

Jonathan Baird

2021 General Synod Election, House of Laity, Diocese of Salisbury



The Church of England is in crisis. And the parish is in peril.

Consequently, I stand for election on the Save The Parish ticket. May I please urge you to read its manifesto (savetheparish.com). It is carefully considered and most powerful.

Throughout this green and pleasant land, in the face of shrinking and ageing congregations, tens of thousands of good and worthy parishioners work their hands, sometimes to the bone, in order to keep their parishes afloat.

Sweeping, polishing, eking out crumbling bits of Oasis, baking, lugging, assembling trestle tables, selling raffle tickets and jam, rehearsing, cajoling, organising and sitting on hard chairs in draughty halls, they do their best to boost the fabric fund and maintain the parish share.

But to what end? The parish is being impoverished (and dangerously so) by the harebrained profligacy and unnecessary duplication of the forty-two dioceses, a third of which are believed to be close to bankruptcy.

In 1976, the parishes handed over their assets to the Diocesan Funds and the Church Commissioners in a worthy attempt to even out wealth between richer and poorer incumbents.

Instead, in the last forty-five years, the dioceses have sold off multiple assets, built absurd, bloated and stifling bureaucracies and chewed through well in excess of £8 billion (according to a study in 2016).

It has been the biggest plundering and squandering of parish funds since the Reformation.

[At its peak, the Church had over 25,000 parish clergy. By 2019, it had fewer than 7,000. In 1837, there were twenty-six diocesan bishops. Today, there are forty-two, together with a further seventy suffragan bishops.

In terms of burgeoning bureaucracy, to give but one example:

The Diocese of Oxford has 173 employees at 'head office'. And, in recent years, it has created the following new posts: Environment Programme Manager, New Congregations Team Administrator, Director of New Congregations, UKME Development Enabler, New Congregations Enabler and a number of new full time Area Deans with no parish responsibilities.

The Church should be tending to its flock and concentrating on pastoral work. It should not be building a Byzantine temple of bureaucracy.]

The clear and present danger is that the Church's bureaucracy is crushing all parishes, notably the rural ones, which continue to subsidise the dioceses' wanton spending spree, whilst continuing to lose their clergy and parsonages (the latter belonging to the parish and not to the diocese).

Recently, GS 2222 had its first reading in the General Synod. If this insidious proposal is passed, it will become even easier for the dioceses to close and sell off parish buildings and sack vicars and turn them out of their homes. And then, to dispatch unknown clergy from central hubs. In other words, to replace the resident, committed, known and probably loved vicar with an unknown face from a clerical car pool.

To be blunt, the parish is facing its biggest threat in a thousand years. And Save the Parish is a peasants' revolt in the face of such threat.

I am an active and enthusiastic member of the congregation of St. John the Baptist, Chirton, near Devizes.

Aged sixty-one, brought up in a naval family on the west coast of Scotland, with an MA in History from Cambridge and an MBA from Insead, I spent nine years in investment banking before running my own firms in finance for the last thirty years. In 2015, after living in France for twenty-eight years, I semi-retired to deepest Wilts.

I have considerable experience of negotiation, effecting change, getting the message across and getting things done.

In the General Synod, there is A GREAT DEAL OF WORK to be done. And much folly to be stopped. Furthermore, the response of the Church's hierarchy to the pandemic needs to be questioned robustly. So lamentable and spineless a performance must never be repeated.

On a final note, the Church of England consists of the same faith in different flavours and is all the richer for it. Down the centuries, it has thrived and survived so well because it is a genuinely broad church. Consequently, we must all fight to preserve as many parishes as possible. From right across the spectrum of worship.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to telephone or email me. At any time.

May I please count on your vote?

Thank you very much.

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