

Review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 (GS-2222)

Response of the English Clergy Association

The English Clergy Association represents the interests of clergy of the Church of England and supports them with advice and information. We very much welcome the Covenant for Clergy Care and Wellbeing and all that it says about looking after the welfare of our clergy. Yet we are concerned that the changes suggested to the Mission and Pastoral Measure are a retrograde step and could potentially undo much of the good work that the Covenant was intending to do by way of support and encouragement of our clergy in their ministry.

There is certainly a feeling by many clergy that over the years their ability to minister effectively has been diminished and their security and value compromised. The proposals contained in the consultation document GS-2222 both continue and accelerate this movement and are a cause for concern. Under the proposals, the rights of clergy as office holders to object to measures which affect their church buildings and parsonages, and the right to object to imposed changes of pastoral and missionary outreach within their parishes, would be infringed, while correspondingly greater powers are given to the bishop and the diocese.

These are important and far-reaching proposals. It is clear from comments in the press that they have attracted a considerable degree of criticism. It is a pity that neither individual clergy nor their representatives on Diocesan or General Synod, or others concerned with clergy welfare and the wider issues that affect the Church, appear to have been consulted on the shape of these proposals prior to the document being laid before the General Synod, but only a very limited group of people. The overwhelming purpose, as well as freeing diocesan action from scrutiny and objection, seems to be to enable a vision of mission which is far from commanding universal support. It is hoped therefore that this consultation will be a meaningful one and that the many representations are carefully considered so that this is not seen to be a done deal.

It is appreciated that the decline in the number of active worshippers in the Church of England, and a reduction in the resources available, both financial and human, means that some change is inevitable. Such change, however, must be carefully managed and must not

be allowed to remove the balance and safeguards that are crucial to the effective mission of the Church. Change should be undertaken carefully and sensitively, and particular regard should be had as to the impact that such changes might have on those who are devoting their lives to the ministry of the Church. There seems to be an element of opportunism in forcing through rapid change at a time when the traditional parish system is particularly vulnerable and its clergy demoralised and seeking to recover from the many months of church closure and disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. Support and understanding, not radical change and redundancy, are required at this time.

Units of Mission

Christianity began as a city religion. In Gaul during the fourth and fifth centuries as a part of the evangelisation of the countryside, baptismal churches were established by the bishops in communities outside the city. Each had a *parochia* or parish separate from that of the diocese that constituted a territorial area for which it was responsible. Church building proliferated throughout the Frankish Empire between the 7th and 10th centuries and smaller churches began to be built to serve villages and townships. Many landowners built churches on their estates, the beginning of the private church. Each came to possess a *parochia* in its own right with a responsibility for the care of those living within it, and the parish became the basic pastoral and administrative unit. In Anglo-Saxon England, the Church in the countryside was based on the great church or minster. It would appear that after the Conquest, the system of parishes prevalent on the continent was introduced into England, probably by Archbishop Lanfranc, and gave rise to the present system of parishes. The parish has served the Church in England well, both before and after the Reformation, for nearly a thousand years.

The impact of declining numbers and resources is most evident in the rural parishes, and it needs to be appreciated that town parishes and country parishes have their own distinct problems and benefits and may perhaps have to be dealt with differently. In the rural parish, there is very often the existence of a beautiful historic building that is costly to maintain by a dwindling number of worshippers. Nevertheless, in many rural communities, the parish church is actively supported by the whole community as 'their' church whether or not they are worshippers or indeed have any faith. It is so very important that a tangible link between the church and a local community is maintained. It is a prime mission of the

Church that it serves its local community with joy. It isn't all about getting bottoms on seats! To remove the parish as an area of care and concern for the local community would therefore be counter-productive and seriously affect the connection that only a local church can provide.

One of the key areas contained in these proposals concerns the Emerging Church. Paragraphs 19 to 39 of the Review seek to reduce rights and representation for questioning Emerging Church initiatives. The drift of such initiatives appears to be towards larger and more geographically remote units involving significantly fewer stipendiary clergy and more decision-making from the centre. This is despite the clear conclusion of the Church of England report *From Anecdote to Evidence*, which states 'the larger the number of churches in the amalgamation, the more likely they are to decline.' As the Revd Canon Angela Tilby has pointed out in her column in *The Church Times* (1st October 2021 and 8th October 2021), this trend away from stipendiary clergy ministering locally is not Anglican and is likely to axe many rural churches. Those bishops and others advocating such schemes (as recently in the Leicester diocese where the plan is to reduce stipendiary clergy by around 20%) and indeed the Review itself, make great play of how important the local parish is to the Church of England and claim it as a backbone and a glory. Yet, this is wholly inconsistent with the proposals contained in this Review.

The creation of structures of ministry based on large administrative areas and the introduction of another layer of administration remote from the local communities, is untried and untested and fraught with danger. Such centralised forms of ministry would distance the Church further from the people it seeks to serve and would be counter-productive, particularly in rural communities. The nearest equivalent would perhaps be the Methodist Circuit system. This has hardly been a successful modern example with attendees declining by around 7,000 per week ([methodism in numbers 2020.pdf](#) (methodist.org.uk)) and many chapels sold. We would contend that only through local churches being revitalised with the help and enthusiasm of local stipendiary clergy can new money be found. Instead of putting money into specialist ministry, any money available should resource the local parishes both in terms of personnel and grants for imaginative schemes.

The Closure of Churches

It follows, that in order to permit the creation of larger units of mission, one of the primary aims of the proposed changes to the MPM is to facilitate the closure of churches. While it is inevitable that some churches may have to be closed, the large numbers that have been suggested could be closed as a result of changes to the Measure would be seriously damaging to the Church of England. The Measure has been called a Church closer's charter in *The Spectator* ([The Church Closers' Charter must be torn up | The Spectator](#)) with the possibility of hundreds of churches being closed over the next few years with very few safeguards or representations. The concerns of Friends of Friendless Churches can be seen here: [Proposal to axe experts could affect hundreds of closures, warns church-rescuing charity \(churchtimes.co.uk\)](#). Clergy as office holders and a corporation sole should have the right to object to proposals which affect their church buildings. Such buildings are in every sense local and those who are ministered to by the clergy as well as others with local concerns should be heard before any decisions are made as should those with a wider interest in historic buildings. The closure of churches must not therefore be made easier with reduced consultation and fewer checks in the process as contemplated by these changes, but must always be a last resort that involves genuine consultation in each case at grassroots level. Once churches have been closed and sold off, they have gone for all time. There is little doubt that when Dr Beeching closed so many local railways there was genuinely felt at the time to be a pressing urgency to save money, but his knee-jerk reaction to financial difficulties at the time has now been generally seen to have been a great mistake. We must learn from history. Nor must we allow our churches to be closed simply at the behest of the diocesan bishop with little or no meaningful consultation as occurs in the Roman Catholic Church. We agree with the words in a legal analysis of GS-2222 for the Save The Parish movement which states that 'The settlement put in place by the 1976 Endowments and Glebe Measure, which asset-stripped the parishes, and now requires ever increasing payments of the parish share, is gradually sawing off the very branch on which we all sit.' ([GS 2222 Analysis and response by STP, p. 14.](#)) These mistakes of the past must not be allowed to be repeated where it becomes a case of realising valuable assets for a short-term gain that is not directed towards the true ongoing ministry of the Church.

There is no doubt that the financial difficulties that the Church of England finds itself in today is the driving force behind these proposed changes. The parish share has been the subject of much criticism. There is a widespread perception that money being paid by the parishes that could otherwise be devoted to worship, local needs and pastoral care, is being diverted into a big black hole. To some extent this is the fault of the dioceses and much greater effort and transparency is required to justify the use of these contributions and show how the money is being spent. It is a very difficult question as to how far those parishes that are successful in attracting large numbers (often gathered churches) should subsidise those churches where the congregation numbers are small. There is often opposition by some churches with very large attendances that they are being taxed through the parish share for being successful while those clergy with diminishing congregations feel that they are failing in their mission. But successful ministry is not all about attendance numbers. These are admittedly very difficult questions. Perhaps other possibilities might be explored, such as the creation of local community trusts to maintain the fabric of their historic church and thereby relieve it of this financial burden which at times can be quite considerable.

Consultation

The Review notes the strength of pastoral reorganisation being a bottom-up process (para. 36). This is crucial, irrespective of whether it may take longer or be administratively inconvenient. Of course, directly interested parties such as PCCs and churchwardens must be consulted where a pastoral reorganisation will affect their church. In our view, it is also important that the wider community is also engaged in the consultation process. It is not a sustainable argument to limit the right of consultation simply because the number of such representations in the past has generally been low. In many cases, local communities continue to support their churches both financially and emotionally, whether or not they are actual worshippers. Parsonages were often provided by the parishioners and sometimes by the clergy themselves and are not diocesan assets. In the deliberations concerning the proposed reforms around the introduction of common tenure, it was conceded for this reason that ownership of parsonages should continue to be vested in the incumbent and not the diocese. The parishioners therefore have an interest both morally and in law in the church and the parsonage, and it follows that they have the right to be

consulted in any pastoral reorganisation that may affect their church. If a church is truly to reach out to its local community, then it must engage with it in a matter so important as the continued existence of its local church. We would therefore urge that their right to be consulted and to make representations should not be restricted.

The MPM provides for consideration by the Commissioners of any representations made to them concerning a draft scheme or order with a power to amend the proposals. This provides an independent review body that can look again at any proposals made under the Measure. There is a further appeal to the Privy Council. The Review suggests that in place of the independent review provided by the MPCPC, the diocese should be given the responsibility for managing the processes around pastoral organisation, including the consideration of representations, which currently come to the Commissioners. Such a suggestion is wholly flawed insofar as the diocese is an interested party in the furtherance of the scheme, and therefore in a real sense this would be an appeal to itself and would constitute a flagrant breach of the rule of natural justice. We would support the view that clergy faced with dispossession should be able to go to an Employment Tribunal. At the very least the existing safeguards should be maintained – yet there is no commitment to this. Of course, disguised redundancy may be used, waiting for retirement or movement and then not filling the post. This has a corrosive effect on active clergy, making very difficult or impossible traditional stipendiary ordained ministry and pastoral care, and hastening decline.

Clergy Dispossession

A most important element in the ministry and service of the Church is that there should be a stipendiary priest who is as local as possible to the people he or she serves. They are seen as part of the community and share the problems and aspirations of those living within the parish. The effect of the Covid pandemic has been mentioned in the Review. Interestingly, although anecdotal, there were many examples during the worst of the Covid 19 outbreak, where those churches more centrally based or gathered churches were unable to function, and the parish church was the only church offering regular worship and leadership within the community. The presence of a local incumbent also meant that in many cases the church took a leading role in the community giving support both practically and spiritually at

the time when both were very much needed and appreciated. That surely is such an important part of ministry.

Paragraph 31 of GS-2222 rightly recognises the increasing and complex burden on clergy, many of whom now have multiple PCCs and compliance requirements. The conclusion of paragraph 32 that the diocese should be given more powers is not the solution, as a considerable number of these pressures in the past have come from the diocese. The suggested changes to the MPM would again create a shift of the decision-making process away from the localities and into the diocese.

It is inevitable that if churches are closed and more amalgamations take place to create larger areas of mission with fewer stipendiary clergy, clergy would have to be dispossessed and made redundant. Yet, these proposals designed to make it much easier for the wholesale redundancy of clergy to save money or balance the books (as in the recent Leicester Diocese reorganisation) is to invite great injustice. As GS-2222 recognises in para. 118, this treatment of loyal and professional clergy, who have devoted their lives to parochial ministry, is a difficult area. Indeed, if made redundant, clergy would lose not only their post and their income but also their house, and family life would be completely disrupted including the occupation of the spouse. The compensation considered (a year's salary) is wholly inadequate. A more realistic figure would be at least five year's stipend at the rate which the diocese calculates the complete financial benefit to clergy, e.g. taking account of the value of the provided accommodation. A related unjust use of power unrecognised in GS-2222 means that clergy who may be made redundant are less likely to oppose such overall proposals because they fear if they do, they may be discriminated against in the future.

Selling Vicarages

We regret the way in which so many Vicarages have been sold and their proceeds acquired by the diocese for its day-to-day running costs and oppose making this even easier by abandoning the present procedures for objection. Once a Vicarage is gone it is very difficult for that parish ever to have a priest. Money for parsonages and vicarages was often raised locally and if they are sold the money should remain a local asset.

Patrons

Patronage goes back to the 12th century as a part of the reforms of Pope Gregory VII to bring the private church under ecclesiastical control. As a result, the right of a patron to present to a living was made subject to the bishop's acceptance of the proposed candidate. By the Patronage (Benefices) Measure 1986, the parish representatives must also approve the offer to present. Where there is a patron in existence, therefore, the appointment to a living is a shared process, though ultimately if no agreement is forthcoming the bishop will have the final say. This ensures that there are checks and controls in the system and the proper scrutiny of any proposed candidate. Institutional patrons, such as the Prayer Book Society, are valuable in ensuring that the forms of worship and traditions of a particular parish will be maintained. Patrons can also give a voice to their church in times of difficulty. Private patrons may have commercial or management experience that can be offered to their church if required and advice on fundraising, etc. Patronage when properly used is a part of a three-way partnership which means that no one person, whether the bishop, patron or PCC, can determine the appointment of a candidate without there being a full and open discussion. The position of patrons has been considerably undermined by previous Measures, and these proposals would make further inroads into the role of the patron were the right to present be further restricted. This is tilting the balance too far in favour of the bishop so that this ceases to be an equal partnership. It is too easy for patronage to be seen as an inconvenience that might prevent the bishop from introducing a particular candidate or further diocesan policy, and which therefore should more easily be dispensed with. To abandon patronage would be to lose a considerable resource of help and advice and further reduce the influence of the laity in the Church. It should also be remembered that the advowson, the right to present, is a secular piece of property, an 'incorporeal hereditament' as Lord Coke called it, and it is beyond the competence of the General Synod to interfere in the exercise of those rights without parliamentary legislation.

Conclusion

There is a need for proper statistical analysis and evidence-based policy instead of each diocesan bishop coming up with mission schemes which are often not properly thought through and have a potentially devastating effect upon the highly trained parochial clergy they should count themselves fortunate to have. We believe that it is time to use what

resources are available, or may be made available through any economies that might be made, to support and encourage stipendiary clergy to fulfil their God given vocation to minister to each local community. To abandon this principle is to put the whole ethos and community witness and mission of the Church of England in danger and over the course of time to further diminish its ability to fund this ministry to the nation as a whole.

The English Clergy Association

October, 2021.