



General Synod Election Address

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Kate and I live in Dorset, where I am Deanery Rep on the PCC for Littlebredy, in the Bride Valley. We have four children at university and beyond. I write histories, and detective stories set in Istanbul in the 1840s, and for the last five years I've been writing the Spectator column at the back of Country Life Magazine. I am now asking for your support for election to the General Synod.

Before the idea of standing had entered my head I wrote a piece which recalled the diverse origins of our English parish churches, and admonished the church leaders for closing them during the pandemic. It appeared that some bishops viewed parish churches as a burden rather than as a gift of the ages, whereas the church I love is the work of many hands and minds, both quick and dead. It isn't a narrow cult, bent on filling pews and ticking boxes, but a national church for the people of England, its parishioners.

It is dedicated to the celebration of love, which means welcoming us all without exclusion, as congregation or as priests, year after year, century upon century, ready to tend, comfort and inspire.

Most people's interest in church naturally waxes and wanes, both through the year and across their lives. They may attend at Easter and Christmas, and resort to the sacred when it's time to mark the climactic events of their lives, the births, marriages and deaths. That is what the glorious buildings, our parish churches, are about. The church and its ministers allow us to brush against the mysteries, to measure our own lives against the eternal, and to fathom our transience. But we can't be doing that all the time. Few of us can live in a state of permanent religious excitement.

Enthusiasts must leave room for the backsliding, so-so semi-congregants who are also fundamentally its people, its parishioners, among whom our vicars do so much good work, offering a refuge in times of stress and loss, change or crisis. The church may not always be wanted - we've had long periods of irreligion, and periods of deep religiosity, in our history - but it must always be ready. Music, educated priests, historic buildings, sonorous liturgy and sacerdotal language, the cultivated sense of ritual and repetition: these are all summonses to witness the fragility of human life, and the strength and comfort of continuity against the mystery of eternity. They are woven into the fabric of Anglicanism which is, in some respects, a church of place.

Years ago Kate and I made a pilgrimage of sorts, trudging 2000 miles from the Baltic to Istanbul. For six months we slept in barns and farmers' kitchens, fed and sheltered by strangers. We experienced the kindness of ordinary men and women, and learned how a

church had the power to maintain peoples' spirit and their community, another lesson for the C of E as it lurches towards centralisation, retrenchment and irrelevance. We, too, need vicars selected for their pastoral gifts: great parish priests make great churches.

One of them was our late vicar, Bob Thorn, who too was inspired by the idea of a physical journey whose rewards and dangers foreshadow our life journeys, with their twists and dips, learning on the way, heading towards a common goal. I helped him e-publish his book about the Lindisfarne pilgrimage he undertook with his wife Rev. Jean, before he rowed away on a personal pilgrimage to Cornwall, not to return in this world. His legacy was faith as a kind of persistent wonder, an awareness of the miracle of existence that propels us, what Dylan Thomas called 'the force that through the green fuse drives the flower'.

I've written A Pilgrim's Guide to Sacred London, and worked with the non-denominational British Pilgrimage Trust to create reflective walking routes through London, and across the countryside where I live. I hear from people involved with Church Governance who believe in opening up churches, in practical initiatives to raise money and consciousness, while strengthening the position of the church in the community, and I share their irritation with woolly directives and the proliferation of officers and brochures at diocesan level. We could revitalise – or energise – or pay for – our parish churches, before we start selling them off and shifting worship to peoples' kitchens. We must think how to do that, and I would canvas ideas from everyone in and out of church. Could we twin parishes, rural with urban, north with south? Explore a church's use for sleeping, for meals, for meetings and music? Churches can generate income: churchyards too. And then keep what they make, perhaps? We can be bold in exploring ways to fund our priesthood.

If I can bring my parish neighbours' issues to Synod, perhaps I can help maintain the church's recognition in wider society, if only by trying to remind people that it's still here after 1500 years, with 12,000 ravishing churches at their service, 7000 trained parish priests, still offering a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a glimpse of the divine, to everyone.

At its next meeting, the General Synod will consider legislation that would make it easier for dioceses to dissolve inherited parish structures. But once the parishes are gone, the buildings sold and the people dispersed, they will never return. I've listened to so many people in our parishes who feel anxious about the direction the C of E seems to be taking, and my own feelings in the matter have drawn me to make a commitment to represent them.

I was able to speak to Debrah Mclsaac, who generously offered her advice: being a member of the General Synod demands time and hard work. She gives that in spades. If you elect me, too, I hope I can do half as much for the people of our rural parish, who want a voice at General Synod for traditional, inclusive, local, parish-based churches.