

Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell

A defence of the Church of England

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If you've been following the media coverage of the Church of England over the course of the coronavirus pandemic, one question you might have seen is: 'Where is the C of E?'

Let us offer an answer. We have been burying the dead, comforting the bereaved, feeding the hungry and praying for our nation. We have been doing this not as superheroes, but as human beings living through the same crisis as everyone else: grieving, home-schooling, worrying, getting sick, shielding, isolating, weeping.

With that said, we fully understand — and indeed share — the anger and frustration felt by some that the government ordered public worship to be suspended during the first lockdown. We share the anxiety felt by many over the sharp fall in collection plate donations with fewer people currently attending church. We weep with and pray for our clergy who have been on the front line for nearly a year now.

One thing is abundantly clear: the Church of England has been a bedrock of faith, love, hope and compassion in this country for centuries through wars, plagues and pandemics — we still are, and we will go on being just that.

You can imagine our shock, then, when we read in the media about what is supposedly happening to our beloved church. That the parish system, with its beautiful vision of serving every inch of the country and every person in it, is being systematically dismantled. That clergy are being made redundant. That there are plans to somehow centralise everything and for services, even beyond Covid, to be online rather than in person.

So let us try to set the record straight. There are no plans to dismantle the parish network. We are committed to our calling to be a Christian presence in every community.

Throughout our history, some churches have closed and others have opened. We weep at the former and rejoice at the latter. But it is not new. The untold story is that in recent years the Church of England has planted or renewed at least 100 new congregations and churches.

Far from withdrawing from the poorest areas, there is a huge effort towards growing congregations and supporting ministry in those areas — including rural areas, where we invest £10 per head of population compared with £6 per head in urban areas.

Meanwhile, the suggestion that all we do is cut back clergy numbers is not only untrue and unhelpful, it creates unnecessary anxiety. We need more clergy and they are coming forward in record numbers. And where dioceses are saving posts, it is usually through retirements.

The reason the C of E has survived and flourished over centuries is because ministry has evolved

This year, we have seen the biggest rise in ordained and lay vocations for a quarter of a century. To fund this, the church commissioners' strategic ministry fund is channelling £1.6 million to support curacies for dioceses that would otherwise not have been able to afford them. In total, £33.7 million is formally committed to dioceses by the end of 2025. This is to help ensure each new priest has a future ministry.

At the General Synod this month, we will be talking about the future vision and strategy for the Church of England. And yes, we are imagining a 'mixed ecology' church — new communities alongside and emerging from established parishes; a fresh focus on chaplaincies — where so much remarkable work is being done in hospitals, prisons and so many other places; and efforts to provide for those who have come to faith online over the past year. We want there to be more church, not less.

At the same time, we are looking very carefully at how we serve and administer the church so that we can be as effective as possible. Our aim is to ensure that the money we raise goes to the frontline ministry the nation needs. But at Synod we'll be focussing on the heart of the vision: inviting the church and the nation to return to Christ — and find a vocation as His followers through prayer and service.

Yes, there are hard decisions currently being made across many dioceses. Overall some stipendiary posts will be lost. But that isn't the same as making clergy redundant. The aim is to make each parish and each Christian community sustainable. If that doesn't happen, there really will be no Church of England. And to do it requires generosity and sacrifice.

Of course we get some things wrong, but it would be irresponsible for the leadership of the church to ignore the severe challenges of Covid and the financial hit that comes with it. But our efforts are focused on enabling churches to stay open and for clergy to flourish. The very reason the Church of England has survived and flourished over centuries is because ministry has evolved. The Anglican stability that people rightly cherish — as do we — is the result of our willingness to change. As the theologian Hans Kung once observed: 'To stay the same when everything else around you changes is not to stay the same.'

There are rascally voices around who want to undermine the church — it was ever thus. But the real story is that we so believe in that vision of serving every inch of the country, and every person in it, that we are having to expand what it is to be the church.

There is no central *plan* for all of this. How could there be? Each diocese is its own legal and charitable entity and makes its own decisions. But there is a central and local *vision*. It is to be centred on Jesus Christ and flowing from that to encourage the Church of England to embrace new ways of serving the nation — not to dismantle what we have inherited, but to build upon its proud and treasured foundations.

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