

Dr Vivien Southall

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?

I finished my doctorate 18 months ago as it was finishing, I prayed about what I could do that would be stimulating and challenging but also part of my Christian ministry. A couple of years previously both my daughters had come out as same sex attracted which led me to read more about what the Bible has to say about sexuality. I became passionate that members of the LGBTQAI+ community should experience full inclusion in Church. I had been a teacher and lecturer in education, and my doctorate was on neurodiverse long-term romantic couples, therefore inclusion for neurodiverse people, people with disabilities and those who are LGBTQAI+ is something I consider vital. When two years ago the opportunity to stand in the General Synod bye-election arose, I was excited at the opportunity to take up this challenge. I was elected and have now served nearly two years.

All of being on synod is challenging, but I enjoy that aspect of it. There is a lot of reading to do. I am ADHD and so find remembering details difficult – this just means that I have to work a bit harder than some others who have good memories for fine detail.

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?

I am unhappy that wider society still considers that we are not clear on Safeguarding. I think it is essential that we pass a safeguarding policy that is considered robust and transparent. Regaining the trust of those outside the Church is fundamental to any mission work.

The Church of England mission to 'Grow the Church Younger' seems to me to be becoming embedded. Churches are thinking of many different ways to reach children and families and to work with schools, all of which is essential in mission. However, I also think that at retirement age people begin reviewing their lives, it is a period of change, and I wonder if engaging this group of active, but less busy people, would enable them to consider their own spiritual journeys and faith.

I like the idea of recognising new worshipping communities. I believe that this gives impetus to the many groups that are started by churches; coffee mornings, toddler groups, forest churches, after school church and so many others - and to continue to develop these as worshipping communities. I have been very inspired by hearing what really small churches are doing as well as active large Churches.

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 of England is taking safeguarding seriously. I have been very encouraged to be part of debates where motions have been passed and, by the time I have got home, the Diocese has already got written statements and guidance out to parishes. Having been a teacher safeguarding has always been part of my role, and in my consciousness, as something that should not be compromised. The lead teams reviewing and writing the Safeguarding policy work very hard to ensure that the Church is a safe place. When they have presented on safeguarding, attendance in the chamber is high. Since I have gone onto General Synod, I have noticed that people really focus on these debates, and you can feel people trying to make up their minds on what the safest decisions to make are. More external oversight was recommended by the committee but concerns over the impact on local diocese are valid. Personally, I think that society will have more faith in us if we have some external oversight at diocesan level. My concern is the huge task asked of parish safeguarding officers, and essential provision of support to make the role manageable.

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

There are various pots of money that the Diocese applies for from the central Church. Bids often need to be for specific projects, and much time and effort is put into these bids. These bids have often been for big projects in cities which attract attention, making us all aware of missional activities in urban settings. We are less aware of the smaller projects in more rural areas that are supported with funding. It is a credit to the Exeter Diocese team that they have managed to get so much funding for some urban projects recently which will be centred in some areas of deprivation. Having large Churches as resource centres is a good way of enabling smaller churches to benefit from the bigger projects.

However, the challenge of multi-benefice rural parishes is real and leads to huge stress on ministers in these parishes. This does need addressing and decreasing the number of incumbents can only serve to make the situation worse limiting mission and church growth. All of these issues will be significant challenges for the next General Synod.

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?

We are all aware of the deeply held views that members of the Church of England have on issues such as sexuality and marriage. I have made my stance on inclusion of LGBTQAI+ people fully in the life of the church clear, and this includes allowing same sex attracted

clergy to marry. Being open and transparent about one's views is important. It is a subject that is in the minds of people when they are at Synod, however, it is not the only thing that we talk about. At General Synod you often find yourself sitting by people that you have never met before. It is a privilege to find out more about them and much of the time I am awed by them. I wear my rainbow lanyard, so people know my stance and they can choose to bring it into conversation or not. I will continue to stand to speak in favour of Prayers of Love and Faith (PLF) and other contested matters. I am in favour of clergy being able to follow their conscience and decide whether or not they lead services of PLF. Therefore, it makes sense that to disagree well, both options must be available.