Holy Trinity, Brompton](#), and thus to a network that often casts round for opportunities to take control of churches of other traditions, has been obvious; and so an independent review has long been an urgent need for the re-establishment of an atmosphere of trust. To have the idea in circulation that there has been a successful grab for resources by those with powerful friends is dangerous for a Church that is asking whether the Bishops’ avowed support for parochial ministry extends to financial help.

Unfortunately, Sir Robert Chote's review, which [reported](#) yesterday, was limited in what it could achieve by its timescale, and the requirement not to do original research. Evidence at this stage is often absent or anecdotal, or, in the case of estimates of new disciples expected or "witnessed", "not . . . robust". Critics are unlikely to be satisfied. Sir Robert suggests, no doubt rightly, that a better study with more objective data would be possible when the ten-year milestone is reached; but in the mean time a great deal of the Church of England's money will have been spent, and the levels of trust may have eroded further. The review's report is, nevertheless, the product of what strikes us as an honest effort to get to the truth about this strategy, and its recommendations are good as far as they can go. The larger question, whether this is indeed the best method for reversing the decline of the Church of England — or, perhaps, more properly, for enabling the C of E to fulfil its vocation, whatever the institutional consequences — remains up for debate.