

## Strategy, lay led churches, and ‘Save the Parish’

For more than a decade, the leadership of the Church of England has been promoting ‘Fresh Expressions of Church’ and ‘new ways of being Church’. In the last couple of months there has been a backlash, with the creation of a ‘Save the Parish’ movement. This article summarises the tension and offers some thoughts.

### Lay led churches – clergy a “limiting factor”

A paper<sup>1</sup> from the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell was issued in June for debate at the July General Synod in the Vision and Strategy agenda item. It included a vision to plant 10,000 new “worshipping communities”:

“We believe God is calling us towards a revitalised parish system within which new and inherited worshipping communities flourish together. [...] We think this could result in 10,000 new communities starting by 2030, reaching people in all spheres of their life – home and local community, work and education, social and digital.”  
(Pages 9-10)

The Church Times newspaper of 2 July reported:

“More detail about the 10,000 was provided at last week’s MultiplyX 2021 church-planting conference, held online by the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, which is led by the Bishop of Islington, the Rt Revd Ric Thorpe. The initiative has been given the title “Myriad”, and is led by Canon John McGinley, the head of church-planting development at New Wine and a priest in the diocese of Leicester.

In his talk, Canon McGinley described Myriad as a vision that people could join, rather than a project or initiative. Its scale — it is envisaged that the 10,000 new churches will make one million new disciples [...] he said. “Lay-led churches release the Church from key limiting factors. When you don’t need a building and a stipend and long, costly college-based training for every leader of church . . . then actually we can release new people to lead and new churches to form. It also releases the discipleship of people. In church-planting, there are no passengers.”

[...] Many of the 10,000 churches would start small, and some would remain as 20 or 30 people meeting in a home. But the definition of a church was “tight”, he said: it must proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, have regular worship, be open to everyone and sacramental, and have more than 20 people.

MultiplyX 2021 [...] secured an endorsement [...] from both Archbishop Welby and the Archbishop of York, the Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell [...] “Every church we ever go to has been planted at some point or another,” Archbishop Welby said.”

---

<sup>1</sup> GS 2223 “*Simpler, Humbler, Bolder: A Church for the whole nation which is Christ centred and shaped by the Five Marks of Mission*” <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GS%202223%20Vision%20and%20Strategy.pdf>

## The backlash, confusion, and ‘Save the Parish’

Canon McGinley’s speech was heavily criticised:

- Clergy didn’t like being described as a “limiting factor”.
- The criticism of “long costly...training” implied people are better at their jobs if they have not been trained to do them.
- The criticism having a church building, ignores its benefit to the local community.
- It seemed a vision for the rich. Most Christians do not have a home big enough for 20 or 30 people to meet in.
- The proposal to be sacramental and lay led would involve doctrinal change, because the Anglican Communion does not permit lay presidency at the Eucharist.

There was then further confusion as it emerged that there were actually two initiatives, each planning on 10,000 new worshipping communities. The Church Times of 16 July reported:

“THE 10,000 new lay-led churches envisaged by the Myriad project are separate from the 10,000 new worshipping communities set out in the Archbishop of York’s Vision and Strategy update (News, 2 July), the Church’s director of evangelism and discipleship, Canon Dave Male, said last Friday.

“We were talking about 10,000 new Christian communities coming out of revitalised parish ministry at the same time as they [Myriad] were launching,” Canon Male said. “I totally see why people were confused.” They were “totally different things,” he said, but “there may well be a bit of overlap.””

This was rather concerning, because a national strategy is supposed to be all-encompassing. So, for both Archbishops to speak at a conference about creating 10,000 new worshipping communities, around the same time as they were issuing a strategy document about creating a different 10,000 new Christian communities, and not making clear that we are therefore talking about 20,000 doesn’t feel very strategic.

The backlash took form in the “Save the Parish” which was launched on 3 August. Its manifesto<sup>2</sup> included:

“The parish is at the heart of the Church of England. [...] And yet, over many decades parishes have been starved of priests and money [...] We believe that the parish is the best means of Evangelism. [...] We will campaign for  
[...] A prohibition on dioceses linking the payment of parish shares in individual benefices to the provision of clergy. The churches least likely to be able to afford their share are the poorest churches; they should not be the first target for diocesan rationalisation.  
[...] the Strategic Development Fund [...] has to be [...] Only spent on projects which enhance parochial ministry  
[...] Scrap the proposed revision to the Mission & Pastoral Measure 2011. If the Archbishops want to be taken seriously in their claims to love the parish, they must drop this enormous power grab, which would deny local churches and communities the power and right to contest plans to close their churches

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.savetheparish.com/>

[...] Good theological education is at the heart of the revitalisation of the church's mission”

### **The Archbishop of York's 'mixed ecology'**

At the General Synod Debate on Vision and Strategy, General Synod member Prudence Dailey gave an entertaining speech<sup>3</sup>, pointing out the value of what we already have:

“We're encouraged to be visionary, and so I ask, if we were going to start the Church of England from scratch and think really big, what might we want it to be like? Let's dare to dream for a moment.

Wouldn't it be great if we could reach people where they are by having our very own building in the heart of every community as a centre for people to gather and worship and which might also sometimes be used for community events. The presence of God, incarnate in brick and stone. Each one of these centres might have its own clergy, specially selected and trained, who could minister and reach out to all the people in their own context, and these clergy would actually live right in the heart of their community and be part of it. And how about if we could release these clergy to carry out their ministry full time by giving them some kind of stipend?

Of course we don't have to dream, because we already have all this. I absolutely believe that there is no desire to side-line parishes. The danger is that the more we channel our energies into ambitious new initiatives, the less time, energy and money there is for the daily round of traditional parish ministry.

We all know that many parishes are now struggling, really struggling, squeezed between declining congregations and increased parish share demands. And from whence cometh their help? There's Strategic Development funding and Fresh Expressions funding, but where's the 'getting on with the parish ministry on the ground' funding?

It's so much harder to build a thing up than to allow it to fall into decline. Until I see real evidence that we're willing to treasure what we already have, I'm afraid I will struggle to take note of this report.”

The Archbishop of York replied:

“Prudence Dailey, with whom I find myself in almost complete agreement, as I often do, and I wanted to pick out one phrase from her speech, “release the clergy”. I want to say that is precisely what this is about, alongside transforming effectiveness and governance review, to see all of this about releasing the clergy so that we can revitalise our parishes, and to use [...] conservation alongside innovation in a mixed ecology.”

---

<sup>3</sup> On You Tube, 2 hours, 31 minutes, 40 seconds in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ2sG1qooSM>

## Where do we go from here?

I am currently standing for election to General Synod, and I have been having meetings with Deanery Synod members who have been kind enough to give of their time to speak to me.

One member<sup>4</sup> pointed out that for most people under fifty, a church service is an alien environment. Hidden behind closed wooden doors, to sit on a wooden bench and be expected to sing. This is not an experience most non-churchgoers feel comfortable with. We therefore need to go to people where they are.

Another member<sup>5</sup> said that her native Wales is full of empty non-conformist chapel buildings. They were groups who left the institutional church and set up their own thing with enthusiasm, but 50 years later those people have died and not been replaced. She said that a strong hierarchy and church structure is therefore needed for longevity.

Combining both these views, we need to have new initiatives in the community, but with the parish church as the hub.

The local parish church reaching out and being immersed in the local community, is not actually a 'Fresh Expression', it is the traditional model.

I have been reading through the history of my church by going through the old Parish Magazines of All Saints, Woodham. In 1906, All Saints had the following groups, all but one, lay led: Clothing Club; Coal Club; Communicants' Guild; English Church Union; Maternity Society; Missionary Association; Mothers' Union; Parish Library; Servers' Guild; Sick and Benefit Club; Sunday School; Surrey Needlework Guild, and Temperance Society.

Times have changed, but perhaps not that much. In 1906 we had a "Temperance Society". Today a church may host meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1906 we had a "Clothing Club", today we have collections for the Food Bank. In 1906 we had the "Sick and Benefit Club", today a church may have a branch of Christians Against Poverty Debt Counselling.

Going out into the community and reaching people where they are, isn't a new thing, and we don't have to ditch the parish system to do it.

8 September 2021  
Adrian Vincent

---

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Hampshire

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Davies