

## Scribe's column

### Reform of the National Church Service

Like many others, our church was facing a financial crisis. But St Dives has a bold and progressive congregation, situated in a prosperous suburban area, and the Archbishops' new publication *Working for Parishioners* has fired our enthusiasm. We are the first church round here to opt out of our diocese, and now we are self-governing, we are freed from many of the shackles which held us back from competing effectively with the parishes around us.

The first step was to end all giving to outside bodies, such as missionary societies, or support for inner city churches. That more than balanced our books, and left enough over to finance the next stage.

Now we could fix our own terms and conditions of service, we were able to offer tempting packages to appropriate specialist staff. We recruited two dynamic senior vicars from nearby churches, persuaded the Cathedral organist to join us, and provided financial incentives for our choirboys to practise every night of the week and sit still in their stalls on Sundays. There is no point in having trainees when you can poach fully trained staff from your neighbours, so we terminated the contract of our curate and sold his house to a property developer.

With congregations booming, and as we began to attract a better class of worshipper, we were soon able to extend our car park, complete with automatic credit card operated gate. This awoke us to income generation, and we looked at what we had to offer in this competitive market. Analysis of our statistics showed an already strong cross-boundary flow from weddings for couples from outside the parish, but we realised there was considerable untapped potential. With our new freedom to borrow at commercial rates, we soon found a sympathetic merchant bank and raised a Euroloan to refurbish our church hall, install the latest in kitchens, and a range of boutiques and services.

Now not only can you have a tasteful wedding with robed choir, and floral decorations (from our own St Dives flower shop), but we can print the invitations, make the wedding dress, supply the photographer and the video, lay on the reception (our chef recently transferred to us from the Grand Hotel), and provide discreet security for the display of presents. Should your glossy marriage later start showing signs of fall-

ing apart, fear not – our parish marital counselling service will swing into action; providing of course that your referring general clergyman's annual budget still has sufficient funds. Next came funerals, and we diversified into undertaking and a fleet of limousines, while of course our church hall, (rechristened La Salle d'Eglise, in honour of our first Michelin star), produces an excellent cost-effective lunch for the mourners after the service.

As we steam ahead, the parishes around are left struggling in our wake, and several have already gone out of business. Their buildings are crumbling for lack of funds, while we have just installed the latest seating, lighting, and audiovisual equipment in the St Dives auditorium. We have recruited their best staff, attracted away the more prosperous and intelligent members of their congregations, and channelled all cross-boundary flows in our favour. With the new prompt financial settlements and our heavy investment in the latest information technology, this pays good dividends.

Did we make the right decision? We could see the writing on the wall for the National Church Service, and have taken to self-governing status like a duck to water, or our accountant to our growing positive balance. Don't bother us with all that pre-Market stuff about "rich in goods but poor in soul", "Love thy neighbour as thyself", or that ridiculous story about the Good Samaritan – although, come to think of it, the innkeeper provides an excellent model for St Dives, seizing the opportunity offered by an open-ended cost plus contract. (LUKE, Chapter 10, verse 35).

Our many visitors sometimes ask us about the residual congregations in other parishes. Our promotional video has all the answers. Mobility is the name of the game today, so if worshippers aren't satisfied with their local parish, St Dives stands ready to receive them with open doors – and our new car park. If they claim to be too old or too ill to travel, well, their local church has to provide core services (Easter and Christmas communions and a Harvest Festival). In any case they're not our responsibility – our service here has earned the Archbishops' commendation as outstanding, so what more can anyone expect?

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