



THE EPHESIAN FUND – A BRIEFING DOCUMENT FOR PCCs

Background

The Ephesian Fund was launched in December 2023 by the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC). The CEEC is not a formal part of the Church of England, and its decision to launch the Ephesian Fund has not been approved by the General Synod, House of Bishops or by dioceses. It was introduced alongside the commissioning of what they call “Overseers” to provide alternative pastoral care for clergy who do not wish to receive support from their diocesan bishop. Both are part of a desire by the CEEC, unsupported by the House of Bishops, General Synod or the wider Church of England, to create a “Third Province” for those churches it deems “orthodox”. This would effectively separate off those churches who are siding with the CEEC from the wider church. As the Church of England has not formally approved any such structural re-organisation the CEEC along with some partners under the banner of the “Alliance”, are seeking to introduce as many measures as they legally can to create this separation from the wider church by themselves. The Ephesian Fund is the financial part of this plan to divide the Church.

Purpose of the Ephesian Fund

The purpose of the Ephesian Fund is to ring fence donations to the diocese so they cannot be used to support churches that do not subscribe to the CEEC statement of faith. It is described as a separate route for parishes to pay their parish share while not supporting those parishes which they consider “non-biblical”. Any payment to the diocese via the Ephesian Fund will prevent that money being used to support parishes who have not signed up to The CEEC’s doctrinal statement, even if they are churches in good standing who follow the historic creeds and formularies of the Church of England.

The Ephesian Fund aims to politically pressure the Church of England to approve deeper and more formal divisions within the structures of the Church. It intends to use parish finances to pressure the House of Bishops to deliver a formally partitioned Church of England.

In practice, if more money were being paid in by the Ephesian Fund parishes than they were receiving in terms of the costs of their clergy, the diocese would not be able to reallocate that surplus to support other churches. This would impact churches ministering in poorer areas and in rural areas, putting pressure on the parish system which could lead to some areas no longer having paid Christian ministry. However, in dioceses where the Ephesian Fund raises less than the subscribing churches receive in terms of clergy support, those parishes would still expect the diocese to make up the shortfall.

Legal Position

Your PCC is a separate charity in its own right with the PCC members acting as trustees. Trustees need to ensure the organisation is well run and its money is spent wisely. It is the PCC members' responsibility to assess the risks associated with any course of action, including damage to relationships with key stakeholders such as the diocese and members of the congregation.

As separate legal entities, PCCs are not legally required to pay parish share. However, paying parish share is the main way that dioceses raise funds to pay for clergy, including their training. When a PCC decides not to pay its parish share, in part or in full, that reduces the funds available to support clergy across the diocese.

The CEEC presents the Ephesian Fund as equivalent to paying your parish share to the diocese, but this is not true, because it is paid with restrictions on how it may be used. There is also no guarantee that a diocese will accept a payment funnelled through a third party such as the Ephesian Fund as legitimately paying your parish share. It could therefore mean that your PCC effectively fall into arrears with regards to parish share in the eyes of the diocese. This could lead to the diocese requesting greater contributions in the future to compensate for this shortfall.

Dioceses are also separate legal entities and registered as charities, with their own responsibility to ensure their financial long term sustainability. Should a diocese operate at a deficit and its historic reserves be used up to fund that deficit, it would have to reduce its costs. The majority of those costs are supporting stipendiary ministry, so if a deficit needs to be reduced a diocese could look to cut stipendiary clergy posts. Trustees acting on behalf of the diocese could decide that those parishes which have consistently failed to pay their parish share should be at the top of the list to have their clergy posts cut. If a clergy post is cut then the vicarage could also be sold to raise capital to replenish diocesan reserves, so it would be harder to reinstate a clergy post should the diocesan finances improve. It is important that the PCC is aware of the risk of deciding to not pay its parish share to the diocese.

Political risk

There are risks associated with the PCC making political decisions to how the shared funds of their church are used. While there may be some on the PCC who are opposed to the use of the Prayers of Love and Faith, there are likely to be members of the congregation who do not hold such a strong view. Taking this radical step of breaking fellowship with the wider diocese and withdrawing support for clergy in neighbouring parishes is unlikely to have universal support across a congregation. Members of the congregation who see their giving used as political leverage may then decide to redirect their giving to other causes, reducing the income of the church. Making political decisions with shared resources can bring disagreement and dissatisfaction, reducing commitment among the congregation. If a PCC is

mindful to subscribe to the Ephesian Fund it would be sensible, open and transparent to carry out broad consultation with their congregation. This should include the reasons why the PCC is considering this move and the likely effect on parishes that are no longer supported as well as the long term relationship with the diocese.

About the Living in Love and Faith project

The Living in Love and Faith project has been looking at how we manage disagreements regarding same sex relationships. The Ephesian Fund is being presented as a necessary response to preserve the consciences of those opposed to the introduction of the Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF). There has been much misinformation regarding what the General Synod has approved, and what will be required of clergy and parish churches. It should be stressed that the liturgy commended by the House of Bishops is not a marriage service. The approval of the PLF *does not* allow same sex weddings in a C of E church. The PLF are simply a suite of prayers which can be used to give thanks to God for all that is good in the lives of two people in a faithful, stable, permanent relationship, and to ask God to bless those two people. They are therefore not directly related to marriage and the House of Bishops has confirmed that they are consistent with Church of England doctrine, including the traditional teaching on marriage.

The use of the PLF is a matter for a priest to decide upon, in discussion with their PCC. No priest will ever have to use the PLF if they do not want to. The prayers can only be used by those clergy who opt in to use them, and it is advised that they also secure the support of their PCC before doing so. There is therefore already sufficient protection of clergy with a traditional view on marriage. The aim of the Ephesian Fund - to pressure the House of Bishops to provide reassurance to clergy who do not wish to use the PLF - is unnecessary, as such assurances have already been given.

The Theology of Giving

Jesus' example was one of self-giving generosity, turning water into wine, feeding the five thousand and commanding that we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. His death upon the cross is the ultimate symbol of giving of oneself for the sake of others. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 10:8 that we have freely received everything from God, and in response we should be free in how we give to others. In the New Testament Acts 2 speaks of the generosity in the early Church, when Christians are said to have held their resources in common and looked after those in need. It is clear that such giving is done out of love for others, and not as a means of excluding those with whom they had a disagreement.

The unity of the church is also a central theme within Scripture. In writing to the divided church in Corinth, Paul describes the diversity of the Church as being like the different parts of the human body. We may not be the same, but we belong together and need each other. Paul asserts that the body is only whole when all of the different parts work together.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”... But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.” (1 Corinthians 12:21,24-26).

In the letter to the Galatians Paul also affirms the universal belief in the early Church that Christians were united through baptism.

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:26-28)

This emphasises that we are united to other Christians through baptism in Christ Jesus. As brothers and sisters baptised into a new life in Christ, it is not for us to break fellowship with Christians we may disagree with on one specific issue. Our shared baptism into the Body of Christ, not narrow doctrinal uniformity, is the foundation of our unity.

It is clear that within Scripture that Christians are united through common baptism into the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and that there will be diversity among Christians within that unity. We are called to support one another, and to do so freely and generously just as God has given freely to us. Together for the Church of England does not believe that it is part of God’s purpose to deliberately withhold finances for political purposes. Rather we should seek to be in good relationship with other Christians and strive to support each other with the same generosity that God has given to us all.

About Together for the Church of England

Together for the Church of England is a charity that works for the unity of the Church of England and the removal of barriers to full participation in the life of the church. We encourage church members to participate in the governance structures of the Church at all levels to promote an equal, inclusive and diverse Church that is fit to serve God and engage effectively with local communities. We support the Prayers of Love and Faith being available for those clergy and congregations who wish to use them as part of their pastoral support for same sex couples. We also support the right of those clergy and congregations who do not wish to use the PLF not to do so. We believe in the unity of the church and the preservation of conscience. We also work for a church which is more equal with regard to ethnicity, gender, disability mental health, socio-economic background and more.

Conclusion

The Ephesian Fund does not have the support of the Church of England and is designed to

promote division within the Church. It is not necessary as a means to protect clergy who are opposed to the use of the Prayers of Love and Faith, as no priest will ever be required to conduct such prayers against their conscience. The practical effect of the Ephesian Fund would be to limit how dioceses could use funds to support ministry across the diocese, causing disproportionate harm to churches in poorer areas and in rural areas. There are also significant risks that PCC members, as charity trustees, should take into account before deciding to withdraw their payment of parish share. These include the future risk of the diocese not filling clergy vacancies, arrears from non-payment of parish share building up and the potential disturbance caused within the congregation by supporting a politically motivated tool aimed at dividing the Church of England. The Ephesian Fund is also contrary to biblical teaching on generosity, the unity of the Church and the importance of Christians freely supporting one another.

Together for the Church of England does not recommend that PCCs use the Ephesian Fund.