

To: all clergy, PTOs, churchwardens, PCC secretaries and readers

Dear colleagues,

Over the weekend there was a report about the Diocese of Truro on the BBC Politics South West programme. We know that many of you will have been as concerned as Bishop Hugh and myself by what you saw and heard. We want to take this opportunity to reassure you and to explain some of the background and set the record straight on the many inaccuracies the programme contained.

The report was alarming for a number of reasons but most obviously its lack of balance and the failure to properly investigate a series of untested and unquestioned assertions about the diocese made by 'campaigners'.

Much of the time was given to four speakers from a campaign group, three of whom have no connection with the church in Cornwall or with wider Cornish society. The diocese, on the other hand, despite the seriousness of the statement made by campaigners, was given the opportunity to field a single speaker, and nobody from our local churches who might have given a more balanced view.

We have spoken to the BBC to express our serious concern. We also want to set the record straight, as this kind of misinformation does not help our churches and our important, and sometimes demanding, work of growing the church in a culture that is less interested in religion than it once was.

The report claimed 'MPs from across the region are concerned that the established church is deliberately cutting the number of priests serving rural areas while earmarking the money used for their salaries for other things.' Despite introducing the report as being about 'the region' it went on to focus entirely on Cornwall, while reverting consistently to speakers from other areas. This confusion between national, regional and local was apparent throughout the report, for instance in the choice to interview two MPs, neither of whom represent Cornish constituencies.

So that you are aware, Bishop Hugh and I have made a point of briefing our local Cornish MPs on what is happening in the diocese. It is perhaps not a coincidence then that the programme did not feature any of our MPs.

Furthermore, it is not true that the diocese is 'deliberately cutting the number of priests'. On the Way provided a clear, transparent and open process by which deaneries have drawn up plans for their future, and diocesan resources, including finances, are now being invested in those plans - the vast majority in and through parishes.

Nor is it true that money earmarked for stipends is being used for 'other things'. We are governed by Charity commission rules and have clear and proper processes in place to ensure that all our finances are spent for their right purpose.

The reporter went on to talk about 'Controversial plans to reorganise the church in Cornwall' and then cut to an interview with a parishioner in a church in the diocese. The speaker told the interviewer that there had not been a priest in the church for nine years. That immediately makes it abundantly clear that this has nothing to do with any of the current plans apparently being reported on - after all, On the Way began two years ago. In fact, the church in question is in a unique situation, for unique reasons and should never have been used as an example in this report. It is mischievous of those who approached the BBC to have offered this church as if it were typical, and we are disappointed in the level of journalism which did not seek to ask basic questions about their suitability for interview.

The reporter continued, 'The diocese is proposing a series of changes called 'On the Way' which will see some vicars looking after as many as 15 or 20 churches. They say it's vital to help modernise the church'. This is factually incorrect in at least three ways.

First, the diocese is not proposing a series of changes called 'On the Way'. The bishops asked every deanery to take part in a process of planning for a fruitful and sustainable future, in the face of serious challenges, and this process was called 'On the Way'. The plans that emerged were developed locally in each deanery and not by 'the diocese'.

Second, while two of our 12 deaneries will see new patterns of ministry with stipendiary clergy leading teams of ordained and lay people over areas that will include more than ten churches, **ten deaneries will not**. The lack of nuance in the report made it sound as if this was the norm.

Thirdly, nobody has ever said that On the Way or any of the work currently underway is 'vital to help modernise the church'. The Saints Way instead talked about digging deep into our Cornish inheritance to discern a Christ-like church for a fruitful and sustainable future. The difference in tone and content is important.

The report then introduced Chris Loder, MP for West Dorset. He was overtly critical of the church for reasons which have nothing to do with the church in Cornwall or the issues supposedly being addressed in the report.

For instance, Mr Loder made a series of sweeping statements including that ‘when people see here, in the Houses of Parliament, bishops having very strong opinions - you could say pontificating - on legislation here in parliament, rather than focussing on the health and wellbeing of the church of which they are leaders, it understandably is causing great concern.’

It is very difficult to see what this has to do with the subject of the BBC report. Bishops are constitutionally required to be present in the Houses of Parliament, where it is their role to have opinions on legislation. Mr Loder may not like the presence of bishops, and/or their views on legislation presented by the government, but that is nothing to do with the issues under discussion in the report.

Furthermore, his suggestion that bishops’ presence in the Houses of Parliament somehow detracts from their ability to care for the health and wellbeing of churches in their dioceses, as if the first inevitably makes the second impossible, is bizarre - and, even if it were true, **neither of our bishops are in the House of Lords.**

The report moved on to an interview with Ben Bradshaw, MP for Exeter. He claimed that ‘there is money in the pot that is not being used to support and appoint clergy and parishes are losing their clergy and you’re getting these huge mega-parishes that are unmanageable.’ Again there was no scrutiny of these broad brush claims, nor whether ‘mega-parishes’ are the norm that seemed to be suggested by the comment, nor what is being done to ensure that all our clergy roles are manageable.

A fourth person then spoke representing ‘Save the Parish Campaign’. He spoke about the Church in Wales where, he said, ‘they did about 10 or 15 years ago what is being proposed in the Diocese of Truro’. This is clearly untrue; the Church in Wales is different to the church in Cornwall and their plans, made more than a decade ago, were not ‘what is being proposed in the Diocese of Truro’. He also repeated the claim about mega-parishes, as if this is the sum total of our work for fruitfulness and sustainability across the 12 deanery plans.

A final brief clip gave 29 seconds of input from Bishop Hugh. It then cut back to the studio for discussion with the two Devon MPs.

As a diocese, we, as a whole have committed to there being more Christians of every age and background, worshipping God and serving the people of Cornwall,

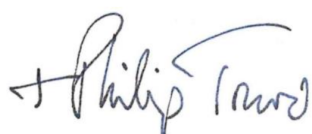
especially the most deprived, and to supporting Church communities in Cornwall of every size, tradition, character and style that are confident in their calling to worship, witness and service.

We have 12 deanery plans in place to move towards these goals, and a diocesan plan which describes in detail how we will support you and your churches in your ministry.

We always welcome feedback on everything that is going on. Bishop Hugh and I are about halfway through a programme of deanery visits to meet with you in your deaneries to talk face-to-face. We also have a dedicated email for anyone with comments or questions to contact us: feedback@truro.anglican.org

We want to take this opportunity to thank you for your faithfulness, hard work, dedication and for the support you have shown us.

God bless



Bishop Philip



Bishop Hugh

THE RT REVD PHILIP MOUNSTEPHEN
BISHOP OF TRURO

Lis Escop
Feock
Truro
TR3 6QQ

Telephone 01872 862 657
Email office@truro.anglican.org
Website www.trurodiocese.org.uk

