



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen writes in the Church Times today. The article follows in full...

There is concern this week that the Church of England is about to abandon its network of parish churches, leading to what *The Sunday Times* called “the sale of many vicarages, the departure of priests and the end of an era when churches were rooted in communities”. Strong words, and understandably alarming. I want to set the record straight.

Church attendance has been in decline for many years. Like every other organisation in the country, COVID presents us with huge additional challenges, not least financial. It would be irresponsible not to be discussing how we adapt and change as a result of this. Many options are being discussed. But no firm proposals have yet been made.

The Sunday Times has aggregated information and discussions from part of these discussions when it got sight of a discussion paper that was circulated to the dioceses called, *Money, People and Buildings*. This discussion paper, though sobering, does not as Church Times readers will now be aware, contain any actual proposals. It is a first go, designed to stimulate creative discussion at gathering perspectives from across the Church of England as we discern how best to move forward. Foremost in all our minds is the long term flourishing and health of the Church. Covid has merely accelerated some of the key discussions that were already underway. But, understandably, this article has led to some anxiety, particularly among ordinands and curates. Let me try to sort out the fact from the fiction.

We are all concerned for the future. It is highly likely that some dioceses are having to reduce the overall number of stipendiary clergy. No one wants to do this but our key priority is to make sure it is done in a prudent and sensitive way. To put it simply - clergy are not being pushed out but the preference seems to be that as some retire and move on, some posts are not being filled. Even without Covid, we have known for some years that there would be a big bulge of clergy retirements. We also know that in some dioceses, particularly in the north some posts have been hard to fill. We therefore still need clergy.

The good news is that God is raising up vocations to ordained ministry. In recent years’ vocations to stipendiary ministry have increased by over 40%. This year will see the largest number of new stipendiary clergy for 25 years. We also need self-supporting ministers with their distinctive ministry and a huge flourishing of lay ministry. This is happening, not least in the diocese of Chelmsford where I used to serve. But it presents an additional financial challenge. The Church Commissioners is therefore making funds available to help dioceses pay for additional curacies. Careful planning about numbers, as described above, aims to ensure there will be posts of first responsibility for them to move into.

So the Church of England is having to change. The changes we are making now have been a long time coming and accelerated by Covid. We are

having to become more effective. We must avoid duplication. Dioceses will need to collaborate and share resources much more. But there will still be priests and people ministering together. Ordained ministry will serve the ministry of the whole people of God as the Ordinal itself make clear.

But the real message is this. Let me repeat it. We need clergy. We are working hard to make sure that those whom the church calls for ordination have pathways into fruitful, sustainable ministry. There are no central plans to cut clergy numbers. Decisions about deployment are made in dioceses and we continue to gather information and perspectives on this and its implications for the whole church. We seek to work together for the common good, remembering our common vocation to be the Church for all of England.

What the church is doing collectively is finding money to support curates and to encourage vocations and to make sure that every penny spent administratively goes to support the life and mission of the church in the communities we serve. To suggest otherwise is mischievous and misleading. It will be tough. It is very challenging. But developing a mixed ecology of parish, parish priest, chaplaincy, digital, and new forms of Christian community supported by more effective support and administration we will better serve the communities of England. That is the aim, to be simpler, bolder and humbler, serving the mission of God in England

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