

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Third Delegated Legislation Committee

DIOCESAN STIPENDS FUNDS
(AMENDMENT) MEASURE

Tuesday 13 June 2023

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Saturday 17 June 2023

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: DR RUPA HUQ

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| † Afriyie, Adam (<i>Windsor</i>) (Con) | † Lewis, Clive (<i>Norwich South</i>) (Lab) |
| † Blomfield, Paul (<i>Sheffield Central</i>) (Lab) | † Mak, Alan (<i>Havant</i>) (Con) |
| † Blunt, Crispin (<i>Reigate</i>) (Con) | † Metcalfe, Stephen (<i>South Basildon and East Thurrock</i>) (Con) |
| † Bradshaw, Mr Ben (<i>Exeter</i>) (Lab) | † Selous, Andrew (<i>Second Church Estates Commissioner</i>) |
| Bruce, Fiona (<i>Congleton</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Cat (<i>Lancaster and Fleetwood</i>) (Lab) |
| Byrne, Liam (<i>Birmingham, Hodge Hill</i>) (Lab) | † Tami, Mark (<i>Alyn and Deeside</i>) (Lab) |
| † Double, Steve (<i>Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury</i>) | † Tarry, Sam (<i>Ilford South</i>) (Lab) |
| † Eustice, George (<i>Camborne and Redruth</i>) (Con) | Stuart Ramsay, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Hart, Sally-Ann (<i>Hastings and Rye</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |
| † Henderson, Gordon (<i>Sittingbourne and Sheppey</i>) (Con) | |

Third Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 13 June 2023

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure

2.30 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure (HC 1413).

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I hope that you will permit a very brief piece of historical context setting on the Measure before us today. In medieval times, clergy were paid mainly from income from land owned by the Church, known as glebe land, from the Latin *gleba*, meaning soil. The amount of land varied from parish to parish and from 1571 onwards, the amount of land a parish owned was recorded in a *glebe terrier*. With the industrial revolution and the growth of cities, wealthy industrialists were often willing to give significant amounts of money to support the local church, often helping to build and endow the church in question, such as, for example, St Mattias church in Stocksbridge, which opened in 1890 thanks to the generosity of Samuel Fox, the founder of the local Stocksbridge works.

To come forward a bit, the Endowments and Glebe Measure 1976 transferred glebe land from the parishes to diocesan boards of finance in exchange for the payment of a standard stipend to each member of clergy in the diocese. That left a very unequal distribution of wealth, with the Oxford diocese, for example, having £166 million in its diocesan stipends funds capital account, and Lincoln having £100 million and the highest assets per capita of any diocese. At the other end of the scale, Liverpool, for example, had only £1.6 million in its diocesan stipends funds capital account. Those are all figures for the end of 2019.

Regardless of their wealth, each of the 42 dioceses in the Church of England is required, under the Diocesan Stipends Funds Measure 1953, to maintain two accounts. The first is a capital account that holds the glebe land, legacies and other assets. The second is an income account that holds the proceeds from the capital account. The funds in the income account may be used only for specified statutory purposes, the principal of which is the paying of parish clergy stipends. Today's amending Measure is concerned with the income account only.

The existing legislative position means that the funds in the income account can be used only within the diocese. In 2020, the Church began to look at ways to enable a richer diocese to support a poor diocese by way of donating funds directly for the payment of clergy stipends. The recommendation of the Church's Mutuality in Finances Group was to bring a simple Measure for Synod's consideration that would remove the geographic restriction on the use of the funds so as to enable one diocese to donate to another. This brief Measure does that by amending the 1953 stipends funds Measure by inserting a new single section 5B.

Subsection (1) of the new section provides that where a diocesan board of finance is satisfied that funds that sit in its stipends income account do not need to be used for another statutory purpose it may transfer those funds out of the diocese. Subsection (2) provides that when a transfer takes place, it may only be directly to the stipends income account of another Church of England diocese or to the Archbishops' Council or another Church charity.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend—and the Minister, I guess, at the moment—for giving way. I have one quick question. When the Measure says that these stipends might be transferred to other charities or organisations, do they have to be within the remit of the Church of England or could the money be given to Oxfam?

Andrew Selous: I am the Second Church Estates Commissioner rather than the Minister, so I am speaking on behalf of the Church of England rather than the Government, to clarify my hon. Friend's first point. The answer to his second question is that the funds can go only to another diocese or another part of the Church of England specifically for parish clergy—not for central funds, not for diocesan administration, but entirely for the benefit of clergy in another diocese.

As I was saying, subsection (3) requires that where the Archbishops' Council or another charity receives such funds, they must decide which diocese or dioceses to transfer the funds to, and then do so directly to the stipends income account of that diocese. It is important to emphasise that this power is entirely permissive; there will be no obligation on a diocese to use it. That said, the Church is confident that those dioceses that are able to be generous will be so.

The Measure has received overwhelming favour in the General Synod, and the Ecclesiastical Committee, which is composed of Members of both Houses, including myself and the right hon. Member for Exeter, considered the matter in its sitting on 25 April, and we found the Measure to be expedient. I hope it will also find favour with this Committee.

To reiterate the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor, we are talking only about money for the payment of clergy stipends, meeting small expenses in relation to the maintenance of clergy houses, paying national insurance contributions for clergy, and paying some small expenses of a parish in vacancy. On transparency and accountability, each diocese has a diocesan synod made up of elected clergy and laity in the diocese, who will have to consider and give their approval of these measures. There is therefore democratic, if you like, scrutiny, diocese by diocese, of what is proposed. We estimate that dioceses in the top quartile will help those in the lower quartile, perhaps with the Archbishops' Council acting as a sort of broker to enable that to happen.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I hope it is in order to ask the hon. Gentleman representing the Church Commissioners whether the Church of England has done a gender pay audit of clergy, and whether there is a gender pay gap.

Andrew Selous: If what I say is incorrect, I shall write to the hon. Lady, but as far as I am aware, we do not distinguish by gender. The rate for our clergy is the rate

for our clergy, whether they are a woman, a man, or have another declared gender. Given that this Measure is purely concerned with parish clergy, I feel I can say with complete confidence that there is absolutely no gender pay gap. What the Measure is about is helping poorer dioceses—the Liverpools, the Newcastles and so on—to receive some largesse from other dioceses like Oxford and Lincoln. I hope she is reassured.

2.37 pm

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq.

I enjoyed the history lesson. It was very helpful to us all. Clearly this is a highly technical Measure to which we have no objection. This is probably the first example of levelling up actually working under this Government, so we will not vote against the Measure and we wish it well.

2.38 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I hope I do not strain the Committee's patience by asking my hon. Friend the Second Church Estates Commissioner how the Measure will work in practice. His gilded words were that the Archbishops' Council may act as a broker, but all the quiet pressure that can be brought to bear on bishops and others in authority who have a career in the Church of England and perhaps have more attractive posts ahead of them may influence their decisions. How will they be gently persuaded to part with their funds? If it is via the archbishops' funds, might it not, in practice, end up more a mechanism of centralisation of Church funds into the archbishops' funds than one of distribution?

Without provoking the concern of the hon. Member for Ilford South, I believe that my cousin, his father, will possibly be in receipt of some of these funds. I am not sure what the state of the funding is in the relevant diocese, but I just wonder how this works in practice. Is the salary bill of the Church of England in the wider public interest for us to reinforce? Do we not have quite enough of them already?

2.40 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It might have been helpful if the explanatory notes had been available for Members to have a little look at before the debate. I have a similar question to the one that the hon. Member for Reigate just asked: how will the brokerage work, and how will we avoid a situation where individual dioceses or bishops feel under pressure, for whatever reason, to do the right thing?

I also wish to make an appeal to Church House for full transparency about the figures. It would be much easier for people to accept some of the redistribution—in principle, that is a very good idea for the reasons that the Second Church Estates Commissioner has outlined—if the relative wealth of dioceses was made public and the public and parishioners could have access and make comparisons, so that there is not mischief making in dioceses, with people saying, "We're much poorer than the diocese next door, but we seem to be paying more into the pot."

It would also be helpful if the Second Church Estates Commissioner clarified what he said about charities. He referred to them a couple of times but he gave the impression afterwards that this money could be used

only for clergy stipends in relation to a much more narrow range of things. He also confirmed, I think, that diocesan synods will have a veto. My understanding was that that had not been accepted by Synod because it thought that that would make the situation too bureaucratic. Perhaps he can just double-confirm that diocesan synods would have a veto on this matter. And at what level is the initial decision taken? Is it made by the diocesan board of finance?

2.42 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The hon. Member for Reigate gave me a decent segue into discussing this matter, and I want to raise two issues. First, there is a bit of important historical context. I would speak in favour of the proposals if they were about making the finances of the Church of England more egalitarian. Historically, there have been far wealthier dioceses across the whole of England. In fact, when my father moved from being the area dean in Redbridge in my Ilford South seat, he went from St John the Evangelist just over the border to Barking, where he became the rector of St Margaret's. Historically, St Margaret's was the seat of William the Conqueror when he first came to England to begin his conquest, but for many years—unfortunately, probably just before my father moved there—it paid a stipend that was more than the Archbishop of Canterbury received. I give that little memoire as a way of illustrating the discrepancies in wealth and power in many parts of the Church of England.

That leads me nicely to the question on which I want some reassurances. I talk to many clergy—not just through my family networks—including in the diocese of Chelmsford. It has been brought to my attention on a number of occasions that many clergy—not those heading towards retirement, but those in earlier stages of their career—are being made redundant, and they are regularly seeking support and advice from the vicars' section, I suppose, of Unite the union. I seek reassurance that the measure might mean that we see fewer redundancies. The situation is a bit different—I do not know whether vicars can go on strike—but it is certainly concerning that vicars have to join a trade union, rightly, to fight back against the Church of England, which people would have thought would be a fairly benevolent power in making sure that egalitarian standards were upheld.

I would like to hear reassurance that the redistribution of wealth across the Church of England will mean that we see fewer redundancies and that grassroots clergy in parishes—particularly in poorer parishes—are given the support that they need to continue their great work.

2.44 pm

Andrew Selous: I shall try to go through everyone's questions, but if I do not answer them satisfactorily, please intervene on me again, because there were quite a few—I tried to note them down as we went through.

I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate that the Oxford diocese, for example, has already tried to be generous, but because we need clarity on the law—so what they do is legal—we have this measure today. A willingness has already been demonstrated by the wealthier dioceses to do this, so I am not really fearful of what he suggests. We are talking about the remuneration of

[Andrew Selous]

parish priests, and I think the Church of England as a national organisation, which, through the Church Commissioners, already moves money towards poorer communities, will welcome the measure as an additional action to promote a policy that is already in place. Salaries of clergy are incredibly important. They are and will remain a priority.

I note the point that the right hon. Member for Exeter made about the explanatory notes. I am sorry that they were not available in printed form. I have spoken to House and Church officials and we will try to ensure that they are available in print in future, so I ask the right hon. Gentleman to accept my apology. They are available on the website, but that is not quite good enough and they should be here in paper form for Members.

Crispin Blunt: Will my hon. Friend give a little more historical context about the size of congregation per stipendiary rector or priest? How big is the flock of those who attend a church with a priest for guidance, compared with, say, 1900, 1950, 1975 and today?

Andrew Selous: I do not have those figures in front of me because they are not strictly relevant to the Measure. I have the populations of each diocese—I referred earlier to the amounts per capita in each diocese. Again, the Church of England publishes attendance figures, so they are publicly available, but because they are not germane to the Measure, I do not have them in front

of me. The amounts in diocesan stipends funds are a matter of public record. The figures that I cited were from 31 December 2019—slightly out of date, but I do not suppose they have changed significantly. They can be looked at.

On the question about diocesan synods, they do not have a veto, so I did not explain myself as clearly as I should have done. If a diocese proposes to move money from its diocesan stipends fund to another poorer diocese, that money will be in that diocese's budget, and the whole budget goes before the diocesan synod. Just as we have a debate in the House on the Budget, so, diocese by diocese, clergy and laity who are elected to the synod in each diocese will have an opportunity to question what is happening.

On the comments of the hon. Member for Ilford South, it is always a massive sadness when we do not have enough clergy. I hope that the Measure will lead to the retention of more clergy, or the ability to employ more clergy. It is one more means, alongside parish giving, where the majority of our income comes from, as well as the Commissioners' money, which contributes about 18% of the Church's funds, to help ensure that clergy are properly looked after. It is absolutely our intention to provide as many clergy as we can.

I hope that I have satisfactorily answered the questions put to me, and I commend the Measure to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

2.48 pm

Committee rose.

