

The Reckoning – Will the Church of England Survive?

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by Jayne Ozanne, Editor of Via Media, Member of General Synod and Member of the Government's LGBT Advisory Panel



They say “*people in glass houses should never throw stones*” – although it seems to me that the Church of England is an expert at it, and the house now has very little glass left! I’m sure I wasn’t alone in finding myself choking on my proverbial cornflakes last Sunday when I read an [exclusive interview in the Guardian](#)ⁱⁱ with the Church Commissioners’ new Head of Responsible Investment, Bess Joffe, outlining how the Commissioners will be warning companies “that they must do more to protect biodiversity and increase the ethnic diversity of their senior teams or risk protest votes at upcoming shareholder meetings”. Explaining why they were taking this action, Joffe told the Guardian: “You want to be in a world where boards of directors, management teams and pipelines of talent look like the communities in which they exist.”

She is of course absolutely right – it’s just rather embarrassing that the Church of England has such a poor record on doing just this themselves! We have woefully few senior church leaders from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In fact, we have a pretty poor record on most areas of inclusion – looking at the current House of Bishops, and even the make-up of General Synod, we still remain predominantly white, male and middle-class. We have woefully few members from any of the areas relating to the protected characteristics in the Equality Act – save of course religious belief. And then, of course there is the Equality Act itself and the preposterous fact that the established Church, which is in the privileged position of being able to make and shape British law, has been granted exemption to the one law of which it should be the Moral Guardian.

In short, Joffe has shown us that we are guilty, yet again, of not practising what we preach. In the real world, most would call this for what it is – rank hypocrisy.

To be fair, the Church of England has named “hypocrisy” as one of the Six Deadly Sins that came out of the Pastoral Advisory Group (otherwise known as the [Pastoral Principles for Living Well Together](#))ⁱⁱⁱ. However, it’s not something that we are really very good at talking about or owning – I mean, have you ever been in a meeting when it has been called out or addressed? Instead, we tend to excuse it away privately to ourselves, saying “well it’s really a lot more complicated than that, and things are changing!” But are they really changing or are we just getting better at creating more fog, where we get accustomed to living in our slightly surreal world of smoke and mirrors?

At least Bess Joffe spoke out! I applaud her for wanting to use her position to change things – and particularly for wanting to use it to address inequality. But it’s interesting to pause for a moment and reflect on why she is able to do this when so few others aren’t?

I'd suggest that one primary reason is because she is a member of the laity and is therefore not confined by the ridiculous covenant of silence that so many senior clergy seem to have embraced. This means, frankly, that she does not need to "behave well" in order to get any form of preferment – or in other words, she is not warned off saying anything that might "rock the boat" and put any hope of future promotion out of reach.

I'm sorry to name it, but I think this is where so much of our real problems lie. We have created such large central structures at both diocesan and national levels – which we can barely afford in these financially strapped times – where in order to be able to be part of it you need "to conform". And, of course many understandably want to be "part of it" – they want to progress, often for the very honourable reason that they want to get to a place where they feel they can "make a real difference". Although of course, few truly feel able to do so when they do actually get "there". It's "smoke and mirrors" after all!

I am speaking perhaps more bluntly than I normally do because I am deeply concerned that the Church of England is currently facing a crisis of such enormity that I fear few have truly taken its severity onboard. It is my sincere belief that we have only a few years left (if that) before we implode – under the weight of our central structures, under our inability to make decisions, under our crushed and demoralised parish systems and under the glare of a general public who have given up on an institution that they see as steeped in hypocrisy and puritanical legalism.

Believe it or not, God has *not* promised that the Church of England will continue for ever. The Christian faith most certainly will be carried from generation to generation, but God does not have to use an institution that has lost its ability to speak truthfully, act righteously and has chosen to exempt itself from standing up for the marginalised. These next few years will be years of reckoning, and it's about time we started facing some hard truths...we need to come off our fences, come out from our hiding places and allow the wind of the Spirit to blow away the fog and smoke that has blinded us so that we can look ourselves clearly in the mirror, and be honest about what we see.

Maybe then we'll have a chance, but only if we're humble enough to get on our knees and recognise how badly we've got so many things wrong – and how we have hurt so many people in the process!

We can but pray...

ⁱ <https://www.viamedia.news/2021/01/19/the-reckoning-will-the-church-of-england-survive/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/17/church-of-england-to-step-up-pressure-on-firms-to-improve-diversity?fbclid=IwAR3CUEvnNICBjOBwbIGUuTpjX45Ke0OlrB1XOJlcHwuveOPSuq2u6YImWw>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-advisory-group>