

Save the Church campaign wheels out the big guns in its defense of the parish system in the Church of England

By **Julian Mann** - June 6, 2022



Sir James Burnell-Nugent

The Save the Parish [campaign](#) in the Church of England, which has now registered as a company after launching last year, has a heavy gun in the form of a retired Admiral.

Sir James Burnell-Nugent KCB CBE is a [director](#) of the new company. A frontline churchwarden in rural Devon, he is a former [Commander-in-Chief Fleet](#) of the Royal Navy. Before becoming an Admiral in 2005, he had served as the Maritime Commander of the UK Joint Force and Deputy Maritime Commander of the Coalition during the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan.

Sir James is able to deploy a newspaper letter-writing pen that is proving mightier than the Church House press release. In a letter to *The Church Times* in March, loudly applauded on demoralised Parochial Church Councils (PCCs), Sir James, 73, highlighted 'the massacre, through ever more mergers and closures, of parishes that are the source of £1 billion of funding'.

He called on 'the Church Commissioners (via the Archbishops' Council) to 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'.

Then, he wrote, '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'.

This was not the first time Sir James has intervened in the debate over the future direction of the national Church. In a letter to *The Times* in October last year, he called Leicester diocese's decision 'to fold 234 parishes into the embrace of 20 to 25 huge groups' a 'sad day for the Church of England'.

He accused the CofE of behaving 'like a socialist republic: demanding increasing "tax" (parish share) from dwindling numbers of churchgoers, then spending too much of it on its own bureaucracy. Moreover, as *The Times* reported last month, in 2017-2020 it spent £248 million on "renewal and reform" projects that failed to increase church attendance'.

In what Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby hailed an 'historic moment', the Church announced on 11 May an investment of [£3.6 billion](#) by 2031 in a bid to reverse its numerical decline. At the press conference, Archbishop Welby said money would go on enabling the CofE to reach its 2030 net-zero carbon target and on initiatives aimed at young people.

It is true that parish churches that do not try to reach children and young people with the Gospel have only themselves to blame when they get older and smaller. But as an indicator of the growing influence of the Save the Parish movement it is significant that *The Church Times* has echoed the concerns Sir James and his crew are expressing.

In its leading [article](#) on the new funding, the CofE's 'trade' paper declared:

'What dioceses and parishes are asking for increasingly, however, is reliable, sustained support for basic, everyday ministry which is slipping inexorably beyond the reach of existing congregations. In many instances, the shortfall is not much; but any deficit these days opens up a PCC to threats that another priest might not come their way, thus sealing the parish's decline.

'Parishioners do not regard the Commissioners as a magic money tree. They do, however, expect to see signs that the Church's national leadership shares their concern about the loss of valuable parochial ministry.'

It would seem that the Admiral's broadsides have been effective in influencing opinion. But in the long run the CofE's future as a national Church remains in doubt as its congregations continue to grow smaller and older.

Moreover, spending money without repentance from the Christ-dishonouring false teaching that has been allowed to flourish in the CofE will not change its spiritual trajectory.

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