

General Synod Election Address: Mr Peter Sarjeant

Candidate to become an Exeter Diocese lay representative for the 2026-31 Quinquennium



My home parish is that of Dodbrooke: the parish encompasses a residential part of Kingsbridge and the adjacent rural area, and is a member of the Kingsbridge Estuary Churches Mission Community. I have served as churchwarden for a 6-year term and am now the treasurer & secretary to the PCC, and church verger. My career was that of a merchant navy officer, latterly serving as Master for 12 years aboard NERC Royal Oceanographic Research Ships.

Alarmed at the amalgamation of rural parishes into ever-larger benefice groupings, I am standing under the banner of 'Save the Parish' (StP) – a grassroots organisation that seeks to reaffirm the value of a Christian presence in every community. Our Deanery (Woodleigh – 30 parishes) has seen a planned reduction in FTE priest numbers from 6 to 4.5 over the past few years, resulting in an inability to fill a 0.5 post and a rural dean now 'overseeing' 12 churches whilst her own tenure as priest-in-charge has been extended for up to 3 more years. A strong church requires sure foundations but financial and other resourcing pressures are causing steady erosion at ground level. 'Save the Parish' offers a concrete set of proposals to support Parish, Priest and People, detailed in the link [General Synod Manifesto 2026 - Save the Parish](#). A summarised selection of these interrelated proposals follows; chiming with my vision for future parish ministry.

As a member of General Synod **I would support moves to redirect dividends paid out from endowments (themselves worth £11.6 billion), controlled by the Church Commissioners, back towards their original purpose** – that of supporting ministry in parishes where assistance is most required. Since 1998, dioceses have had to bear the cost of clergy pensions without the endowments to fund them. Now 35 dioceses run deficits; 23 hold less than 3 months' reserves; 13 have no investment assets they can liquidate**. Release of funds could stem the cuts in stipendiary priests and eventually reverse the trend towards larger parish groupings: in the meantime, **I favour introduction of a Charter of Care for Clergy that protects our priests against the potential for mental and physical stress**. The charter would include provision to halt any cuts in stipendiary posts as a means to balance budgets and also seek to redefine measures of 'success': job prospects and security for parish priests are baseline requirements for a future healthy church. Security of tenure, however, comes with the responsibility to provide strong parish ministry. To that end, StP supporters will be campaigning for **a review and renewal of theological training** that will aim to produce priests relevant for our times; capable of leading and inspiring growth in the parish setting.

Lay leadership roles have become increasingly burdensome to the extent that office holders cannot find replacements and/or vacancies remain unfilled, particularly in more poorly-resourced parishes. We must simplify the faculty process, dramatically reduce compliance, make clear the difference between statutory demands and diocesan initiatives, and prioritise the filling of parish clergy vacancies to avoid congregational decline. In short, **we need a Churchgoers' Charter.**

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As a Cathedral chorister in the '60s, mine was an anglo-catholic upbringing, imbued with the choral tradition. Through life's journey, however - witnessing the work of the Mission to Seafarers, mixing with many creeds and cultures at sea and experiencing the joy of worshipping in different settings during retirement travels around the UK in our old narrowboat - I have become **accepting of a broad church, rooted in Christian love.** In keeping with this, I am supportive of the Living in Love and Faith initiative and the next steps in this process as proposed by the House of Bishops.

Whilst recognising the challenges of applying climate-related objectives to many of our Grade 1-listed church buildings, I have been **encouraged by the drive towards net-zero**, particularly where practical solutions are facilitated for parishes via, for example, the 'Quick Wins' grants scheme. Utilising such a grant I was able to organise installation of an innovative low-cost on-pew heating system for Dodbrooke – a first for the Exeter Diocese.

If elected, **I would work with members of General Synod, whatever their position on these or other matters facing the Church, to save the parish system for future generations.** As debate is conducted, it is vital that the Central Church receives constructive contributions from grassroots level. This is something that I feel called to offer with sincerity, integrity, diligence and respect.

Thank you for reading this address: if it strikes a chord, then please support me with your first or high-preference vote. Feel free to contact me if there is anything you wish to discuss.



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** GS 2380, Diocesan Finances Review: Update 2 (February 2025), presented to General Synod.
<https://www.savetheparish.com/diocesan-finances-review-update-2025/>