

Diminishing assets

What will the Church of England do about its pensions and parsonages?

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To be reviewed next month

2a The Cloisters, Gordon Square
London WC1H 0AG

tel 020 7388 3588

fax 020 7387 3539

subscription email

nd.subs@forwardinfaith.com

editor

nd.editor@forwardinfaith.com

all other enquiries

nd@forwardinfaith.com

Editorial

Editor: Nicholas Turner

Assistant Editors: Geoffrey

Kirk, Jonathan Baker,

Kathleen McCully, Simon

Heans, Owen Higgs,

Thomas Seville CR,

William Davage, Len Black

Contributing Editors: Andy

Hawes, Francis Gardom,

Arthur Middleton, Gerry

O'Brien, Barry Orford,

John Richardson

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Mike Silver

57 Century Road,

Rainham, Kent ME8 0BQ

tel 01634 401611

fax 01634 306368

email m.silver@breathe.com

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What a strange legacy. There is no doubting Prime Minister Tony Blair's religious convictions and commitment; and yet he has presided over the most dramatically de-Christianizing decade this country has known since the Viking invasions. There is a further irony, if the press reports are to be believed, in that he will soon be received into the Roman Catholic church, after ten years of pursuing so many policies inimicable to the teaching of that church.

The systematic dismantling of the United Kingdom has, as the recent victory of the Scottish Nationalists proved, gone rather further and faster than New Labour envisaged. The dismantling of the Christian heritage of the UK has, likewise, gone further and faster than even New Labour first imagined.

The removal of the Madonna and Child from the ill-fated Dome at the approach of the millennium seemed, at the time, in poor taste. We can see now how much it was part of a wider project, conscious or unconscious, in the words Mr Blair used in his resignation speech in Sedgefield, 'to get rid of the detritus of the past.'

The loss of the moral and legal compass that has guided this country for well over a thousand years is no small loss, and one that all traditional Christians, of whatever denomination, must feel painfully. But then, as our secular opponents, rising now on the fickle wheel of secular fortune, might happily to point out, we would say that, wouldn't we?

It is not our task to bemoan the passing of the light, as though it were our own possession, but it is our duty to remind ourselves and others of the importance of the common wealth, the unity of our culture and nation.

How ironic that it was Mrs Thatcher who is remembered for saying, 'There is no such thing as society,' while it was Mr Blair who set out to prove it. The rights of individuals have, without doubt, risen greatly during the last ten years, and we should not begrudge those who feel freer, happier and more confident.

There is, however, a price, and it is by no means negligible. The rights of individuals, conflicting as they inevitably are, are bought at the price of a loss of our common bonds. We are freer only because we are being drawn more and more into our own, ever smaller ghettos.

The rejection of tolerance in favour of legislated rights; the refusal to countenance in the public sphere the religious values of the past; the re-basing of multiculturalism upon a secular foundation; these are not insignificant

changes in the social framework.

They may bring many benefits for many people, but they express the loss of unity in our common life. They are proving the benign instruments of the dismantling of our shared, national life. Maybe it was not all down to the government of the last ten years, but it is a strange legacy for such a prosperous decade.



What was the biggest theme of the history of the Church of England in the twentieth century? The loss of faith after the First World War; the attempt at restoration after the Second; the strange obsession with Edward VIII's marriage and a horror of divorce for the next sixty years; the sexual revolution and the new ethics; the growth of liberalism and secularism; the rise and fall of ecumenism?

The one item which is rarely mentioned, for it is peculiar to the CoFE as a national church, was the systematic dismantling of the endowments of the ancient parishes. It was not without its merits, as many in our inner city parishes would acknowledge. No one could defend the huge disparities in wealth between some of the rural benefices and many of the urban centres of population. There was a real need for equity, for the richer to help the poorer, for a better stewardship of the inherited resources.

The biggest change was not, however, the regularization of a system in need of reform, but the deliberate if covert dismantling of parish endowment. For well over a thousand years, the churches and parishes of this country relied upon endowment, usually in land, in order to minister to those beyond its believing membership, to do the work of Christ, year in year out, within the community.

The twentieth century saw a well-meaning but fatal rise in the power of the dioceses, funded in part by what seems now the utterly reckless distribution of capital assets. It worked. Parishes were impoverished. Dioceses grew ever richer and more powerful. This was the history of the last century. Until the money ran out.

General Synod now has to face the issues of parsonages and pensions. Squandered resources in the twentieth century now mean scarce resources in the twenty-first. The desire, once again, to use capital for income (to sell the family silver) will be put forward vigorously, with mission-shaped zeal.

The Church is much more than the sum total of its buildings, it is true, but we should beware the asset strippers all the same. **ND**



Pay cuts all round

Luke Pacioli is aware of the dilemma faced by the Church Commissioners, the Pensions Board and the members of General Synod, as the struggle for cash begins in earnest

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I watched the General Synod debate on the Church Commissioners' great financial debacle. Two bishops seemed to sum up the Establishment attitude. Dr Jenkins, Bishop of Durham, sat outside the chamber, head in hands. One of his colleagues, his parting carefully manicured, gazed with contempt on the lay member who thought the trustees should take responsibility for the disaster which had happened on their watch. Neither spoke.

The bishops who took part in February's debate on the future of clergy pensions put up a better show. Their position is invidious. Bishops and senior staff receive a higher pension than parish clergy and as men close to retirement they will be less affected by the proposed pay cut. And a pay cut is what is proposed. Pensions are deferred income and under the current proposals any future rise in stipends will be more than offset by the reduced pensions package.

But the pensions debate is not just a headache for the Establishment. How much Commissioners' money is spent on pensions is part of the struggle for scarce resources – money – which will define what the church looks like for years to come.

This struggle split Synod. On one side were those who, like the Bishop of Worcester, believe that previous understandings given about the level of pensions should be honoured. The other side was led by the Archbishop's Council: their Pensions Report included a series of proposals of a type commonly used in business to mitigate the huge costs which the government has placed on pension funds.

But it is not just the government's fault. From an economic viewpoint clergy are a hybrid. They are in the private sector but do a caring/public sector job. The private sector has traditionally provided sufficient income to buy a pension. Caring/public sector jobs do not usually provide the income needed to buy a pension, which is why the state has traditionally promised public sector workers a good, state-funded pension. In the Eighties and Nineties the CofE tried to do the same for its clergy. This was both a matter of justice ('the labourer is worthy of his hire') and because when freehold for life was removed it was understood something had to be done about retirement housing. Today lack of money has led powerful voices to say the church can no longer provide a state-style pension to its low-paid caring professionals. Hence the package of three proposals put to Synod by the Archbishop's Council.

Proposal one is to decouple pensions from stipend levels. This is what the Conservative Government did when politicians began their infamous raid on the nation's pensions. At a national level it is now recognized that pensions and earnings need to rise together. So, if clergy pensions were decoupled from clergy incomes, this would be contrary to the national trend. And it would hit clergy hard because benefits such as dispensation from council tax are not included in the

stipend on which their pension is based. This means that at retirement, clergy cost of living goes up automatically without any allowance being made for this.

The second major proposal is the extension of the number of years before full pension entitlement, from thirty-seven to forty. With the tightness of funds, this probably cannot be avoided.

Thirdly, it is proposed to cap the maximum annual increase in pensions to 3.5% of that year's pension. In his presentation to Synod, Sean Farrell of the Pensions Board justified the 3.5% cap by saying that, thanks to the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee, RPI inflation is set to be no more than 3.5%.

Synod members rightly noted that RPI is not an appropriate measure to use because it does not reflect pensioners' inflation. Just as questionable is Farrell's assumption that inflation has been tamed. We might expect that claim from Gordon Brown, but no responsible pensions trustee could make that assumption. It was precisely this kind of complacent mistake which allowed the government to chip away at pension surpluses in the Nineties.

The Pensions Board's paper prior to the presentation at Synod is also worrying. There it was claimed the 3.5% cap was not a problem because if inflation ever did rise again, the government could require the Board to make pensions keep pace with inflation. But a sudden imposed increase in pensions would hurt the Board's investment strategy – it would lose money because it would be forced to reorganize its portfolio to raise extra income. Indeed, it is an abdication of responsibility for pension trustees to rely on the government in this way. So the 3.5% cap is a long term cut in pensions.

Yet, what can be done? There are parts of the CofE which are wealthy enough to get by. Rich parishes often make pension contributions for their vicar. The staff of some of our most ancient cathedrals benefit likewise. But for anybody not working with the rich or the well-endowed, where can the money come from? Either parishes must give more, which means they must grow, or the Church Commissioners must direct more of their income to clergy pensions.

And money spent providing the clergy with a pension (£102.7 million in 2005) cannot go on the Commissioners' non-pension spending. In 2005 this spending was £24.5 million on bishops, £6.6 million on cathedrals, £32.4 million on parishes (with £4.5 million on mission), £5 million on the Commissioners themselves and £1.6 million on the support of church buildings.

So who will lose out? The Synod debate focused on the threat to mission funding if the Commissioners redirected more funds to pensions. No one asked whether mission projects funded by the Commissioners had been successful. Or where the money came from in the first place. Or whether we need all the bishops. But they will do. The struggle for who gets what is on. **ND**

Promises, promises

George Austin looks back at how General Synod first established clergy pensions along with compulsory retirement, the undertakings they made then and the proposals now being presented

Church pensions and retirement housing matter to all clergy and lay-workers, retired or not, so the General Synod debates in July need to be followed closely, especially by the retired clergy who have no vote and no representation among those who will be making the decisions. But there is still time to lobby members.

There is no question that pensions have improved over the past 60 years, from the days when an incumbent paid his retired predecessor's pension out of his own, often inadequate, stipend. This ended in about 1950 and by 1980 the basic pension had risen to £2,000, with the following year seeing the largest annual increase ever of 25% to £2,500.

The announcement of this was made in a Synod debate in 1981 on a more radical report from a working party whose aim was to work 'towards a longer-term aspiration of a total pension equal to two-thirds of the Central Stipends Authority minimum stipend of the previous year.' This was eventually achieved, with the implication that this would be continued in a long-term hopeful future for the beneficiaries.

It seems now that this will change, with pension increases capped at the rate of inflation or at 3-5% on the previous year, whichever is the lower figure, 'rather than in line with increases to stipends.' The Pensions Board has advised pensioners that 'all future pension increases should be in line with increases in the retail price index, up to a maximum figure.'

In the long term this will mean that pensions in payment will fall in comparative value to stipends and those who have served the Church all their working lives will suffer. Even if it is financially necessary, it is nevertheless a regrettable trend in the Church of God.

The Pensions Board letter goes on to say that this 'would slightly reduce the pension payments the Church Commissioners make and allow them to provide more non-pension financial support to the Church.' This can surely have no other interpretation than that money is to be taken from pensioners and diverted to other expenditure. If that is indeed the case, it is not merely regrettable but quite appalling.

I hope that we may be given an indication of how much annual reduction is given to 'other expenditure' – bishops' expenses perhaps? – in order that those of us who give 10% of our income to church and charity may make the appropriate reductions.

In the February debate the Bishop of Ripon and Leeds stated that 'the full pension at the point of retirement will remain at two-thirds of stipend.' Does this mean that existing pensioners will over the years be on reduced pensions by comparison with those who are newly retired?

In other words, will existing pensions continue to be based on two-thirds of that year's stipend plus up to 3-5% (or lower if the RPI increase is less) or will

it be based on the initial two-thirds of stipend at the time of retirement? This is not clear from the Pension Board's round robin.

What of retirement housing? When the Synod in its early days decided on compulsory retirement at 70, it was realized that this could create considerable difficulties for poorer clergy and a working party (of which I was a member) was set up to try to find a satisfactory solution. The debate on its report and recommendations was held in February 1980, led by Dean Fenton Morley who had chaired the group.

He reported that in 1979, three-quarters of new pensioners had been able to arrange their accommodation privately, but that this left a considerable number who needed help. Clergy concerns had grown as a result of an 'escalating cost of housing which in 1979 rose by, on average, 29%.'

But even if only 25% of retiring clergy needed help with housing, that was a need which must be met. At that time the maximum mortgage allowed was £12,000, though as a speaker was to point out later in the debate, that was not quite half the average cost of a modest house (£26,000).

Under the CHARM scheme, the Pensions Board is now prepared to lend up to £125,000 towards retirement housing at a rate of 4% the first year and rising as pensions rise. Perhaps the present £125,000 seems a fair increase at 10-4 times in terms of inflation, though there are other problems.

In the February 2007 debate, it was pointed out that someone on a full church and state pension would have received about £16,000 p.a., putting them 'in the top 20% in terms of retirement income' – though it was added that they have to provide for their housing out of that. And there's the rub. By the age of 65, most people hope to have by then paid off their mortgage and so do not have that added burden.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the clergy should provide their own housing. Teachers and nurses have great problems in finding affordable housing in London but can at least choose less expensive areas in which to live. How would an incumbent there possibly afford to purchase his own house if his parish was in one of the many affluent areas where even a modest-sized house could cost at least £1m?

It is difficult even after retirement. If a clergyman has the basic total income mentioned above of £16,000, this will require an interest repayment on a £125,000 mortgage of £5,000 p.a. – about one-third of his annual assets. When the pension was raised in 1981 to £2,500, a Pensions Board mortgage of £12,000 at 4% would have cost £480 p.a., so that if with a state pension this became, say, £3,000, the interest would be only 16% of his total income. Not easy!

And when the scheme was introduced in the 1980s, the cost of housing was much less anyway,

this can surely have no other interpretation than that money is to be taken from pensioners and diverted to other expenditure

especially in the light of the housing inflation of the past decade. In 1996 we bought a retirement house with four bedrooms at 35% of the price at which it is now on the market. Put the other way, it has increased in value by 287%. That has been the common increase in those years, whereas the clergy stipend has perhaps increased by 50% and so the problem worsens.

There is another possible area of future difficulty. On 1 February 2007, the Commissioners announced that, following a competitive tender, they had 'sold their financial interest in a portfolio of housing loans' granted by the Pensions Board. They explained that it was a sale of their rights 'to receive income and capital receipts on the loans' and was not a sale of 'the bricks and mortar.'

Was this a decision by the Assets Committee acting alone or was it approved by the Board of Governors? During the 18 years I was a Commissioner, from 1978 until 1995, and a member of the Board for much of that time, I know that if anyone questioned actions of the Assets Committee, we were told firmly that it was not our business to do so. This lack of accountability was part of the reason for the financial disasters of the early 1990s.

So now the 1,300 retired clergy still

have their original equity share in the property, but the interest will be paid to a private company which will also gain from any increase in their share of the property's value when the beneficiaries of the loan eventually die.

The Commissioners have written to all the retired clergy concerned (that is, those with loans) to 'reassure them that their loan conditions with the Pensions Board remain unchanged.' Can it be certain that loans to new pensioners will enjoy the same loan conditions?

But the Church Commissioners are a charity, so their sale of this property portfolio is in a sense a privatization. The Commissioners must of course manage their huge funds like any other investment company – in their case not for shareholders but for the Church. A private company has a first duty to shareholders, and recent history – for example, in the denationalization of the railways – has shown how disastrous this can be sometimes for consumers, however highly reputable the company may be.

Although clearly the provision of housing loans had always meant that this was in a sense an investment in property, I had always regarded them as part of the charitable service the Commissioners gave to the Church and not a part of their

general property assets, such the Metro centre in which they then had a very large investment. It is an additional worry that this was clearly not the case.

On the matter of assets, the clergy have always lived in tied accommodation, of which their increasing value has been of no benefit to them but rather to the Church of England itself. If there are, say, 10,000 parsonage houses that 40 years ago were each valued then at an average estimate of £15,000 – £150m in total – their value now would surely modestly average £400,000 each, totalling some £4bn. The clergy may have had the 'advantage' of comfortable tied housing, rent and rates free, but the real long-term benefit has been to the general assets of the Church.

Retired clergy have cause to thank the Pensions Board which over the years has provided excellent pastoral care and concern for the Church's retired employees that has been second to none. In July, the Synod will again consider the plight of pensioners. No-one should doubt the good intentions of those seeking to balance the needs of those who have served the Church for so many years against the dire financial situation which this and many other pension schemes now face.

But it is hard not to wonder if for clergy pensioners there are storm clouds on the horizon. **ND**

Many readers will be carers, or may become carers in the future. This means that their lives become ordered around the needs of a family member or friend. This presents many spiritual challenges to the Christian. In a caring role, there must be a constant search for a point of balance between the needs of the person for whom we care and sustaining one's own essential needs for rest and reflection – for keeping on top of day-to-day business, and maintaining vital relationships in community and home.

The first step is to accept the vocation as a carer: for whatever reason, the Lord has put you in a situation where another person looks to you for practical help and comfort. Resentment and reluctance to receive this task leads to a bitterness of heart that sours everything. Accept with thanksgiving the practical service that it is possible to give and the fact that through this giving one makes a profound effect on the quality of another person's life. For whatever reason, you have been brought into a gospel and kingdom relationship. The Lord teaches 'it is better to give than to receive' and in the practical tasks we carry out as carers, we fulfil the new commandment: 'you are

Ghostly Counsel

Christian caring

Andy Hawes is Warden of Edenham Regional Retreat House

to do to one another what I have done for you.' Welcomed and accepted in this way, the role of a carer becomes a ministry of God's love and opens the carer up to an outpouring of God's grace. Remember the words of Jesus: 'whatever you do for the least of my little ones, you do also for me.' It is not at all unusual for carers to experience great joy and freedom in the act of caring.

Frustrations are bound to build up. Fatigue sets in and tempers become frayed and short. Make sure that you find someone to talk to who will listen to you, and pray with and for you. In a time of such spiritual, physical and emotional demands, lives can quickly become ill-disciplined and disordered. Now is a

good time to make use of the grace found in the confessional.

Everything and everyone in the situation must be surrounded by prayer. The endless practical details of caring can produce anxiety and frustration. Let these be a reason to let go and let God take control. Nothing is too small or insignificant to be placed within his loving purpose – remember that 'even the hairs of your head are numbered.' The irony is that the more you feel everything depends on you, the less it actually does. The whole experience of being a carer leads one to a deep realization of one's own need for care and support. In this way it can lead one along a path of humility to one where healing is found.

Being a carer sharpens up one's own sense of need. There is a clear call to find time to be still and rest in God's presence. There is a definite spiritual hunger that demands guidance and light from the Word of God and spiritual strength from the Body of Christ.

Being a carer is an invitation to come close to Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and gave himself up as the willing slave of all. God give us grace to love and care in him.

Ownership and power

*This is an abridgement of **The Venerable Normal Russell's** submission concerning the removal of the ownership of parsonages from incumbents in their parishes to dioceses and their finance men*

The second McClean Report recommended that the ownership of churches, churchyards and parsonage houses should be transferred by Measure from the freehold ownership of the incumbent to the relevant Diocesan Board of Finance. In the General Synod debate, it became clear that the proposal to transfer ownership in this way touched important chords of local loyalty and, though staunchly defended by the committee's representatives, it was agreed that in taking the process forward, the ownership of churches and churchyards should be left as they are.

An odd form of ownership

Rectories and vicarages raised somewhat different issues. One of the most serious concerns was that, should a diocese become insolvent, rectories and vicarages would become available to creditors if their title had been transferred to the Diocesan Board of Finance.

It does of course have to be acknowledged that 'ownership' by an incumbent is very different from what is normally thought of today as ownership of a house. Rectories and vicarages can perhaps most helpfully be seen as being held in trust to house the rector or vicar for the local parish or multi-parish benefice, *not* primarily for the diocese.

I was unable to see why, if a diocese could not manage its financial affairs competently, parishes should as a consequence lose the house held in trust for a resident incumbent. This point was taken and the current recommendation is that parsonage houses should be transferred to the ownership of Diocesan Parsonage Boards: they would not then form part of the corporate assets of the diocese, and should therefore not be available to creditors. However, I still believe that it would be better to leave things as they are for a combination of reasons.

Nothing proven

1. **The need for change has not been clearly demonstrated.** If there is a clear need for change in the ownership of rectories and vicarages, it has not been sufficiently clearly articulated for me to understand it. What reasons have been given?

(a) **It seemed like a good opportu-**

nity to tidy up the law. The driver for the Common Tenure enterprise was the 1999 Employment Relations Act. There was thought to be a need to address the terms and conditions on which clergy are (quasi) employed. But to do so did not require that the ownership of parsonage houses be transferred.

It may be that there is a case for taking a long, hard look at church housing generally. The issue of inadequate provision for clergy retirement is now widely recognized as being an urgent problem. These issues can be considered, but it has not been satisfactory to have them addressed as an appendix to clergy terms of service.

(b) **Common Tenure would not then be common.** There is great variety in the ownership of houses, with some being provided by the dioceses from the corporate funds of the DBF, some from glebe funds and some by the PCCs or other trusts. But the majority, and therefore the commonest type of housing, remains the 'benefice house,' even when the benefice is suspended.

One of the aims of introducing Common Tenure is the lifting of these suspensions and the restoration of security of office to those clergy who currently have no security as priests-in-charge. The overwhelming majority of clergy will then be incumbents in their benefices, occupying the commonest type of clergy housing we have in the Church of England. 'Common' need not necessarily mean 'uniform' in relation to property.

Always exceptions

Even with Common Tenure there will still be exceptions, e.g. service, school, college and hospital chaplains, and clergy in royal peculiars. Much as I support the generality of Common Tenure proposals, it is important not to insist on Common Tenure in the small number of cases where it does not easily fit. This could well distort other provisions of importance. The justice of Common Tenure has to be held in balance with other legitimate considerations.

(c) **As the diocese carries the repair liability for parsonage houses, it makes sense for the diocese to own them.** Why? Most of the revenue income of dioceses comes from the parishes via the parish

share. Indeed, in most dioceses, dilapidations expenditure is listed in diocesan publicity as one of the major items for which parish share is needed.

The CofE would be unwise to embrace this as a principle. It would offer an open invitation to Government to transfer school assets by Act of Parliament to the Department of Education or Local Education Authorities, as church schools are almost entirely funded by central and local government.

(d) **The form of ownership is arcane and it is not really ownership as we normally understand it.** Both assertions are true, but it is always unwise to rush to dismiss the wisdom of the ages as being simply old-fashioned. In both church and state, constitutional change should only be undertaken with care and its implications fully thought through. One does not have to be a Marxist, to see that the centralization of between £3 billion and £4 billion of dispersed assets (of comparable scale to the assets of the Church Commissioners!) would have major constitutional implications for the CofE.

There is actually little that an incumbent can do as 'owner' of the vicarage without the agreement of others. The significance of his/her 'ownership' lies more in what the incumbent can stop others doing – sometimes negative, as archdeacons well know, but not always so.

Further considerations

2. **Checks and balances.** The polity of the Church of England, as it has evolved over the centuries, has allowed a wide range of traditions and churchmanships to flourish. Although not a designer masterpiece, the oddities of patronage, security of tenure and the particular form of dispersed ownership of churches, churchyards and parsonage houses are part and parcel of the checks and balances within the CofE. This polity is quite different from the centralized power structures and relatively monochrome churchmanship evident in at least some provinces of the Anglican Communion. It is worth defending.

3. **A domino effect?** Transferring the ownership of parsonage houses from incumbents to Diocesan Parsonage Boards requires amendment to a great deal of church law. We are fortunate to

have skilled drafters of legislation working for the Archbishops' Council, but the scale and complexity of the church law involved is such that unintended consequences are almost inevitable. Some of these consequences are probably unpredictable. Is all this wise when it is completely unnecessary? Some cans of worms are best left unopened.

4. **The issue of power.** It is said that history is written by the victors. When there are serious disagreements and bitter conflicts in the Church, as is sadly the case within the Anglican Communion at this time, without proper constitutional protections those who command the majority of whatever stripe are apt to claim the property. Most of us would like to think that the unseemly property grabs which have been reported elsewhere would not happen in the CofE.

The wisdom of ages

Has not the local ownership of property been a significant factor in the development and protection of 'our way'? It has given the clergy, over many generations, the security to assert unpopular theological beliefs and to defend liturgi-

cal practices with which their bishops and archdeacons have not always been comfortable. This is not too great a price to pay for the healthy diversity of the traditions that have renewed the Church's life, when they might otherwise have been stifled by fear, or simply driven out.

5. **Legitimate clergy concerns in the current climate.** There are two questions which have been raised and to which, to the best of my knowledge, no adequate answer has yet been given, viz what would be the implications for incumbents of the transfer of the 'ownership' of parsonage houses to Diocesan Parsonage Boards should a diocese have an overweening bishop: (i) if there were to be no realistic provision for clergy unable to accept the validity of the orders of a woman bishop? (ii) in the case of English clergy finding themselves in a similar predicament to those currently committed to a traditional understanding of faith and morals in (say) the Diocese of Virginia, when the bishop is able to assert that parsonage houses belong to the diocese?

6. **Security of vesting in Diocesan Parsonage Boards.** In almost all dioceses, the Parsonages Board has in practice become a sub-committee of the Diocesan Board

of Finance. Although it has a separate legal existence, in many places that has almost been forgotten and it is often seen as the Buildings Committee of the DBF. Moreover, sometimes at the behest of the auditors, many dioceses have for some time been treating parsonage houses as part of the corporate assets of the DBF on their balance sheet.

I have been advised that were parsonage houses to be subject to a charge and used effectively as the assets of the DBF, or seen by outsiders as assets of the DBF, the fact that the property has been transferred by Measure to the ownership of the Diocesan Parsonages Board might not be upheld against the claims of creditors, particularly in the case of a floating charge.

This is a matter on which there is more than one legal opinion among ecclesiastical lawyers. Unfortunately, this fact has not yet found its way into a public arena. Both the Revision Committee and the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament would be helped if the differences in legal opinion could be pursued further in an appropriate professional forum, before the draft legislation returns to the floor of the General Synod. **ND**

Pentecost reflections

Hugh Baker remembers when a sermon became the finest political manifesto for building a just and hard-working society

Like me, you may have had glossy little leaflets through your door at April's end, urging you to vote for...whoever. Unsurprisingly, we have grown suspicious of politicians' glowing promises, for the worst examples of how humans treat one another have followed from times when the populace have believed them.

What would you have read, had you received a manifesto from Paris 1793, or St Petersburg 1917, or Germany early 1930s? The future would have glowed with promise, as 'the detritus of the past' was swept away.

It all ends in tears, of course, and maybe we in Britain have learnt our lesson. For a decade, the Party most singularly instrumental in pushing for fairness and equality has ruled...and we now know that the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer...and we are not bovered.

There are two contradictory impulses. One is to share; to be kind and caring, to have laws built on justice and equality, to care for the poor, the sick and the mentally disabled. The other is to reward hard work, enterprise and talent, believing that the overall effect on our prosperity is worth the disparities of

wealth which may result. We see these warring impulses written into the very shape of our national politics.

New Labour's Third Way was an attempt not only to hold the middle ground (and, therefore, power) in British politics, but to combine the strengths of these two seeming incompatibles. Wouldn't it be lovely to have them both: to have a society that was kind, compassionate and sharing, yet encouraged hard work, honesty and virtue?

It happened once. There were people who '...were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need' [Acts 2.44-5]. Did this 'socialism' produce the amoral indolence of which many of us now despair in our own nation? Seemingly not, for their ties with God and each other were strengthened, not weakened: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer...They broke bread and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people' [Acts 2.42, 46-7a].

What brought all this about? Preachers,

take heart! It was a sermon. From Acts 2.1 onwards, we see a build up of God's influence on men which crystallizes in this 'divine society'. Firstly (verses 1 to 13) there is the empowering of the existing disciples by the Holy Spirit, followed by Peter's explanation (verses 14 to 40) to those who have observed what has happened. God is at work, laying the foundations in individual hearts of the corporate building; 'When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said...' 'Brothers, what shall we do?' [2.37]; 'Peter replied 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you...for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' [2.38].

Here we see described the foundations on which every Christian life is built. You and I are the (sometimes) unimpressive continuation of that first Spirit-powered community.

Once we were sufficient Salt and Light in this country for there to be created a National Health Service, which embodied Christian values in the heart of how we treated one another. Over half a century later, those values (or rather, the faith on whose existence they are dependent) are deemed to be redundant.

We shall only have Acts 2.42-7 insofar as we have had Acts 2.1-41 first. To have Acts 2.42-7 for ourselves, is the Church's task, and privilege.