

All Things Lawful And Honest

A blog pertaining to the future of the Church

Power Grab or Pastoral Measure?



Fr Christopher Johnson asks important questions about proposed changes to the Mission and Pastoral Measure. He questions why so much power is being placed in the hands of diocesan machineries, and whether it is right that 'dioceses' themselves are driving this change.

We have had over a year now of the Church of England making quite a considerable effort to close churches.

My latest encounter with this came last week in the form of a discussion with the Church Commissioners in the context of a Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee meeting. The meeting itself was excellent: there was a positive contribution about church buildings from the Church Buildings Council, and a great introduction to the legal processes by the home team, amongst other things. But then there was a presentation of a document proposing changes to the Mission and Pastoral Measure, GS 2222 (as it now is).

GS 2222 starts off surprisingly well. In the first chapter we read that 'Virtually everybody living in England is a parishioner, and as such they are entitled to the ministrations of the Church, and the priest with the cure of souls has a corresponding duty to minister to the people'.

It substantiates this by reference to *The Archbishop's Committee on Church and State* (1916), noting that 'The incumbent has from early times been under obligation to baptise infants, to admit parishioners... to Holy Communion, to solemnize their marriages, to visit their sick, and to bury the dead dying within the district in the churchyard or other parochial cemetery. Parishioners have a legal right to demand from their parson these and all other ministrations belonging to the cure of souls'. What a beautifully balanced statement of rights and responsibilities this is: people and parsons, being the Church of England, worshipping God, serving the nation.

But as we move away from statements about our historic context, another actor comes into the scene: 'the Diocese'. There are 98 references to 'the diocese' or 'dioceses' in the document, and it is interesting to see what this hitherto historically minor character has to say.

To begin with, we learn that it was discussion with 'dioceses' which prompted this review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure. Then we learn that, having prompted the review, it is 'dioceses' which have so far been consulted about it, especially through 'Diocesan Secretaries, Archdeacons, Pastoral Secretaries and their Closed Church and property officers', who believe they should have more autonomy.

This desire of 'dioceses' manifests itself in the proposals. Hence we are asked periodically whether 'Dioceses need more powers' and 'responsibilities could be moved to dioceses'. 'Dioceses' would also make decisions about the need to consult people like the wider deanery, the PCC, the parishioners, the public, and parish patrons. In the longer-term changes proposed – notice this shift in power is gradual – the question is asked whether the 'diocese' should decide 'who has the rights to be involved in the consultation and where there would be no rights of representations' at all.

These proposals would enable dioceses far more easily to take an axe to the present parish system. Indeed, we are told 'many dioceses' are 'completing reviews' of pastoral organisation, 26 are planning church closures within the next 2-5 years, 5 of those are planning up to 40 church closures each, and 4, we are informed, 'were thinking about shutting 152 churches over the medium term (5 years), which would represent a significant increase on recent trends.' The authors add, 'It was also likely that dioceses would want to close many more churches if the funding arrangements and processes were different.'

And what in place of the parish? Well, some dioceses are moving towards a 'super-benefice or super-parish type model, whilst others are moving towards a deanery structure with paid Deanery administrators' – that is despite evidence

in the report itself which highlights that this model has not worked well in Wales. Or then there are these 10,000 new house churches – but others are addressing the assault on the national Church posed by those.

The authors of this report consider it their job to propose changes to the Mission and Pastoral Measure so that dioceses can make the arrangements they need. They want to ‘help dioceses’. But I ask: who is ‘the Diocese’? Is it the bishop? Is it the diocesan bureaucracy? Is it the diocesan synod?

And what about the people and parsons of England? Or the parish patrons? – our speaker at the diocesan meeting I mentioned earlier was surprised to hear that I felt she should consult them. Or even churchwardens and area deans, sequestrators and others?

There is, surely, a legitimate question to ask, about how the church reduces its expenditure on buildings and people to make itself sustainable, but the Church of England is not a supermarket chain, where managers look at the profitability of an individual branch, and decide it can close, or even replace the business model itself.

Nor can it be right for dioceses to accrue powers in this way, which will then enable them to set the framework of discussions about changes to parishes, hold discussions as they see fit, and then produce the outcomes they desire. What if ‘the diocese’ was so minded that a parish church did not serve the Diocesan vision? What if it didn’t suit the bishop’s tradition? What if it doesn’t pay its share out of genuine poverty? The churches do not belong to ‘the Diocese’, they belong to the people of God, led by their parish priest, who is established in office through the possession of his or her benefice received from the parish’s patron in order to exercise the bishop’s cure.

In this disastrous document, every other stakeholder in the parochial system could potentially have his rights to representation in pastoral reordering denied, for the sake of expediency for ‘the Diocese’. My opinion is that the model proposed by GS 2222 is disastrous, and we parishioners, priests and patrons should not give up our rights so easily.

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