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WHO SHOULD OWN THE PARSONAGE?

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At present the parish Church, graveyard and Benefice house is freehold property and is therefore in a sense owned by the parish incumbent. Obviously their ownership is very particular and there are all sorts of rules about their rights and duties as the owner. Whilst this may seem a rather peculiar arrangement it is one of those aspects of being a national and established Church that reflect the character of the Church. The buildings are not owned by a national body or regional body, nor are they generally owned by the congregation or a local trust, but they are owned by an individual officeholder on behalf of the people; someone who is appointed to minister to the people locally.

Early in 2005 the General Synod looked at proposals to transfer the ownership from the incumbent to some other entity. This did not go down well and, in effect, the Synod rejected the proposals in relation to Church and graveyard but left open the possibility in relation to the Benefice house. It should be noted that the houses of Team ministers and of Curates are not generally owned by the Benefice; the Diocesan Board of Finance already owns most of these.

In November the Synod returned to this idea as part of a package of proposals in relation to clergy terms of service. The plan is to change from clergy being freeholders and give them something called 'Common Tenure'. The clergyman who holds Common Tenure would be a corporation sole and would then hold the freehold of the Church and graveyard for so long as he held the office.

However, the proposal was still put that the Benefice house should be transferred to the Diocesan Parsonages Board (not the Board of Finance). There is some logic to this since the DBP already has certain duties in relation to the Benefice houses. Although it should be noted that the legal responsibilities still rest with the Incumbent and it is perfectly possible for him to take the initiative in looking after the property and merely apply to the Board for any finance to facilitate this. With the passage of time the Diocesan bodies have bought and sold properties, provided new ones for new parishes and put a lot of money into maintenance. Nevertheless, the origin of the clergy houses is usually in the local Church. They were often part of the original freehold properties provided by the local landowner who would often be the patron. Moreover, the funding used by the DBF to buy and maintain properties comes largely from the parishes themselves (by way of parish share) or from historic assets (most of which were taken off the parishes in the 1970s) or from the sale of other clergy houses. Thus whilst it may be true that the Church has seen Diocesan Parsonages Boards as a convenient way of administering properties, there is no need for them to actually own the properties.

In the vote in General Synod a motion was put that would have effectively ensured that clergy houses remain as part of the freehold of the benefice. This motion was defeated but it was very close. Since this proposal will form part of a larger package there will be a difficult question to ask about whether this one proposal should go ahead. If it does, those who are strongly opposed would need to have it removed, which could prove difficult at that stage, or would be forced to vote against the whole package. Since final approval will require 2/3rds of each of the three houses of Synod it is possible that enough people would vote against in order to see the property remain locally owned.