

Dr Bijan Omrani

1. What has prompted you to stand for election to General Synod in particular, and in which ways do you think it will challenge your capacity and capabilities?

The mission of the Church of England – to proclaim the word of Christ and to bring us together wherever we are for worship, fellowship and service – is vital. Yet, the capacity of the Church to fulfil this mission is being hampered by problems of vision and stewardship. Church institutions are distracted by different priorities, and the church's historic resources are not reaching the front-line clergy and parishes where that support is needed most.

In standing for the synod, I hope to work with other colleagues who endorse the Save the Parish Manifesto to bring forward measures to make sure that clergy and that the wonderful lay volunteers who help to keep churches running are properly supported, and that parishes have the resources they need.

I have trained as a barrister and worked as a school teacher and governor, and charity trustee. I am also a historian of Christianity, the author of *God is an Englishman: Christianity and the Creation of England*, as well as a frequent writer in the national press on church affairs. My experience and knowledge I hope fit me to dealing with the challenges and complexities of representing Exeter diocese at the Synod.

2. What do you believe the Church of England should prioritise over the next five years to support mission, Christian discipleship and the flourishing of parish and other worshipping communities?

The Church must restore the income from the Church Commissioners fund (whose capital is £11.6 billion) to its original intended purpose, the support of stipendiary parish ministry, along with the work of cathedrals. Likewise, the income from dioceses and parish share should be put as far as possible towards the cure of souls, rather than being dissipated in other priorities and the growing central and diocesan bureaucracies.

The welfare of clergy should be a particular priority. The push towards amalgamation of parishes, with clergy being asked to deal with ever larger numbers of people and bigger areas, should stop. It is demoralising for clergy to be asked to deal with such “mega-parishes” that are unmanageable. Clergy should be properly resourced, and they should have the chance for fuller training with more resources being put into theological education.

Church volunteers should likewise be supported. They should be protected from the burden of growing central bureaucracy and diocesan initiatives, so they can focus on supporting the specific needs of their local church and parish. The excessive length of clerical vacancies should be limited, and laypeople should not be expected to do the work of clergy unpaid.

3. What should General Synod do to help the Church become safer, more accountable and more trusted, ensuring that national reforms work effectively in parishes, dioceses, and cathedrals?

The church has suffered in recent years from attempts to overcentralise, and to act in a fashion that is too top-down. Too frequently, the concerns of local parishes have been ignored in the pursuit of central diktats, and money has been used unwisely or carelessly. This has eroded trust.

Aside from ensuring the better treatment of clergy and laity, there are concrete measures the Church should take to build trust. There needs to be a reform of the Mission and Pastoral Measure, which governs controversial actions: closing churches, merging parishes, dispossessing priests. When parishes are threatened with any of these, they should be given full rights of consultation and appeal, and proper access to legal representation. Rather than enforcing national one-size-fits-all initiatives, local parishes should be given greater freedom of action to do what works best in their locality. Safeguarding should be made more effective and independent.

The National Church Institutions should also withdraw from controversial initiatives that undermine local trust, for example Project Spire which pledges £100m of church endowments for slavery “reparations” despite the complete absence of historical, legal or moral justifications.

4. How should the Church prioritise good intentional investment in mission and growth whilst also resourcing parish ministry in all its forms?

The Church of England’s own research (for example, in the 2014 paper “From Anecdote to Evidence”) shows that mission and growth are not something to be contrasted with “resourcing parish ministry”. Indeed, mission and growth are the result of well-resourced parish ministry, and that the parish is the most reliable and time-tested vehicle for the emergence of that growth, rather than the various new structures which are tending to undermine the parishes.

Therefore, my answer to this question draws from my response to question two above. The income from the Church Commissioners, the dioceses, and common fund needs to be put towards larger, reliable and regular funding for ordinary clergy and parishes, and better theological education for the clergy. Bureaucracy and waste needs to be cut relentlessly. The current complicated arrangements, where dioceses now have to make grant applications for large-scale funding, and that such grants favour non-parish initiatives, must end.

5. General Synod must address issues on which faithful Christians hold deeply differing views. How would you contribute to honest debate, good disagreement and clear decision-making while helping the Church maintain its common life and mission?

One always keeps in mind the scriptural statement that we as a church are one body in Christ, although with many members: different talents and different opinions. Whilst we may hold strong and contrasting views, it is needful that we remember that fellowship in Christ as we strive to share and advance the Word of Christ, even if we disagree on the best cause of action in the immediate circumstances before us. Led by such a conviction, it is possible to explore problems even to the depths of hard disagreement, whilst maintaining the respect, courtesy and charity that should be between all those who share the Christian faith.