

CHURCH TIMES

Letters to the Editor

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ISTOCK



Governance review and episcopal aggrandisement

From the Revd Dr Che Seabourne

Sir, — Much as I am loath to interrupt Canon Tilby in full flow, her assessment of the Governance Review Group's (GRG) work and the Synod's reception of it ([Comment, 4 March](#)) is rather uncharitable, besides perpetuating a conspiratorial view of the [House of Bishops](#).

There were three amendments relating to the GRG report. The [Bishop of Oxford](#), Dr Steven Croft, did indeed abstain on the first, as proposed by the Revd Sam Maginnis, who also proposed a second amendment, for which abstentions were recorded from Dr Croft and the Bishop of Coventry. There was, furthermore, an amendment proposed by Prudence Dailey, which, though lost overall, was supported by the [Bishop of Derby](#).

As a member of the House of Clergy, I voted against all the amendments, and for the main motion. Much of the work of the GRG relates to simplifying the mechanics of the various national church institutions (NCIs): a set of groups with more silos than a grain farm. There is good work going on in the NCIs, but there has been little attempt to review their governance structures since the Turnbull report of 1995.

Indeed, following one of Fr Maginnis's amendments, the main motion was passed in all three Houses, with least support from the House of Laity. Though not required for this vote, all three Houses carried the motion with a two-thirds majority, as determined in accordance with the Standing Orders, which exclude abstentions from such calculations.

Yes, the main GRG vote was universally agreed on by the House of Bishops, but is that really surprising, given the desperate need for governance reform of the NCIs after 27 years of relative stagnation? Or, to put things differently, looking at the votes by Houses, if the Bishops are orchestrating an Establishment stitch-up, they're doing a pretty shoddy job of it. Besides, I certainly wouldn't view their unanimity on this issue as "shameful".

Speaking more broadly, in our [diocese of Leeds](#), [Bishop Nick Baines](#) has been incredibly clear about his support for parish ministry, and the positive part that strategic development funding and church revitalisation can play in encouraging parish ministry. I passionately support his vision, with an independence of personal thought, spirit, and judgement.

Now that two-thirds of the Synod members are new, as I am, perhaps we might be a little less cynical about our episcopal leaders? In my presumably "naïve" experience, they are far too busy trying to support clergy like myself to be plotting the downfall of the parish.

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From the Revd Campbell Paget and others

Sir, — We read with concern Canon Angela Tilby's article rightly questioning the proposals for governance changes. In every respect — financial, strategic, and pastoral — such a centralised, oligarchical instrument would take the Church in completely the wrong direction, undermining its membership, effectiveness, and credibility. The project is quite clearly an act of desperation.

How the Bishops expect their clergy and laity to have confidence in an even greater degree of diocesan authority when so many are failing beggars belief. Not only has there been ineffective financial management: no empirically sound strategic goals have been set for producing fruitful solutions; nor, for that matter, has the requisite pruning been introduced in the right places to enable healthful growth.

The evidence clearly demonstrates a misdiagnosis of the problems facing the Church of England, together with the championing of a cure that would serve only to bring about its demise. *Pace* the Archbishop of York, this particular opera does not have to have a tragic ending, but a strong dose of realism will be required to prevent one.

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From Miss Vasantha Gnanadoss

Sir, — Canon Angela Tilby points us to the “shameful” lack of support in the House of Bishops for a [General Synod](#) amendment that raised a question mark over moves to increase their own status. She is right to be concerned.

The House of Bishops should set an example to politicians and to the community that democracy produces the best results if there is freedom to express differing views. At present, most political and other leaders treat loyalty as the single most important quality. Our Bishops have a responsibility for the welfare of the community and the morale of their clergy. They should recognise that, by adhering to a party line, they may be supporting policies that are doing harm both to the Church and to the wider community.

Fear for our own status damages our soul and our intellect. When we submit to oppressive behaviour, we lose our moral values and clarity of thinking. Our own welfare becomes our sole concern. Bishops need to focus their attention on our clergy, laity, and the rest of society rather than on themselves.

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Door must be kept open for Russia-Ukraine talks

From the Revd Donald Reeves and the Most Revd Malkhaz Songulashvili

Sir, — Once again, Europe is under the lingering shadows of war.

During an emergency debate in the [House of Lords](#), the [Archbishop of York](#) ([News, 4 March](#)) said that peace was a choice and called for action to be taken to deliver it in [Ukraine](#).

We welcome his words, and we are proposing to bring together priests from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the [Russian Orthodox Church](#), alongside other religious leaders, to see what needs to be done to bring peace to the long-suffering country of Ukraine and to foster reconciliation between Russians and Ukrainians.

We know that the door has to be kept open, given the ongoing isolation of [Russia](#). If any of your readers would like to know more about this proposal, please contact the Revd Donald

Reeves, of the Church of England, and the Most Revd Malkhaz Songulashvili, of the Peace Cathedral in Tbilisi, Georgia.

In the mean time, we are calling on European Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the people of faith or none, to respond to the tragic war in Ukraine with prayer, commitment, and action.

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Cruelty of decision on Interim Support Scheme

From the Rt Revd David Atkinson and Dr Sue Atkinson

Sir, — We are writing to support Andrew Graystone’s protest at the “cruel decision to rein in the Interim Support Scheme” ([Letters, 25 February](#)) for victims and survivors of church-related abuse, cutting its counselling provision to just six months or, exceptionally, 12 months. We know survivors who have lived with the effects of trauma many years after the abuse, who are looking to the Church for a compassionate and healing response. For many survivors, this is a long-term need.

We are shocked to read that there was no consultation with survivors about this decision. Many feel that cutting back on available support, coupled with long delays in the Redress Scheme, gives a message that the Church is more concerned with bureaucracy and penny-pinching than with repentance, restorative justice, healing, and generosity. Thankfully, the Church has been slowly learning to allow the values of the gospel to inform its response to survivors of abuse. This decision sets this process back, and needs to be rethought.

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Discrepancy between aspirations and finance

From Sir James Burnell-Nugent

Sir, — The answers by the [Bishop of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich](#), the Rt Revd Martin Seeley, to the General Synod ([11 February](#)) point to the essence of the [financial](#) dilemma being addressed by development of an uncosted [Vision and Strategy](#) alongside the massacre, through ever more mergers and closures, of parishes that are the source of £1 billion of funding.

In fact, Bishop Seeley's diocese has the right answer: more priests in parishes leads to growing congregations, thus more giving, and thence greater affordability of mission and ministry. More clergy in the front line is the most fundamental step to “overcome this discrepancy between our ambitious aspirations that require stipendiary clergy and our current short-term situation in relation to finance”.

But other immediate steps should also be taken. First, the [Church Commissioners](#) (via the [Archbishops' Council](#)) should 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.

Second, they should review the outrage that for the cremation of a parishioner by their parish priest, the funeral fee goes to the diocese. All fees “earned” by a parish priest working for their parishioners should go to the parish. Again, simply a matter of fairness.

Third, the Archbishops' Council should review the balance of who pays for the welcome increase in ordinands heading for stipendary posts. In the [diocese of Exeter](#), we are asked to contribute (notionally) through the parish share to this training cost, when we are being threatened with no successor when our Rector retires. This is unjust and needs to be put right.

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Memory playing tricks

From Mr Martin Sewell

Sir, — In my letter ([4 March](#)), I objected to the curtailing of the debate on a following motion on [safeguarding](#). I then misremembered, and referred to a similar problem occurring at the

conclusion of the later Governance Review report. That was inaccurate, and I apologise, although my underlying concerns remain sound.

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Pews-removal ruling

From Professor Nigel Bastin

Sir, -- Your report, “Restore pews, PCC and churchwardens told” ([News 4 March](#)), made salutary and depressing reading for many churchwardens and PCCs in England who are being urged by their dioceses to make their churches more suitable for community use. Engagement with the wider community is difficult, if not impossible, without there being a reasonable amount of open space, and, in most cases, this cannot be found without the removal of at least some of the many pews that are rarely sat on.

Of course, permission can and should be sought, but the process is long and expensive. Research commissioned by your paper, the “Coronavirus, Church and You” survey, clearly shows a growing reluctance on the part of lay people, in both rural and urban areas, to take on roles within their churches. The experience of their colleagues in St Leonard’s, Hythe, will do little to slow or halt this trend.

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