The Primacy of the Parish

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The Bishop of Burnley responds to recent claims that the Parish system is up for wide scale review

The Bishop of Burnley responds to recent claims that the Parish system is up for wide scale review, and strengthens the case for its place at the heart of the identity and mission of the Church of England. He suggests we need to trust the local to make good decisions, resolutely address failure where it occurs, and invest in priests who can renew Parish communities.

At St Peter’s in Fleetwood the parish priest has pulled together a consortium which has bought the hospital in the town centre and has developed it as a facility for vulnerable adults with a food pantry and wide range of other services. At St James Haslingden they have formed a community of 30 people who meet online each day for Morning Prayer and who now cook and deliver hot lunches to around 100 people in the community. At Preston Minister they have provided meals to tens of thousands of students and families and are offering genuine excellence in the live-streaming of worship. I could go on … and on! All this, of course, on top of the routine of sustaining a life of prayer and worship.

This pandemic has shown the extraordinary agility and flexibility of the Parish system. Not many years ago the Parish was being written off as part of the furniture of ‘inherited church’ which, with its expensive buildings and out-dated worship, had to be swept away to make space for the bold and new.

But the past year has shown exactly why the Parish is and must remain the bedrock of Anglican life in our nation. What makes the ministry of the Church of England distinctive is its legal responsibility for the ‘cure’ of every soul in the nation. It is through the Parish that that lofty goal is delivered.

Within every neighbourhood in this nation there is a family of Anglican Christians who gather in worship and prayer and who seek only the common good of the communities they serve. Most maintain a building as a sacred space for prayer and a tangible symbol of the presence of the incarnate Lord in the lives of his people. Most contribute generously to the stipend and housing costs of a priest who can express the ministry of Jesus Christ through the sacramental life and pastoral ministry. This is an extraordinary contribution to our national life which the Church of England offers at no cost to the national purse.

In the past three decades we have seen a huge raft of evangelistic initiatives which have pioneered new ways to share the faith. New local congregations, nurture groups, Fresh Expressions, Messy Church and so many others have sought to capture imaginations afresh with the Gospel. What do they have in common? Every single one relies completely on the stability of the Parish structure for finance and implementation.

So why not leave everything as it is? Recent articles in The Spectator and elsewhere in the press have hinted darkly at plots within the House of Bishops to dismantle the Parochial structure, to add thousands of clergy to the dole queue and to close many of our buildings. There is much that is mistaken in this coverage, not least that the decentralised structure of the Church of England with its 42 autonomous dioceses and 12,000 independent parishes renders such a centralist programme of reform entirely undeliverable.

But the biggest mistake that lies behind these articles and much of the reaction to them is the presumption that we can leave the Parochial system as we know it now unchanged. The Parish has survived for so many centuries precisely because of the flexibility that we have seen in recent months. In a Church that faces numerous issues in rebuilding its spiritual and financial life after the most desperate health crisis in a century, that flexibility is going to be needed all the more. Only a fool could argue that everything should stay the same.

So how should Parish life adapt? Here are three suggestions.

First we need to trust the local. In response to the pandemic some dioceses are tempted to implement centrally driven programmes of pastoral re-organisation in which the map and the spreadsheet are used to ‘re-imagine’ church life. But there is an alternative which is to hand over much more responsibility to each Parish so that the PCC determines the level of priestly ministry they receive and how they will pay for it. We should shrink the centre and trust the local, using a small level of centrally pooled funds, a fairer distribution of Diocesan historic assets and Church Commissioners Lowest Income Community Funding to sustain urban parishes. This is the model used in the rest of the Anglican Communion and it is one that would incentivise growth and generosity rather than genteel decline.

Second we need to address failure. In most dioceses the cause of financial problems is a small percentage of parishes which are simply not viable. Some have no vision or zeal for souls, some have priests who have given up hope or who lack motivation, others are infected with toxic relationships. Heavy legal structures make it all but impossible to deal with failed parishes such as these. They are a luxury we can no longer afford, and reform is required so that the small number of failing parishes do not drag down the whole. There are occasions when the best way to serve a community is to close and re-plant.

And third, we need to learn the art of Parish renewal. There are many schemes to train pioneers who can start something from nothing, and they have an important part to play. But what most dioceses need above all is priests and lay leaders who can renew an existing Parish, who can lead tired laity to deeper conversion, who can draw new people into relationship with Jesus Christ, who can demonstrate excellence in the ordering of worship and in pastoral care and so who can bring steady, unspectacular growth.

The Church of England is inconceivable without the stable bedrock of Parochial life. But an unthinking conservative reaction to the need for reform will not preserve it. Every tradition will need to demonstrate the fleetness of foot we have seen in this year of pandemic. For above all we must remember that our primary purpose is not the preservation of inherited structures but the worship of Jesus Christ.

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