

Of Parsons and their People

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The word parson, now largely close to archaic usage, was historically an informal noun used of Anglican Protestant clergy in particular. It comes from the Middle English *persone* meaning 'the person' because the parson was legally viewed as the 'official person' representing the church in the community.

It evokes an age where priest and people were close and epitomised how the parish system in England in particular had developed from early Anglo-Saxon roots. A Latin variant of the Greek *paroikia*, the dwelling place of the priest, was used by the eighth Archbishop of Canterbury [Theodore of Tarsus](#) (c. 602 to 690). He applied it to any [Anglo-Saxon township](#) with a priest. For centuries thereafter, parishes functioned as both religious centres and local civil administrative units responsible for poor relief, local roads, and community record-keeping, until civil and ecclesiastical parishes separated in the 19th century.

In England the parish is geographical with mapped boundaries, elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, the parish is the church membership.

All of this signifies a close and personal working bond between the minister and the people, something that continued, strengthened even, after the Reformation. Arguably, for this particular editorial this is the essence of the Church of England and it has worked well until recently.

People, whether churchgoing or not, still relate to those who they call variously and often inaccurately, vicar, rector, pastor, curate, reverend and for those of a high church disposition father.

However, the close relationship between minister and people has, in recent decades, been dismantled as the Church of England has centralised and become burdened with bureaucracy as parishes have been, closed, altered and amalgamated – sometimes to ridiculous extent, way beyond the capacity of any personal oversight.

An increasingly demoralised and overworked clergy is now subject to all the burdens of modern administration, safeguarding, statistical returns and of course declining congregations and crumbling buildings.

The Church of England, which clung onto its bishops during the mid-seventeenth century when the siren options of Independency and Presbyterianism briefly prevailed, now boasts a proliferation of these extremely busy, sometimes purple clad, often distant and remote, episcopal overseers. In short, The Church of England is in “a serious cycle of decline”ⁱ The only thing growing is centralised authority.

In a new report ‘Wasted Money in a Diminishing Church’ by Canon Robin Gill & Professor John Craven the authors write in essence that too much money is being spent on administration in every diocese and less and less locally and in supporting clergy. They point out that nowadays we have four times more bishops than in Victorian times. Then there were far fewer dioceses and the numbers of in-the-pew worshipping members were much higher both relatively and in actuality compared to today’s population.

The Report recommends a radical cutting of the number of dioceses and bishops and a devolution of resources to deaneries.

The Report did not recommend the use of Artificial Intelligence to replace missing clergy numbers but the irony is that there are a few as yet isolated examples of overworked and struggling clergy having resorted to having their sermons written for them at least in part by AI!

Does all this sound familiar? It has a certain resonance with secular authorities seeking to cut back, save and find new ways of working. However, the similarity stops there because we are talking of a human and spiritual relationship between people and their pastors. Is this to be sacrificed on an altar of centralisation? Can the Church have enough courage to cut its burden of hierarchy? No commercial organisation would tolerate such a bloated management structure, its shareholders would rebel.

Certainly there are a great many dispirited and annoyed loyal lay members out in the parishes. There isn’t quite an uprising as yet, but it can’t be far away when the cry ‘Give us back our vicar’ will be deafened by the noise of people leaving.

ⁱ Church Times 26th October 2026 <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/23-october/news/uk/c-of-e-heading-for-financial-disaster-warn-two-academics>