

For such a time as this

I have written this briefing to outline the serious challenge facing us as a parish church in the Church of England, and outline the reasons for the actions that we are taking.

In the book of Esther the Jews in the Persian Empire faced a deadly danger. Mordecai wrote to his niece Esther, who had become Queen, to urge her to speak to the Emperor: “For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom **for such a time as this?**” (Esther 4.14). She took courage, and her action saved her people from destruction.

In April I published a “Lament for the Church of England” which focussed on the problems of falling numbers of congregation, clergy, ordinands and a growing financial crisis. These problems are amplified by the controversies over sexuality and the “Prayers of Love and Faith”.

This crisis has been brought upon us by the senior leadership of the Church: we are seeking only to remain faithful to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, and the universal tradition of the Church. We believe that this is the moment at which we must take a stand and contend for the gospel entrusted to us, and this is something over which we cannot simply agree to disagree.

Parish Situation: I am greatly encouraged by the numbers of children and young people engaging with church at present. I am also delighted with the Anna Chaplaincy work led by Jill. The administrative organisation of the church seems to be running very effectively. I know that many of our volunteers are stretched and need more support (especially children’s work and church cleaning). I am also concerned about the fall in planned giving which has emerged during the last few months. We will address these issues at the congregational meeting on 28 September, and in October we will be making an appeal for people to serve and give, as we did in June last year.

Diocesan Situation:

Diocesan Synod will meet on 12 October, and top of its agenda is the Budget for 2025, which must address a deficit of £2 million, which could bankrupt the Diocesan within 2- 3 years. This financial crisis is replicated in the majority of Dioceses, and the earliest that national resources from the Church Commissioners can be deployed to bail them out is early 2026. Despite this crisis, there is no serious analysis of the reasons for the decline of the Church of England (at a time when other churches are growing).

The Diocese is reluctantly considering a significant reduction in clergy numbers, recognising that this could exacerbate the decline:

“Implications included the risk of a decrease in Common Fund contributions, the risk of failure of the universal parochial system, increased clergy over-stretch and risk of burn out” (June 2024 Diocesan Synod minutes §8)

The number of full-time clergy will have to be cut from 165 to 150 (-10%) and may need to be reduced to 130 (-22%). This means that parishes will be combined into ever larger groupings, despite the risks listed above, as is already happening in dioceses like Truro and Leicester.

The future of our relatively healthy benefice is at great risk, especially when I move on or retire. Our difficult relationship with the Diocese will make this worse, but is not the sole factor, and paying Common Fund in full will not be enough to protect us from being merged with other parishes around, and thus losing our distinctive bible-based character.

The incoming Bishop of Exeter (Rt Rev Michael Harrison) has publicly committed himself to supporting the ordination and licensing of clergy in same-sex civil marriages in a joint letter he signed with 43 other Bishops in November 2023:

“We look forward to Guidance being issued without delay that includes the removal of all restrictions on clergy entering same-sex civil marriages, and on bishops ordaining and licensing such clergy, as well as granting permissions to officiate.”

This will make our relationship with the diocese increasingly difficult.

National Situation:

The House of Bishops continues to press ahead with implementing the prayers of love and faith, despite the protests of many that this is contrary to the teaching of Jesus and the whole bible, and will split the Church of England, as it has already fractured the global Anglican Communion.

The Alliance (<https://alliancecofe.org/>) is a network of all those who oppose the revisionist agenda of the national church. It brings together the different streams of Evangelicals in the Church of England, conservative and charismatic, including New Wine and Holy Trinity Brompton network (HTB), as well as traditionalist Catholics. I attended their recent briefing, along with 40+ clergy from our diocese. Nationally over 2000 clergy have signed up, whose churches represent 42% of adults and 54% of children and young people active in the Church of England: we are not an insignificant or extremist rump!

The Alliance is pursuing a three-fold strategy for the next 6 months - until the February 2025 General Synod- of trying to negotiate a workable settlement to give us a secure future within the Church of England, while also preparing for a *de facto*

parallel province, and taking actions to demonstrate the seriousness of the disagreement.

Of their recommended actions, the PCC and I have already requested 'Alternative Spiritual Oversight' from the Church of England Evangelical Council, and Bishop Rod Thomas will be with us on Saturday 28 September. Alternative Oversight does not change our legal status as part of the Diocese of Exeter, but it signals our deep dissatisfaction with the current leadership of the Church. We will continue to contend at every level of church government - Deanery, Diocesan and General Synod- for wiser counsel to prevail.

At the PCC meeting on Thu 19 September the PCC voted by a substantial majority to use the Ephesian Fund as a channel by which to pass our Common Fund contributions to the Diocese. I intend to review this decision in a year's time.

The Ephesian Fund (<https://www.ephesianfund.org.uk/>) is a charity legally registered with the Charity Commission, and administered by Stewardship Services (<https://www.stewardship.org.uk/>). It has been set up by the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) with a board of trustees and a formal constitution. Its aim is to provide a secure way for PCCs and individuals to support good work in parish churches, while protecting their giving from being used by their diocese to fund ministry which they believe has departed from the historic teaching of the bible.

How does it work? If the PCC agrees to channel its Common Fund contributions through the Ephesian Fund, all the funds are still passed to the Diocese, but with a restriction imposed by the Ephesian Fund that the money can only be used to support churches endorsing the CEEC basis of faith and the charitable objectives of the Ephesian Fund.

Anyone giving to the PCC by standing order etc. can be confident that all their gift will still be used to support local ministry, maintain buildings, and meet at least the Cost of clergy requested by the Diocese. The amount the PCC gives to the Diocese will not change: only the route by which it is directed.

What is the point, if the Diocese still gets money from us? Using the Ephesian Fund during the next few months will send a clear message to the Diocese and the wider church that they need to seek a workable settlement. Smaller churches using the Fund which are net receivers will be encouraged to know that there are larger churches willing to support them, and larger churches will be recognising the needs of those smaller churches. This will not bankrupt the Diocese: they are already managing that on their own. We intend to continue giving as much as we did before, but through a different channel. Our benefice will still be a net contributor to the Diocese, when Hennock and fees are considered.

The PCC recognises that this is a controversial step. Some members of the congregation may choose in protest to give directly to the Diocese, but they need to recognise that by doing so they are contributing nothing to the cost of the local work in the parish, building maintenance, heating, insurance etc. The Diocese does not deduct their giving from our Common Fund Request.

The PCC also recognises that if it had chosen not to use the Ephesian Fund, other members of the congregation would choose to reduce their giving, or give to the PCC via the Ephesian Fund as individuals, thus imposing the same restriction on the PCC as the Fund would impose on the Diocese.

The Alliance leaders are determined to do all that is possible to persuade the bishops to negotiate, but they are not optimistic that the Bishops will change course and agree to a settlement that will provide a secure future for orthodox Christians within the Church of England. If after the next round of General Synod meetings, no progress has been made, other options will have to be considered in order to ensure the future of faithful gospel ministry.

The PCC and I want to continue the good work that is being done among people of all ages and opinions in the parish. We do not expect or require everyone in the congregation to hold a particular view on the controversial issues of this day. Everyone is welcome to worship with us, and my prayer is that as we study God's word and pray together, we will grow into that perfect unity for which Jesus prayed, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Eph 4.13)

Our contention is with those who were consecrated to uphold the doctrine of the Church, and are instead undermining it, are disrupting the church's unity, and contributing to its decline. We are therefore taking these measures to persuade them to think again and seek a workable settlement, allowing the maximum practical level of unity despite our differences, and put our energy into the mission and ministry of the gospel.

At our meeting on Saturday 28 September, we will consider the local and national situation, the actions that the PCC has taken, and give you opportunity to ask questions. Please feel free to speak to me and other PCC members beforehand, and pray that the Lord would give us great patience, wisdom **for such a time as this.**

Rev Graham Hamilton
20 September 2024