

Church parishes that can't balance books don't have a prayer

Oliver Moody

Churches should close if they cannot balance their books, according to a powerful theologian.

Lord Mawson, a minister in the United Reformed Church who has transformed the fortunes of several churches in east London, said that parishes should be run like businesses. "Some churches do need to close," he

said at the first of this year's Westminster Faith Debates. "I don't think the Church can afford to be a preservation society. Some of its buildings and assets are really expensive [to maintain] and there are choices to make."

The Rev Canon Anna Norman-Walker, the canon missionary at Exeter Cathedral, said the Church of England could not afford to keep the parish system and would face a "huge crisis of

sustainability" in funding its buildings and clergy without bold reform.

The uncertainty over the Church's future appears to be spreading to the status of the Church itself as it faces calls from some quarters for disestablishment, which would unyoke it from the state.

A YouGov poll of 1,500 Anglican clergy published yesterday revealed that 12 per cent wanted the Church to be

disestablished, while 25 per cent backed a loosening of the ties between Church and state. More than 80 per cent of the clergy said that it was important to uphold the parishes.

Andrew Davison, a fellow in theology at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, defended the parish system, arguing that it was key to the Church's "remarkable" work. He said that the main threat to England's 16,000 parish-

es was "the story that the Church seems often to tell itself about the parish's inevitable decline".

The last report into parish finances found they broke even in 2012 but that income had not risen in line with inflation. According to an English Heritage estimate from 2004, the annual cost of keeping up parish buildings — £175 million — significantly outstripped the £115 million parishes raised.