

## POOR OLD VICARS CAN'T DO EVERYTHING!

The ecclesiastical correspondent of The Times recently pointed out that **THE CHURCH IS SET TO LOSE A TENTH OF ITS CLERGY IN FIVE YEARS** and bemoaned the fact that the traditional model of a vicar in every parish is over. I responded by writing:

*"For those of us living in rural areas it has been over for 40 years or more. I worship, and sometimes conduct services in a benefice with a population on 1,600 with ten village churches and one stipendiary priest.*

*The result is not a disaster because the Church is not the clergy but Christian people. In addition to churchwardens the leadership of each church is in the hands of lay people. It has to be. I used to be in charge of five of these churches and even then the church members had to take full responsibility for their own church. I never attended a church council meeting - I had no need to. Church members were quite capable of running their own show - they did not need a priest to take the chair. Nor did I spend a lot of time visiting people, for that purpose we had lay pastoral assistants, properly trained by myself and a local scheme recognised by the bishop. I considered myself to be in the background and available when necessary to anyone.*

*I saw my job as threefold. First to be responsible for prayer and worship, and to train Readers and others to do so. Second to encourage and train ordinary church members (not just a few officially recognised LPAs) to play their full part in the ministry of Christ to the local community. Third, to act as coordinator, making sure as far as possible, that we had an aim, and knew where we were going. I like to think that all that would have happened whether I had one church or far more.*

*The Church of England does not seem to understand this. Most people still expect the poor old vicar to do everything - except flower arranging and Sunday School teaching (if he was married his wife could do that!) The result was that being a faithful church member merely involved putting your hand in your pocket and sitting (quietly) in a pew once a week. Not at all like the community that Jesus founded.*

*The C of E - and those who hardly, if ever, worship in public - need to learn that ministry is the responsibility of the whole people of God. It is not our business just to pay up and go to church regularly and let the vicar do everything. Christ is calling us to be the Church, his Body, all the time and every day.*

*Until we learn this lesson, and discover afresh how Jesus himself worked, we shall continue to moan about money and the shortage of clergy. It is a lesson that God intends to teach us, and until we do, we shall continue to struggle and retrench.*

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The positive response I received has been enormous, including two bishops, but mainly a large number of frustrated laity, who were longing to work for Christ and the church but felt that they were inhibited from doing so by the clergy. Years ago the evangelist, Canon David Watson, suggested that the clergy were acting as "corks in the bottle" preventing the growth of the church. I fear that is still the case in many places.