

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Summer 2002 No. 85

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

Defending the local Church

David Phillips

Church Society Trust has been granted leave to appeal to the Privy Council against a decision of the Church Commissioners. The Commissioners had agreed to accept a pastoral scheme put forward by the Gloucester Diocese in relation to the Trust parishes of Meysey Hampton, Marston Meysey and Castle Eaton which would be merged into the larger neighbouring parish of Fairford. The PCCs of all the Churches concerned together with other individuals had petitioned the Church Commissioners to reject or at least modify the proposed scheme, however the scheme was approved. Through all this some of the members of the Churches have become very dispirited as they have felt that the Diocesan and national Church machinery were not really interested in their views or concerns. Therefore, the Trust believed it right for us to seek leave to appeal not simply because of our own patronage rights but in order to safeguard gospel ministry and to ensure that local churches are the focus of the life of the Church of England. At the time of writings it looks as though the case will be heard by three judges sometime in the Autumn.

There are five points on which the Trust will appeal:

1) The scheme as proposed does not pay proper regard to the distinctive churchmanships of the parishes involved. The tradition of Meysey Hampton et al. (under the sole patronage of CST) has been conservative evangelical whereas the tradition of Fairford is liberal-catholic. The Commissioners declared in their report that churchmanship was not an issue!

2) The scheme as proposed will lead to the marginalization of the parishes of Meysey Hampton, Marston Meysey and Castle Eaton. Fairford is a larger village and it is clear that with time these three villages will just become outposts. Indeed the Commissioners report acknowledged this. Our desire is to see gospel work continue in these villages and we believe that the best way forward is for them to preserve a distinctive identity.

3) The scheme as proposed does not provide any assurances that the parishes or Church Society Trust will have any say in the appointment of future ministers for Meysey Hampton, Marston Meysey and Castle Eaton. The plan for the immediate future would be for an NSM or house for duty minister to be posted in Meysey Hampton but under the Vicar of Fairford. We have been told that everyone will have a say in this appointment, although in the end it will be up to the Vicar and Bishop. However, we know of far too many instances where Dioceses ignore both legislation and the Bishops' codes of practice to believe that an assurance is satisfactory.

4) The sub-committee of the Church Commissioners which conducted the visit was not sufficiently independent in order to consider the case fairly. This was a hard point to raise but one which has deeply concerned the Trust. The Chairman of the sub-committee had been instrumental in pushing through a suspension and appointment in another Trust parish against our wishes and such that we had to complain about the abuse of the system. (Although not part of our application for leave to appeal we have subsequently realised that the sub-committee consisted of an Archdeacon, a clergywoman and an employee of another Diocese. We do not think that this inspires people to believe that the interest of parishes and laity are paramount in their thinking.)

5) *The way in which such proposals were handled in this case and so many others is tending to alienate parishes and contribute to the decline of the Church.* This is all too apparent in this case. Indeed this is the main point we would wish to draw out of the whole experience and many others but sadly it is unlikely that the Privy Council will take a view on this. The parishes have felt all along that a Diocesan strategy was being imposed on them. This strategy is driven by clergy numbers and to a lesser extent in Gloucester by finance. However, the decisions about deployment and about how money given in local churches is to be used to provide ministry is not being taken locally. It needs to be remembered that in the Church of England it is only very recently that the payment of clergy has been centralised and since then, whether as consequence or not, the church has seen continued decline. It is our conviction that churches, even small churches, must be given a much clearer and greater say over their future. To impose grand plans from outside will serve only one purpose – to destroy the Church at the local level. We have said many times that this Diocese and many others appear to only have a policy for managing decline, but do not realise that their policy is actually accelerating decline. Giving the power back to the parishes is essential if we are to stop the bureaucrats organising us into oblivion.