

Risk and Prophecy – has the Church got its COVID-19 response right?

Dr Charlie Bell, Girton College, Cambridge



Charlie Bell holds a PhD in medical genetics and is a medical doctor, as well as a policy adviser to UK Parliament; later this year he will take up a role as Academic Clinical Fellow in Psychiatry at King's College, London. He is John Marks Fellow, College Lecturer, Praelector and Director of Studies at Girton College, Cambridge, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

In this paper Charlie Bell challenges assumptions about how we should approach the COVID-19 crisis not least in church. He argues that church authorities have misunderstood the science and imposed a culture of fear thereby exacerbating the crisis. It is time for a radical reassessment.

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Risk & Prophecy

Since the start of the coronavirus epidemic, life has fundamentally changed, not only in how we practically go about our daily lives, but also in the way we are encouraged to think. For years there have been complaints about the 'health and safety' culture which is frequently cited as the cause of all evil, but it's not clear that this complaint has ever really been borne out by reality. However, the pandemic really has changed the way we respond to and what we prioritise in our community lives - we live in a society in which 'safe' has become the new watchword. Everything must now be deemed 'safe' before it can occur – a rebuilding of society out of lockdown, based on what has been, at times, pretty shaky grounds. That shakiness, of course, is to be expected – there is no pure scientific way of determining what 'safe' is given the novelty of the threat we currently face and the resulting lack of clear universal measures that can be taken to avoid infection.

To aim to be safe is laudable, and it might seem strange to ask questions about its prominence in public, and church, debates. Safety is, and will remain, a key part of an appropriate and effective response to a major global pandemic. However, this article contends that safety as currently envisaged may, in fact, prove nothing of the sort, and may in fact lead to far worse long-term and societal outcomes than we are currently facing. This is not to denigrate or cast shadow on the intentions of those who have made safety their first concern – it is rather to suggest that the right questions may not have been asked, that those who should be asking the questions may not be equipped to do so, and that the resulting fear and panic that continues to surround the pandemic may be leading to far worse outcomes than are necessary.

To blithely state 'safety' without understanding the underlying principles is, in many ways, as dangerous as blithely ignoring the need to be safe. That many clergy and senior leaders in the Church of England have routinely argued for 'safety' without understanding what they are talking about is both regrettable and disappointing; that lessons have not been learnt from this is even more concerning. But perhaps most worrying is the defensiveness shown by so many senior clergy when their decisions are challenged – most particularly when the totem of 'safety' is raised in order to shut down conversation and communication. Calling something 'safe' does not make it so, and the arrogance (often borne out of fear) shown by ordained people who do not understand risk but still feel able to pontificate on what is safe and what is not is plain dangerous. This attitude must be challenged – not only because the world needs an honest church, but also because one of the stated aims by the Archbishop at the start of this pandemic was that clergy set an example. Our example has not been entirely praiseworthy.

To understand safety, there is a basic necessity to understand risk. It has become abundantly clear during this pandemic that the British public would get a C- in this area, even with inflated grades. It is entirely understandable that the rules have been set with no room for manoeuvre, most particularly when these rules have been set on a huge national scale. This is the nature of public health in a pandemic, and this paper is not arguing for cases of exceptionalism. If a public health measure such as lockdown is deemed required, then it is wrong (not least in a Christian sense) not to abide by it unless there are grave reasons to do so. The key thing about coronavirus is that it is a virus which affects others, not necessarily ourselves – and I write this as a 31 year old, statistically extremely unlikely to become even moderately unwell even if I get the virus. The whole point here is that my getting or carrying the virus makes me a potential risk to others, particularly the elderly or those with pre-existing health conditions. My wearing of a mask inside makes little difference to my own health – it makes much more of a difference to the elderly woman I meet in the supermarket.

However, not all public health measures, and particularly those that have been implemented as we move forward out of the more stringent measures (for now, at least), have been blunt and universal. There have been persistent calls for clarity by the British public, many of them justified. The Government's record on clear communication has been poor. However, at heart, what the British public are often asking for is not, and cannot be, the way that public health measures work. It is not possible for the Government to legislate for and provide a safety rating for each individual social interaction members each of us might engage in. There is always going to be a risk analysis that each of us will need to undertake, and there is an unavoidable level of uncertainty that will continue to exist. There is no such thing as 'totally' safe – we know this from our daily interactions prior to the coronavirus. The winter flu season is always a risk for the elderly; the mere crossing of a road provides a measurable, but uncertain, level of risk. Yet we live with these risks every day, not least because that is part of what it means to be human. In fact, the presence of, the mitigation of and the acceptance of risk is something that is ever-present in the Christian life – Jesus does not call us to a life of zero-risk. The presence of a global pandemic quite simply doesn't change this.

A key case in point is that of singing during the pandemic. Whilst the UK was still in lockdown, questions began to be asked about the risk that singing might pose to the public. At the start, the answer, quite simply, was 'we do not know the answer to this'. In fact, the only answer

that could be given was on the basis of potential risk – that is, by weighing up what we do know, and by using educated guesses on those things that we did know, we could begin to build up a picture of what might be risky in the practice of singing. Yet this, by itself, is not enough. To that picture, we needed to add a number of other factors, including the role of singing in mental health, the mitigating factors we might take, and the role of singing in community life. When dealing with a potential risk, these things are valid considerations (much like the considerations around re-opening schools) – they are emphatically not dangerous distractions.

Yet there were many calls, including from musicians, to ban singing – described as the only way to be ‘safe’ (ignoring the observational evidence from across Europe that congregational singing has not been linked to any spread of coronavirus). In one sense, of course, the ‘safety’ argument here is true – if we do not know what the risk of an activity is, not doing that activity is safer than the alternative – up to a point. To reduce that argument *ad absurdum*, given we do not know what risk there is to wearing a purple sweater whilst crossing the road, given there is the potential risk that it might distract drivers, we ought not to wear a purple sweater whilst crossing the road. Quite patently, that is ludicrous. Yet similar arguments have been made in the context of singing – we do not know what the risk is, and because there may be one, we ought not to do it until the science has proven it is safe. The reality, of course, is that science will not do such a thing – even the excellent experiments undertaken by Costello et al provide only a snapshot (whatever the misleading headline on the University of Bristol’s website suggests).¹ Science quite simply cannot provide the level of certainty that the public appear to expect.

A brief foray into the world of scientific method, most particularly evidence-based or empirical science, is helpful here. The great majority of scientific empirical study (experiment-based) involves something called the null hypothesis. This hypothesis essentially suggests that action/trait A does not cause outcome B (or a variety of similar cause and effect relationships). A scientific theory comes about by disproving the null hypothesis – i.e. evidence that suggests that A does, in fact, cause B. From this very brief explanation of the scientific method, it becomes clear that *proving* something is safe is simply not the business of science. What science can do is suggest that something is *not unsafe* – what it cannot do is prove indisputably that something is safe. A good example is smoking – over the years, the evidence points to the fact that A (smoking) leads to B (lung cancer) – with the starting point that A does not lead to B (the null hypothesis). Those are the kind of questions that science can answer. Yet before the evidence started to build up, the null hypothesis reigned – the evidence was not strong enough that A did in fact lead to B, that smoking caused lung cancer. That, emphatically, did not prove smoking was safe – but the evidence was not yet there to prove it was unsafe. With singing, in a similar way, we are starting with the null hypothesis. We cannot say that singing is absolutely safe – all we can do is build up an evidence-based, intelligent risk assessment, and act on it.

The situation as relates to singing is more widely relevant to the life of the church. It is simply not possible to say things are ‘safe’ – instead, we can say that we have reached what we

¹ University of Bristol, ‘Singing is no more risky than talking finds new COVID-19 study’ [<https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2020/august/performsing-study.html>] accessed 23rd August 2020

assess is an **acceptable level of risk**. Yet at the moment in the Church we are not in a position to define something as acceptable – because we neither have the buy-in from those who need to come to a mind on what ‘acceptable’ means, nor the expertise to weigh up these decisions. This, combined with a focus on the word ‘safe’ rather than ‘acceptable’, means that we are fundamentally failing in our communication and, it appears, in the understanding of many clergy. To reiterate, we cannot call a church ‘safe’ from Covid-19 – it is a nonsense. Much more importantly, we should not be calling something ‘safe’ if what we mean is ‘acceptable levels of risk’. And finally, our focus on ‘safe’ has led us to a complicity in the wider culture of fear that has pervaded the nation, and our churches, since the start of the pandemic.

Much has been written elsewhere about the foolishness of the decision to prevent clergy entering churches at the start of the pandemic. Yet it is worth highlighting two points which relate directly to that decision – the first being the grounds on which the decision was made, and the second being the attempt by clergy to defend the decision. Both of these are not only erroneous scientifically – they pose, in and of themselves, a potential public health risk, by conflating ‘safe’ with ‘acceptable’, and by allowing fear to generate an environment in which what the Church claimed to be scientific was nothing of the sort.

The decision to close churches was, according to several bishops, in part due to fear that the Church might be (and might be seen to be) a locus for ‘super-spreading’ in the context of coronavirus. It is entirely understandable that in the context of a rapidly increasing incidence of Covid-19, churches should have been shut to public worship and, probably, to individual prayer, most particularly when a general lockdown was in place that made such individual prayer a potential route of spread. So far, so scientific. However, to then suggest that there was ‘medical advice’ that supported the closure of churches to clergy was not only untrue, but extremely unhelpful.² For leaders to lead using science, they need to do so responsibly and with integrity. There is absolutely no reasonable scientific rationale preventing clergy from having the possibility (note, not the obligation) of entering their places of worship. In fact, as argued below, it is likely that the decision to do so was actually a net cause of harm. Yet this decision was explicitly wrapped up in ‘science’, with threats of disciplinary action³ – indeed, it is presumably the fact that it is ‘science’ that justifies these threats. Whether or not churches should have been closed to clergy is not, and never was, a matter of science – and it should never have been posited as such. To do so weakened the message from church leaders and will continue to do damage to the reputation of the Church to speak with integrity.

It appears that the key driving force behind the closure was fear – understandable given the circumstances, but still not the key factor on which a prophetic body should rely. Arguments have been made that the hierarchy decided to do things fast to save lives, and that they were under enormous pressure at the time – *ipso* they should be given a free pass. This is absolutely the opposite of what the Church should do. It is quite wrong for church leaders to mislead

² The Diocese of Chelmsford, ‘Chelmsford Diocese’s Bishops Letter to Churches about the Latest Coronavirus Guidance’, [<https://www.chelmsford.anglican.org/news/article/chelmsford-dioceses-bishops-letter-to-churches-about-the-latest-coronavirus>] accessed 23rd August 2020

³ Edward Dowler, ‘Let the clergy pray in their churches’, *Church Times* [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/3-april/comment/opinion/let-the-clergy-pray-in-their-churches>] accessed 23rd August 2020

and conflate about the scientific basis of decisions; it is absolutely unacceptable for them not to recognise and apologise for this. To accuse others of not focusing on the important things is an extraordinary thing for an Archbishop to do, when issues of integrity around science are raised in the context of a scientific emergency.⁴ Those who were involved in these decisions should be speaking out, recognising faults, and helping the church to learn. This is not a value-neutral position – it is *actively harmful* to the Church of England if errors are not both recognised and corrected. It is extraordinary that no corrective has been issued.

Yet the second point related to this misuse of science were the missives sent by senior clergy in support of this position,⁵ and articles written positing outrageous pseudoscientific theories about door-handle spread of coronavirus.⁶ The theory in this article is so absurd as to not warrant a reply, yet it highlights four very clear issues. The first is that some clergy do not understand anything about risk analysis. The second is that these clergy do not know what they do not understand. The third, that such clergy can speak with authority and without challenge by the hierarchy, despite the claims they make being demonstrably false. The fourth being that a culture of paranoia and fear has been allowed to germinate and grow within the Church. That few bishops seem willing to speak out publicly suggests quite how embedded this culture of fear is, not only in relation to coronavirus. An example of inaccuracies that spring from this fear was also prevalent in the letter from the Prolocutors of the two provinces, which stated that ‘every trip we take outside our home endangers life: ours, our family’s, even perfect strangers’. To insist on the inclusion of the word ‘may’ in this sentence, prior to ‘endangers’, might seem pedantic, but without it, this statement, as released by very senior clergy, is demonstrably false. A demonstrably false statement as relates to science in a global pandemic is unhelpful; that it comes from senior clergy and remains unchanged and unchallenged by others in the hierarchy, is unacceptable.

It is, of course, entirely reasonable that the clergy of the Church of England are not experts in scientific theory, risk or pandemic planning. Yet the fact that so many clergy appear to lack insight into this being the case truly is a cause for concern. Clergy who have taken to Twitter to sharply criticise people for not following what they think are the safest measures, or who have demonstrated such a lack of understanding in the application of these measures so as to increase fear and concern amongst their congregations (and how often clergy forget that Twitter is a public space), appear not only unaware of the damage that they are doing, but also speak with such self-belief as to make them an active risk to others. Not to know something is regrettable, but to refuse to learn or seek advice is disastrous. It has been hard, at times, to determine whether clergy don’t recognise their lack of understanding – too often any challenge has been seen as a confrontation to their sense of self or their competence at ministry.

⁴ Pat Ashworth, ‘Welby browned off after grilling on church closures’, *Church Times* [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/3-april/comment/opinion/let-the-clergy-pray-in-their-churches>] accessed 23rd August 2020

⁵ Hattie Williams, ‘Prolocutors defend decision to close churches’, *Church Times* [<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/3-april/news/uk/prolocutors-defend-decision-to-close-the-country-s-churches>] accessed 23rd August 2020

⁶ David Baker, ‘Covid confusion: Church of England clergy and their buildings’, *Christian Today* [<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/covid-confusion-church-of-england-clergy-and-their-buildings/134830.htm>] accessed 23rd August 2020

The pews are full of people who do understand these things – yet too often we remain in the territory of ‘priest knows best’. Clergy may know best about Augustinian theology, the Letter to the Hebrews, or the niceties of the Council of Nicaea – in very few cases do they know best about the scientific analysis of a novel single stranded RNA virus. As a church, we desperately need to move to a situation where this lack of omnipotence and omniscience is OK, and where help can be and just as importantly will be actively sought by clergy – and not only in areas of scientific literacy. If there is one single learning point for the Church of England moving out of this crisis it is this.

Informed criticism and offers of help from within cannot be seen as a danger to clergy – it must be seen as a positive encouragement to do things better. There is a clear and desperate need for appropriate lines of accountability – this crisis has simply brought this into the daylight, not created the situation. This not only applies to parish clergy but those in positions of responsibility or representation – it must be possible to challenge those who speak for the Church of England, whether at a local level, in the media or in national institutions, when what they say lacks either integrity or is factually wrong. Too often criticism is shut down by personalising it – this must end. Effective, depersonalised accountability is needed, and it is needed now. Likewise, there needs to be some level of episcopal insight – in their recent letter to bishops, the Archbishops urged bishops to ‘be more critical in our response to restrictions that are above and beyond government regulations’, which is plainly absurd when these very ‘above and beyond’ restrictions were put in place by the Archbishops themselves! It is good that the episcopacy has learnt the importance of ‘the church at the local level, in parish and diocese, [being helped to] steer a course that is marked by responsible action towards each other, care for the most vulnerable, and witness for the poor and disadvantaged who are suffering disproportionately’. Yet without recognising the scope of the problem and their own part in it, the necessary introspection, analysis and evaluation quite simply can’t take place.⁷ Likewise, without being honest about leadership failures, it is hard to see how the trust of clergy and laity can be reasonably expected.

The culture of fear that has developed in response to coronavirus is, in many ways, quite understandable. Yet it has become abundantly clear that a sole focus on coronavirus deaths has not been enough to avoid some of the wider impacts of the virus.⁸ In fact, the very worst effects of the coronavirus, on a societal level at least, may be those that relate to the unintended consequences of the measures put in place to mitigate against the disease in the first place. That the NHS was not overwhelmed is a cause for rejoicing, yet the long-term effects of the lock-down (and other measures) are slowly becoming clear. The impact on mental health, on A&E attendances, and on a host of other healthcare measures are increasingly documented, yet some intangible effects are also being seen, not least the effect on community. The Church of England, at least historically, prides itself as sitting at the very heart of this community – the parish and parishioners being all those who live within the parish rather than the self-selecting group who turn up on a Sunday.

⁷ Church of England, ‘Offering hope as we face a second wave – Archbishops’ letter to bishops’ [<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/offering-hope-we-face-second-wave-archbishops-letter-bishops>] accessed 23rd September 2020

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care, ‘£5 million for social prescribing to tackle the impact of COVID-19’ [<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/5-million-for-social-prescribing-to-tackle-the-impact-of-covid-19>] accessed 23rd August 2020

It appears that the Church misjudged what the pandemic would look like – its proposals to shut up the physical shop and go online are measures that may plug a short gap in ‘business as usual’, but they are considerably less effective in the longer term. The pandemic was never going to be over by Pentecost – yet the actions of the national church seem to suggest that this was the thinking centrally. The move to online is fine for those who have access to it yet misses many of our poorer and older congregations – the longer it continues, we increasingly become a middle-class, middle-aged church. But just as importantly, we appear to have focused a huge amount of attention on this online content – the weekly Church of England service being a prime, and unfortunate, example. There is, of course, work continuing in the community, with food banks being a prime example. Yet the Church has a role to be prophetic in times like these – to intercede for the elderly who may be devoid of human contact for over a year, to argue for the powerless in society, to develop and preach a prophetic narrative of community and the common good that is sorely lacking in our politics. Of course, it is demonstrably false that you cannot care about two things at once – yet it is clear that the current coronavirus does not provide a good report for the Church of England’s national priorities. It is true that there had to be a focus in the early stages on simply continuing to be a church, in utterly unprecedented times.

Yet for all the meetings we are told occur, this prophetic narrative has not emerged. The ‘example’ we have set has been a decidedly middle-class one – many of our congregations, and the nation more widely, have not had the luxury of working from home, either having been made redundant or continuing to keep the wheels of society moving as key workers. Political narratives continue to paint asylum seekers drowning in the English Channel as primarily shirkers and criminals rather than as the Holy Family in Egypt. Our elderly are more forgotten than ever, and the level of mental distress felt by the young (too often painted as the enemy in a pandemic in which they have mostly, in fact, been paragons of selfless virtue) is exponentially rising. The world is desperate for Christian communion – where are we? Too often, we appear to be pontificating about pseudoscience, or shaming people in our congregations for not wearing a mask for health reasons. The ‘new normal’ that we are inhabiting is nothing of the sort – and the Church of England should be at the front line arguing for all those things that effectively make community.

Our increased responsibility also extends to those in the pews, and here too our preoccupations with ‘safety’ have had negative effects. We certainly do have a responsibility to take safety into account, yet this must be balanced with other considerations – much like the benefits of lockdown need to be balanced with wider health and societal effects. Here we are back to the concept of risk analysis. Analyses of safety must also take into account the importance of being a church. Clergy who state that they must wear masks throughout a service, or that the Eucharist is not possible, all on the grounds of ‘safety’, are betraying their calling to be ministers of Christ in His church. Clergy are not, fundamentally, called to be people of zero risk – they are called to be ministers of the Gospel. To withhold the central command of offering the Eucharist when it is demonstrably safe to do so is a clear breach of this commission. Likewise, clergy who are refusing to open churches on grounds of ‘safety’ must be absolutely clear that this is a genuine issue of safety rather than an unnecessary and ultimately unchristian fear.

Once again, it is not personal attack to ask these questions, and there may be genuine reasons for some practices post-Covid. But, as noted above, some clergy do not understand the risks, and in some cases this is wilful. A criticism of clergy wishing to offer services from inside their churches has been that this is 'exceptionalism' – that clergy should not be given special privileges as compared to their parishioners. Whilst this is a clear misunderstanding of the argument put forward (that clergy were offering their services for and on behalf of the people, and providing comfort to many by doing so), the converse is also arguable. Clergy have a responsibility to their parish and their people, whose souls they have cure of, and in refusing to honour this (either through fear or through 'safety'), they run the risk of a different kind of exceptionalism.

One particular group of clergy that have been let down by the central church have been those who were shielding or in shielding families, and who continue to face a greater risk than the general population. It is absolutely unrealistic to demand these clergy open their churches – their having a physical health problem in ministry should not be a reason to expose them to harm. Yet because of the conflation of the needs of this group with the general permission given to people not to open churches if they don't feel they are 'safe', this group of vulnerable clergy have been left high and dry. The current situation, in which restrictions remain on society and the extremely vulnerable continue to remain so, is not going to be short-lived, and this may mean that these clergy simply aren't able to open their churches without putting themselves or their close relatives at unacceptable risk. To make matters worse, it is also clearly unacceptable to leave congregations without services (and indeed parishes without their clergy), which doubtless adds extra feelings of guilt to these clergy. This is a key moment for collegiality, help and support, at deanery and diocesan level, yet there is no serious indication that this has been forthcoming. Twitter is full of shielding clergy who appear to have received little, if any, support. This is an extremely bad situation for the Church to find herself in – not even providing effective support to those most in need amongst their own ranks of clergy, and indeed increasing their fear about the demands and expectations placed on them. This has to change – and must form part of a wider review of what the Church of England expects, and wishes, to provide in a long period of continuing pandemic and post-Covid recovery.

The need for an ongoing strategy might also include a serious review as to whether the right decisions have been and continue to be made about ordinations. In a move which further suggests that the Church had failed to understand the long-term nature of the pandemic, ordinations were all cancelled in June and moved variously to September, October or 'later in the year'. If this had been a short period of lockdown followed by a return to near normality, the idea of postponing ordinations to such time that they could go ahead 'as per usual' makes some sense, even if it does raise ecclesiological considerations. Yet this was never going to be the case. More worrying still has been some of the conversation around why ordinations were delayed, which too often has focused on their nature as a celebration rather than on their purpose. Whilst it is, of course, understandable that ordinands wish for their families to attend and to have the opportunity to celebrate after the service of ordination, this is not what the service is ultimately *for*. Those called to ordination are called to serve, to preach, to administer the sacraments and to help usher in the Kingdom. Given the number of churches unable to celebrate the sacraments during the early recovery phase, often because older or vulnerable clergy were shielding, the decision to postpone the ordination of hundreds of new

priests seems somewhat absurd. Likewise, it is difficult to understand why new deacons should have to wait and remain lay workers, unless the meaning of ordination has been redefined.

Not only would undertaking small, intimate celebrations (with one or two supporters, representatives of the *laos* and clergy) in the early stages of the pandemic recovery have had some practical use – it would also have sent a strong message to the church and to the world that those called to ordination are also called to a life of self-sacrifice and simplicity in the Gospel. As it happens, the services are to be small and intimate in any case, yet by a lack of serious ecclesiological thinking, the prophetic witness of these services has been lost. Whilst some clergy argue that the current situation is serious enough to prevent the saying of the Eucharist during ordinations, in fact the current situation is serious enough to allow small but valid ordinations to present themselves as beacons of the Kingdom. It might also have helped counter the prevailing narrative that ordinations are for the ordinand – they most definitely are not: they are for the church and for the people of God. To turn them into a primarily worldly celebration is both poor ecclesiology and poor mission.

There is a huge amount that the Church of England has done, both in the pandemic and more widely, that is to be greatly welcomed. Its continued, and often underreported, service to the poor and outcast is at its bedrock, and arguments about ecclesiology or the sacraments can seem peripheral and, at times, unimportant. Yet it is in these very sacraments that the Church is found – until the Church finds itself, then it simply cannot help others be found. Those who minister in the church have a huge responsibility – one which takes courage, and one which (as the ordinal states) they cannot possibly undertake in their own strength.⁹ Yet to be truly courageous, clergy need to recognise their limits, and constantly purify their decisions and thoughts by being open to challenge from within and without. There is nothing courageous about exposing others to unacceptable risk – as we have seen in the despicable cases of child abuse in the Church. Likewise, we cannot call something acceptable or unacceptable until we understand that of which we speak, and have gained the consent of the Church – this is the whole foundation of synodality. It is clear that *risk* is still something too many clergy do not understand, and it is clear that clergy are still expected to be (and perhaps enjoy being) experts on every conceivable topic, omniscient yet under-supported.

Courageous mission and ministry, grounded in Christ and shed of vestiges of self-will and wilfulness, is the only way that the Church of England can thrive (and, indeed, survive). Elements of corporate failure on coronavirus are abundantly clear, yet they speak to a wider malaise in our structures, our expectations and our practice. The question is whether we will continue to deny there is a problem, or whether a new, truly courageous generation of clergy and laity will raise the flag, speak up and risk their own ‘reputation’ in the Church to point out the issue and more importantly seek to change things. Some risks are worth taking. This appears to be one of them.

⁹ Church of England, ‘Common Worship Ordination Services’ [<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/ministry/common-worship-ordination-services>] accessed 23rd August 2020