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# The Parish in Peril? Views From the Grassroots of the Church of England

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## The Parish in Peril? Views From the Grassroots of the Church of England

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores opinions about parish finances and about strategies related to parishes among 3,219 clergy and lay people who took part in the *Church 2024* survey. Just under a third of people thought that their parish was struggling financially and were unable to meet its share of diocesan costs. A third of people felt parishes should be in a position to pay for their clergy, a proportion that was slightly higher among Evangelicals and those from larger congregations. There was strong agreement across the sample that rich parishes should subsidise poor ones, although some laity, especially from larger or Evangelical churches, tended to disagree. There was little support for concentrating resources on larger churches, but slightly more support for closing unviable churches. People from rural churches did not necessarily fit the stereotype of wanting to keep unviable churches going.

### KEYWORDS

Church finances; Church of England; church tradition; clergy; laity; parish system

## Introduction

The Church of England has been in numerical decline for many years. Voas (2017) examined trends in a range of attendance and membership statistics that all showed declines from 1980 to 2013. Usual Sunday attendance declined steadily by 37% over that period from 1,240,000 to 775,000 and the trend continued until just before the pandemic in 2019 (Church of England, 2024) when average Sunday attendance for adults and children was 707,100 (Church of England, 2021, from Table 5). The COVID-19 pandemic added a crisis to an already difficult situation and attendance in 2023, when face-to-face worship was unrestricted, had fallen by 20% compared to 2019 (Church of England, 2024). This numerical decline has placed financial pressures on dioceses. Parish income increased steadily in absolute terms from the turn of the century, but in real terms (allowing for inflation) it peaked around the time of the financial crisis in 2008 and has remained fairly constant since then (Church of England, 2025b, p. 9).

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Although there seems to have been some recovery in attendance since the pandemic (Church of England, 2025a), the ongoing pressure on finances and sustainability at the parish level remains unrelenting for some. This has been highlighted in recent years by the notion of 'fragile church', an idea first suggested by Anne Lawson following her work on rural clergy with multi-parish benefices (Lawson, 2018, 2019). Among the 'marks of the fragile church' that she identified were financial pressure and anxiety about dwindling resources. Follow-up work identified the additional demands maintaining historic buildings as a particular pressure for some clergy (Lawson, 2023). The notion that some parishes are struggling to pay their parish share, fill key lay posts, or maintain the fabric of their church is not new, but it may be becoming more widespread. Recent surveys of the Church of England during and after the pandemic suggested that, while rural churches were feeling especially fragile, this was also something that applied to parishes in more urban environments (Francis, Village, & Lawson, 2020, 2021).

This paper explores views about parish finances and about strategies to deal with decline using data from the *Church 2024* survey (Village, 2025). This wide-ranging survey explored attitudes and opinions among both clergy and lay people, mainly at the grassroots, parish level. Included in the survey were items about how people viewed their parish's financial viability, ability to pay share to dioceses, the need for parishes to fund the costs of ministry, whether rich parishes should subsidise poor ones, whether unviable churches should be closed, and whether the Church nationally should concentrate resources on large churches. These are issues that have preoccupied the Church of England a great deal over the last two decades, but the voices usually heard are those of academics or the hierarchy of the Church who have wrestled with what it means to be the Church of England (as opposed to a church in England) in the twenty-first century. The aim of the survey was to ask questions that would be understood by those who may not have engaged with the debate but who would understand the issues it generates. Before examining their views, it is helpful to situate the debate about parishes within the wider context of the Church of England.

### ***The parish system in the Church of England***

The parish system dates back to the fourth century (Coriden, 1997) and is by no means unique to the Church of England. Nonetheless, English parishes were key units of ecclesial administration and pastoral care from the medieval period and became increasingly important in civil administration after the Elizabethan Settlement (Merritt, 2019; Pounds, 2000). Civil and ecclesial parishes were formally separated by the Local Government Act of 1894, but the parish system has remained a cornerstone of how the Church of England understands itself. The idea of 'a presence in every place' is often interpreted through the notion that bishops, through parish priests, have responsibility for the 'cure of souls' in every parish, whether or not those souls are attached to the worshipping community. For some this places the Church of England in a unique position, which was no more clearly evident than in the way that those who were not otherwise linked to any other denomination would default to the local parish church if they wanted baptisms, weddings, or funerals. This has been a visible expression of the importance of having pretty much every geographical location in the country assigned to a particular parish.

This historical state of affairs has begun to erode as more and more people in England identify as having no religion, and certainly no affiliation to the Established Church. This

of itself might not threaten the parish system, which has always served those who are not explicitly church members. What has threatened the system is the inability of the few remaining committed Anglicans in some parishes to resource a liturgical or pastoral ministry in the geographic area for which they feel they have responsibility. In short, too few parishioners are offering the time and money to maintain buildings and to support the costs of ministry. Hence the increasingly fragile feel to some parishes. Rural village churches have often been seen as the most vulnerable and in need of particular strategies to enable them to survive (Atwell, Ambrose, & Bent, 2022).

One recent change that has been seen as a particular threat to the parish ideal dates back to the publication of the report *Mission-Shaped Church* some two decades ago (Archbishops' Council, 2004). The need to grow new disciples was imperative, and the report outlined ways in which various initiatives, termed 'Fresh Expressions of Church', could transform the landscape. These often involved meeting outside church buildings (such as café church) or groups meeting in church which appeared to create alternative 'congregations' (such as Messy Church) detached from those worshipping in parish churches. For some, this threatened to turn the Church of England into a sect (Davison & Milbank, 2010); for others this was the way ahead (Croft & Mobsby, 2009; Goodhew, Volland, & Roberts, 2012). The debate about this form of mission soon developed into one about the place of the parish in the Church of England (Croft, 2010; Davison & Milbank, 2010; Nelstrop & Percy, 2008) because it seemed to be moving towards individual congregations untethered from parochial geography. Foulger (2023), building on the work of Inge (2003), Rumsey (2017), and others, has recently tried to emphasise the importance of place, but also to expand the notion of place beyond simple geographic boundaries, warning against 'imagined presence' which too easily assumes that having a parish church equates to being present for people in a parish. Nonetheless, the founding of the Save The Parish movement in 2021 (Save The Parish, 2025) has heightened the debate, which has intensified in part because of the strategies the Church has created to manage change over the last decade.

Over the last decade or so, the Church of England's response to the changing context of English society has been to try and manage change centrally, rather than devolving more power to dioceses or parishes. The strategy emerged in 2015 with the 'Renewal and Reform' programme (Spence, 2015), which highlighted some key goals for the next decade and beyond. Part of this strategy was to shift some financial resources away from the block grant to dioceses and to use historic resources to fund particular initiatives, such as so-called 'resource churches' (Shepherd, 2024; Thorpe, 2021). As the strategy has evolved, it has increasingly used terms such as 'mixed ecology' to refer to having structures and identities that move beyond those which were familiar to previous generations (Cottrell, 2021). Although the current objectives of the Archbishops' Council include 'revitalising parishes', they also include creating (socially or digitally) 10,000 'new Christian communities' either at home, at work, or within educational contexts. This shift has been seen by some as a further threat to the parish system (Milbank, 2023) and an ill-judged response to problems facing the Church (Birch, 2025). Others see it as necessary change that is driven by the theology of *Missio Dei* (Bosch, 1992) and in particular the Anglican Church's Five Marks of Mission (Zink, 2017), and that brings realistic hope for the future of the Church (Nye, 2016, 2021).

Although the Fresh Expressions movement has drawn in people from across the Church, it has often been seen as driven by Evangelicals because of its emphasis on

bringing people to faith and personal discipleship, rather than on serving everyone in a particular place. The investment in 'resource churches' is seen by some as favouring larger, more successful churches at the expense of those that are struggling to survive. The investment in diocesan posts is seen as a move to centralised management at the expense of having parish priests on the ground. Those who view the Church as having become more like a corporate business fear that the benefits of the parish system may not hold sway against the idea that financially unviable parishes cannot be subsidised indefinitely, and that the best way forward is to reward success. Some might argue that this does have dominical precedent: 'For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away' (Matthew 25:29).

This change in strategy may not have been recognised by many at the grassroots of the Church, but the ongoing effects of decline would have been evident in most parishes. Anyone who has been involved in running parishes will have long heard complaints about the amounts of money requested by dioceses from parishes, be it as parish share or freewill offering. Virtually all campaigns to increase giving will have stressed the fact that the majority of diocesan expenditure goes to train, house and pay the costs of parish clergy. The fragile church research has emphasised the unviability of some parishes in terms of finance or maintaining buildings. In many dioceses, especially those serving rural populations, the main way of coping with a shortage of clergy and small congregations has been to merge parishes into ever larger benefices. The number of parishes in multi-parish benefices rose from 17% in 1960 to 71% in 2011 (Church of England, 2016).

## **Objectives**

Against this background, it would be useful to know what people from different parts of the Church of England think about issues related to finances and whether it is right for small, financially unviable churches to continue to be subsidised. The aim of the *Church 2024* survey was to elicit responses from people across the Church of England, including clergy and lay people and those at diocesan and parish levels. The aims of this paper are to assess opinion about various issues related to finances and support and to examine how that varies according to where people live, their church tradition, and the size of their congregation. Do the results reinforce or challenge current stereotypes about the differences between rural and urban churches, between Evangelicals, Anglo-Catholics and others, or between those in small versus large congregations?

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

The *Church 2024* survey was an online survey delivered using the Qualtrics platform, which ran from March to November 2024. Invitations to participate were published several times in the *Church Times* and the *Church of England Newspaper* as well as in diocesan newsletters. The final sample used here consisted of 3,219 individuals from the Church of England who had no missing values for variables used in this analysis.

## Participant profile

The overall sample profile is shown in [Table 1](#). There was a slight preponderance of women over men (52% versus 48%) and the majority (54%) were over 50. Comparison of the survey sample with known national statistics suggests that it was reasonably representative of lay people, with a slight overrepresentation of women among clergy, especially those who have extra-parochial responsibilities ([Village, 2025](#)).

## Instruments

### Dependent variables

The survey contained six items related to parishes and finances that were presented separately to those based in parishes and those who indicated a diocesan-level role or who worshipped outside a parish church context. This was because some items needed slight changing in wording to make sense, for example 'My parish church cannot pay its share of diocesan costs' changed to 'Many parishes in my diocese cannot pay their share of the diocesan budget'. This allowed responses from parochially based and extra-parochially based respondents to be compared. In the final sample there were 64 responses from extra-parochial clergy and 69 from lay people who did not worship in a parish, amounting to 4.1% of the total. The six items, as worded for parishes, were:

- My parish church is not financially self-sufficient
- My parish church cannot pay its share of diocesan costs
- Parishes or benefices should pay what it costs to have paid priests

**Table 1.** Profile of the sample.

		%
Sex	Male	48.0
	Female	52.0
Age	20s	4.0
	30s	7.9
	40s	13.4
	50s	21.1
	60s	26.6
	70s	21.2
	80s+	5.7
Location	Rural	32.4
	Town	33.1
	Suburban	24.0
	Inner-city	10.4
Congregation size	< 50	48.8
	50–99	33.6
	100+	17.6
Status	Stipendiary parochial	21.2
	Stipendiary extra-parochial	2.0
	Active SSM or Retired	12.6
	Lay minister	17.6
	Not ministering	46.6
Tradition	Anglo-Catholic	27.9
	Broad church	44.7
	Evangelical	27.4

Note:  $N = 3219$ . SSM = Self-supporting ministers

- Better-off churches should help subsidise poorer churches
- We should close churches that are not financially viable
- We should concentrate resources on larger churches

Each had a five-point response scale ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly'.

### ***Independent variables***

The main interest was to compare responses from people in different locations, different sized congregations, different traditions, and with different roles. Control variables were sex (female = 1, male = 0) and age (by decade). Location was categorised into 'inner city', 'rural' and 'urban'. Respondents were asked for the size of the usual Sunday congregation they attended on a nine-point scale that was recoded into < 50, 50–99, and 100 +. Church tradition was assessed using a seven-point bipolar scale labelled 'Anglo-Catholic' at one end and 'Evangelical' at the other. It is a good indicator of differences in belief and practice in the Church of England (Randall, 2005; Village, 2012) and was used to identify Anglo-Catholic (scoring 1-2), Broad Church (3-5) and Evangelical (6-7) respondents. Status in the Church was categorised as stipendiary parochial clergy, stipendiary extra-parochial clergy, active self-supporting or active retired ministers, lay ministers, and non-ministering lay people (which included a few retired clergy who were no longer ministering).

### ***Analysis***

Responses to each item were recoded to indicate endorsement (agree or agree strongly) and these binary variables were used to compare the percentage endorsing in different categories: location, church status, congregation size, and church tradition. Marginal means were estimated using a Generalised Linear Modelling procedure in SPSS version 31 (IBM\_SPSS, 2025) for a binomial response variable. These means controlled for sex, age, and other variables in the model. The Wald Chi-squared statistic was used to test for differences between means because it is a more appropriate measure of the significance of effects than the F statistic, that is used for normally distributed data.

## **Results**

### ***Responses to items***

The first two items 'My parish church is not financially self-sufficient' and 'My parish church cannot pay its share of diocesan costs' both related to how people perceived the general financial situation of parishes, and both had similar levels of endorsement (32% and 28% respectively). Levels of disagreement were slightly higher (49% and 53%). If the opinions of this sample were reflected in parishes across the Church, it suggests that nearly a third may be unable to pay their way or support their diocese at expected levels. The third item referred to the idea that parishes or benefices should pay the costs of having stipendiary clergy. A third agreed that they should, 30% were uncertain, and 38% disagreed, suggesting more divided opinions on this issue (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Item responses.

	Yes %	DS %	D %	NC %	A %	AS %
Parish not financially self sufficient	32.2	13.2	35.7	18.9	24.0	8.2
Cannot pay parish share	27.8	15.1	38.0	19.0	19.4	8.4
Parishes must pay for clergy	32.6	8.4	29.2	29.7	27.2	5.4
Rich should subsidise poor	74.8	1.4	5.9	18.0	55.6	19.2
Close unviable churches	20.3	11.5	36.2	32.0	16.3	4.0
Concentrate on larger churches	7.9	28.5	47.8	15.8	6.4	1.5

Note:  $N = 3219$ . DS = Disagree Strongly, D = Disagree, NC = Not Certain, A = Agree, AS = Agree Strongly, Yes = A + AS

The fourth item suggested that better-off churches should help to subsidise poorer ones, a widespread practice because the parish shares paid to dioceses have usually been calculated according to ability to pay. There was much stronger support for this idea (75%), with only 7% disagreeing. There seems to be widespread recognition that resources are unevenly distributed at parish/benefice level and that those who have should help those who have less.

The final two items referred to closing unviable churches and concentrating resources on larger churches. Endorsement for both items was relatively low, but much higher for closing unviable churches (20%) than for concentrating resources on larger churches (8%). If a third of people thought parishes were not financially self-sufficient, and a fifth thought unviable churches should be closed, it suggests that there are some church people who might be more sanguine about losing church buildings than others.

### ***Predicting levels of endorsement of items***

The next step of the analysis was to examine how opinions varied across people from different geographic or ecclesial locations within the Church. The multiple regression analyses used binomial variables (1 = items endorsed, 0 = items not endorsed) to test whether there were statistically significant differences in levels of endorsement between various groups, after controlling for the sex and age of respondents. The first two items, referring to financial self-sufficiency and ability to pay parish share, were both endorsed by around 30% of respondents and both showed similar differences between groups (Table 3, columns 1 and 2). There were no statistically significant differences between rural, urban or inner-city respondents, but marked differences by church status and congregation size. Stipendiary clergy, and especially extra-parochial stipendiary clergy, were much more likely to agree with these statements than were other clergy or laity. For example, while 37% of stipendiary parochial clergy and 86% of extra-parochial stipendiary clergy endorsed the idea that parishes were not financially self-sufficient, levels fell to 28% among lay ministers and 22% among other lay people. Endorsement decreased with increasing congregation size, so while around half of those in congregations of less than 50 agreed with the statements, this fell to 27% for lack of financial self-sufficiency and 22% for inability to pay the parish share in congregations of 100 or more. The trend by tradition was for Anglo-Catholics to have higher levels of endorsement than those from the Broad Church, who in turn had higher endorsement than Evangelicals, though this was not a large effect and significant only for item 1 on financial

**Table 3.** Estimated marginal means: Items 1–3.

	Parish(es) not financially self sufficient %	Parish cannot pay share %	Parishes must pay for clergy %
Inner city	37 (2.7)	33 (2.4)	25 (2.2)
Rural	38 (2.6)	32 (2.3)	33 (2.5)
Urban	42 (2.4)	34 (2.0)	27 (2.0)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	5.9	1.4	15.2 ***
Stipendiary parochial	37 (2.1)	36 (2.1)	42 (2.1)
Stipendiary extra-parochial	86 (4.5)	79 (5.4)	10 (4.0)
Active SSM or Retired	21 (2.1)	18 (1.9)	33 (2.5)
Lay minister	28 (2.0)	22 (1.8)	36 (2.2)
Not ministering	22 (1.2)	18 (1.1)	29 (1.3)
Wald Chisq (df = 4)	108.7 ***	140.2 ***	44.7 ***
100+	27 (2.7)	22 (2.3)	33 (2.9)
50-99	35 (2.5)	29 (2.1)	29 (2.3)
< 50	57 (2.4)	51 (2.2)	23 (1.9)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	133.5 ***	133.6 ***	21.2 ***
Evangelical	34 (2.6)	30 (2.3)	36 (2.6)
Broad church	40 (2.5)	32 (2.2)	28 (2.2)
Anglo-Catholic	44 (3.0)	37 (2.7)	21 (2.1)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	11.9 **	5.9	40.2 ***

Note:  $N = 3219$ . Figures are mean % Endorsement (SE) controlling for sex, age, and other variables in the model. \* $p < .05$ ,

\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , otherwise not significant.

self-sufficiency. It seemed that the financial squeeze was most clearly felt by stipendiary clergy, and those in smaller congregations, though over a fifth of larger congregations also thought their congregation was not financially self-sufficient and struggled to pay its share.

For the third item, parishes should pay what it costs to have paid priests, there were significant differences in all groups (Table 3, column 3). Perhaps surprisingly, rural respondents had the highest endorsement (33%) and inner city the lowest (25%). Stipendiary parochial clergy were the highest endorsing group (42%) and, again surprisingly, extra-parochial the lowest (10%). This may have been because the item wording they had was 'Dioceses should not deploy paid incumbents to parishes or benefices that cannot afford them', which is probably a more strongly worded item than the parish-based version. There was again a relationship with congregation size: those from congregations of over 100 were more likely to agree with this idea than those from congregations of less than 50 (33% versus 23%). A similar sort of difference was apparent in endorsement levels between Evangelicals (36%) and Anglo-Catholics (21%). Most people did not think every parish should pay for its clergy, but those most likely to agree were from rural parishes, stipendiary parochial clergy, those from larger congregations, and Evangelicals.

The item about rich parishes supporting poor ones had much higher levels of support than other items, but there were still differences between groups (Table 4, column 1). People in rural parishes were less likely to agree (79%) than those from inner cities (86%) or urban areas (85%). The principle was almost unanimously supported by extra-parochial clergy (97%), but less so by lay ministers (73%) or other laity (71%). There was no difference by size, but Evangelicals were less likely to agree (79%) than were Anglo-Catholics (88%).

**Table 4.** Estimated marginal means: Items 4–6.

	Rich should subsidise poor %	Close unviable churches %	Concentrate on larger churches %
Inner city	86 (2.0)	19 (1.7)	8 (1.1)
Rural	79 (2.7)	26 (2.0)	9 (1.3)
Urban	85 (2.0)	21 (1.5)	9 (1.0)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	23.9 ***	9.7 **	1.7
Stipendiary parochial	80 (1.7)	30 (2.0)	9 (1.2)
Stipendiary extra-parochial	97 (2.3)	28 (5.8)	14 (4.4)
Active SSM or Retired	83 (2.0)	17 (2.0)	6 (1.3)
Lay minister	73 (2.0)	19 (1.8)	9 (1.3)
Not ministering	71 (1.3)	18 (1.1)	7 (0.7)
Wald Chisq (df = 4)	47.2 ***	39.6 ***	9.5
100+	81 (2.7)	26 (2.4)	14 (1.9)
50-99	84 (2.2)	21 (1.7)	7 (1.0)
< 50	86 (2.0)	19 (1.4)	7 (0.8)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	5.4	9.0 *	21.8 ***
Evangelical	79 (2.7)	31 (2.1)	13 (1.5)
Broad church	84 (2.2)	19 (1.5)	7 (0.9)
Anglo-Catholic	88 (1.9)	17 (1.7)	7 (1.1)
Wald Chisq (df = 2)	26.2 ***	46.4 ***	25.8 ***

Note:  $N = 3219$ . Figures are mean endorsement (SE) controlling for sex, age, and other variables in the model. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , otherwise not significant.

The final two items were about closing unviable churches and concentrating resources on larger churches (Table 4, columns 2 & 3). Endorsement for the former at about 20% was much higher than for the latter at about 8%. There was more support for closing unviable churches from those in rural areas (26%) than elsewhere and among larger congregations (26%) than others, though these differences were small and barely statistically significant. Endorsement for closing unviable churches was higher for stipendiary parochial clergy (30%) compared with active self-supporting or active retired clergy (17%) or laity (18-19%). There was a markedly higher rate of endorsement among Evangelicals (31%) than among either those from the Broad Church (19%) or Anglo-Catholics (17%). Very few people thought the Church should concentrate resources on larger churches, with no difference by location or status. However, those from larger congregations of 100 or more were twice as likely to agree than those from smaller congregations (14% versus 7%), and there was a similar difference between Evangelicals and others.

## Discussion

This study of 3,219 clergy and lay people from the Church of England examined opinions about a range of issues related to parish finances and strategies for dealing with struggling churches. The strategy of the national Church over the last decade has left some parishes feeling threatened and a sense that resources may be channelled to successful churches while smaller, unviable churches are closed. The assumption is often that those in smaller congregations in rural areas are the most under threat and least likely to support such initiatives, while those in larger, urban churches or those who work or worship outside the parish system are more likely to support the current strategies.

Strategies that support initiatives to make new disciples in different sorts of communities to that of traditional parishes are often seen as stemming from Evangelical understandings of mission and the place of the parish in the Church of England. Overall, the results seem to challenge some stereotypes and confirm others.

There were some differences between those in rural parishes and those from urban or suburban areas, but little evidence to suggest rural parishes were struggling more than others to be self-sufficient or to pay their parish share. There was generally little support for the idea of closing unviable churches but, surprisingly, there was slightly more support for closing unviable churches from rural areas (26%) than either inner cities (19%) or suburban areas (21%). There was widespread support for the idea of rich parishes supporting poor ones, but this was slightly lower in rural areas (79%) than elsewhere (86%). It might be that there are affluent rural churchgoers who do not want to support struggling parishes in inner cities, or perhaps churchgoers in rural areas are not asking for financial help from other parishes and long experiences has given some a realistic view about the possibility of keeping churches going that are financially unviable.

The greater sense of financial insecurity among smaller congregations is what might be expected, though even around a fifth of people from the largest congregations felt things were hard. Evangelicals tend to come from larger congregations, but this did not entirely explain why they felt fewer financial pressures than others. Perhaps levels of wealth or giving tend to be generally higher in these churches, but this was not examined in the survey. If Evangelicals were less likely to feel the financial pinch, they were also slightly less likely to want to see resources shared with less wealthy churches. This difference was not huge and should not be overplayed because support for sharing was generally high. But this might reflect a difference in ecclesiology that relates to the fears raised by the Save the Parish movement, that larger, Evangelical churches want to see resources concentrated on larger, more 'successful' churches, even at the expense of letting others go. There was certainly some evidence of differences between traditions and between larger versus smaller congregations but, again, this should not be overplayed. The majority of people across all traditions and congregations did not want to see the closure of unviable churches and especially the concentration of resources on larger churches. In this respect, the grassroots seem to be chaffing at some of the way that the hierarchy has led the Church in the recent past.

## Conclusions

Three main conclusions emerge from this study:

First, just under a third of people in the Church of England think that their parish is struggling financially and cannot meet its share of diocesan costs. This has to be a worrying sign, even if the majority do not think this to be so. The perception of financial pressures seems to be greater among those who worship in smaller parishes of less than 50, and it is more keenly appreciated by stipendiary clergy than others. Lay people in large congregations may not understand the perils that their fellow worshippers face in other parts of the Church of England.

Second, a third of people felt parishes / benefices should be in a position to pay for their clergy. Those outside the parish system did not feel non-paying units should not have clergy, but stipendiary parish clergy, whose lives depend indirectly on parish giving, were

much more likely to agree with this idea than were lay people. Evangelicals and those from larger congregations were more likely to feel that parishes should be in a position to pay for clergy, but even here this was a minority opinion overall.

Third, there was strong agreement across the Church that rich parishes should subsidise poor ones. It would be sad if this were not so, as it is surely a fundamental Christian principle. Nonetheless, not all agree, and it may be that some laity especially from larger or Evangelical churches might be slightly less willing than others to see wealth shared rather than concentrated.

Fourth, there was very little support for concentrating resources on larger churches, but slightly more for closing unviable churches. If the latter represents an adjustment to realities and a weakening of the parish system, then it may be something that is slightly more acceptable in rural areas than elsewhere, and more recognised by stipendiary clergy than others. If there is appetite for this, it is slightly stronger among Evangelicals than others.

## Limitations of the study

This study was based on a large, convenience sample and relied on individuals to report on financial matters, which might not reflect actual financial realities. Combining responses from those in parishes and those outside the system was useful, but the extra-parochial sample was small and further dedicated research is needed to assess opinions within this group more accurately. The items did not directly assess the issue of the parish system as such, and future surveys that want to focus more sharply on this issue would need some qualitative pilot work to determine how items should be phrased to capture the opinions of those outside the core of the debate.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee for the School of Humanities, Religion and Philosophy at York St John University (approval codes: HRP-RS-AV-04-20-01(2021) and ETH2324-0130 (2024)). All participants had to affirm they were 18 or over and give their informed consent by ticking a box that gave access to the rest of the survey.

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