

What's really killing the church

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue



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I went to see a woman of senior years—in England she is still called “an elderly lady.” She’d left the church when she was a young woman and wanted to come back.

Ah, I thought, a familiar story. A young person grows up in the church, but when she becomes a young adult she decides to get outside and smell a different air. Now that she was over 90 she thought it was time to give the church a second chance. She took her time, I thought, but the church had been patiently waiting for her all this time, as parents do for prodigals.

So I asked, “What was it that led you away from the church for 75 years?” Nothing to lose, I thought. I may learn something. But I forgot the first rule of the inquirer:

never ask a question to which you might get an answer you're not ready to hear. I was in for a shock.

"It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The rector wouldn't marry us." Well, this sounds intriguing, I thought, and, always a soft touch for the romantic twist on a story, I blundered in where angels fear to tread. "So was there something wrong?" I asked. "Had your husband been married previously, or were you too young, maybe?"

"No," she said calmly, and I realize now that she was trying hard not to be patronizing or angry. "The rector looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16." She held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. "The rector said that since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn't marry us."

The color drained from my face. I reacted with the gasping half-laugh one coughs out when one hears something so ridiculous that it has to be funny—but of course it isn't funny at all but deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that no one could have made it up. It had to be true. Suddenly I felt that 75 years away from the church was pretty lenient. "May I ask what brings you back to the church now?" I said, feeling I couldn't go on without hearing her answer. "God's bigger than the church," she replied. "I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So that's what I've decided to do."

The crown jewels of the Church of England are its parishes. Priests have the cure of souls—not just the churchgoers but of every resident of the neighborhood, where every blade of grass in the entire country has a church that seeks to make itself in some way a blessing to all, where the clergy know that "I can't know everyone, but everyone can know me." But this inheritance is under pressure. In the corners of clergy gatherings there are mutterings. Stories are told of spouses or friends in health care and education who see very few patients or students any more, but instead sit behind computers filling in forms about targets and thresholds. The same is said about priests—that a Prussian-style bureaucracy is infesting the poetry of the priest's relationship to the parish.

In the Church of England, parish clergy are all paid the same; there are no "rich rectors" with well-endowed churches and sprawling expense accounts, so the conventional commercial appraisal—balance sheet healthy, 2 percent pay increase,

MBA completed, another 2 percent increase—doesn't apply. But now appraisal schemes for ministry review have been introduced by some dioceses, and this is the bureaucracy that is resented by clergy who see it, with its target goals, assessments, statistics and accountability, as another layer of control.

When I overhear the clergy grumbling, the elderly Welsh millworker comes to mind, and I find myself asking, "Shouldn't we pause for a moment and ask ourselves why all these systems and controls have been introduced? Isn't it because the glorious parish system puts the parish priest in a position of extraordinary trust, and because that trust has gone without honor rather more times than we'd care to admit?"

The hard thing to say is that this breaking of trust is subtly different from abuse, in the sense of criminal activity. What the Welsh rector said to the young millworker wasn't a misuse of power that was perpetrated by someone living in abiding fear of discovery. It was a ghastly misreading of grace under the veneer of an upholding of natural law. No finger—no marriage.

The rector's decision would be a grotesque historical curiosity if it didn't have such distressing contemporary parallels. We don't call it sin, so it's immune from the process of forgiveness and restoration known as the gospel. And it kills the church more surely than any creeping indifference to the truth claims of the scriptures or any discovery that a pastor turns out to have feet of clay.

What saves the church is a person like the millworker. After 75 years she gives us another chance. I wish I felt more confident we'd seize that chance the second time around.