



News Release

26 February 2007
10am For immediate release.

The £3.5 billion church robbery

The General Synod of the Church of England will tomorrow debate plans to remove nearly 9,000 clergy houses from local ownership and put them in the hands of the Diocesan Boards. These houses have been estimated to be worth £3.5bn.

The proposals are just one of the controversial features of the new, but unexcitingly named, Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) Measure.

At present most clergy houses form part of the 'benefice', which is in effect a local trust for which the incumbent (vicar or rector) is the sole trustee. Almost all these houses were provided from local funds, many being gifted by the historic patrons of a parish. The clergyman holds the property in trust for the parish.

The original proposal was to transfer all the benefice property (including 13,000 churches and churchyards) but this proved even more controversial and the Synod rejected it before it reached draft legislation.

The duty of maintaining clergy houses transferred to the Diocesan Parsonages Board in the 1960s and it is recognised that overall this improved the way in which houses were cared for. Parishes pay for this service through the parish share or quota.

One of the greatest fears is that if the houses are transferred to the Diocese then they will be vulnerable to being used to offset the financial problems facing the Church, or if a Diocese were sued. Already some Dioceses are close to bankruptcy and the ongoing sale of clergy houses has hidden the true scale of the problems.

Of equal concern is the gradual shift towards a centralised denominational church and away from parish based church of the people. Over recent decades legislation has consistently moved in this way. Already many fear that unscrupulous liberal Bishops will use the clergy house as a weapon against conservative parishes, as is now happening on a large scale in North America, and as happens in other ways as a result of poor legislation in this country.

The Synod will have the opportunity, as the Measure is revised, to remove this controversial proposal.

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Church Society exists to uphold biblical teaching and to promote and defend the character of the Church of England as a reformed and national Church. For further information visit www.churchsociety.org

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