

General Synod Election Address: Gareth Wardell



Proposed by: The Revd Dr James Heard. Seconded by: The Revd Lesley Bilinda.

In seeking election to General Synod my main, overarching priority, will be to do all I can to help our Church live out its mission to make known the Good News of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

I believe one of the Church of England's greatest strengths is its breadth of tradition and theological diversity, something that is reflected in my own spiritual pilgrimage to date. I have worshipped within and come to appreciate a wide range of church traditions and believe that in a diocese like London, my lived experience can be used to build bridges between traditions rather than create walls that divide us. As a cradle-Anglican I came to personal faith as a teenager at a Billy Graham rally. After graduating I worked as an NHS Graduate Management Trainee, before training for cross-cultural ministry at All Nations Christian College and working in overseas aid and development for many years in Nepal, where I was the Human Resources Director for United Mission to Nepal, then the largest employer in the country after the Government. I also served as HR Director for IAM (The International Assistance Mission) in Afghanistan during the intensive civil war of the 1990s and the rise to power of the previous Taliban regime and was involved in negotiating with them for the right of women to continue working in our mission's health related projects when most other NGOs had fled the country. This was a costly witness – many of my colleagues were murdered and I was looted at gun-point on several occasions.

Following a Masters Degree in Post-war Recovery Studies, I worked as a Research Fellow in the Post-war Reconstruction and Development Unit at York University, travelling regularly to war-affected countries, including undertaking consultancy work in Somalia and post-Taliban Afghanistan, where I co-authored a report for the UN on Afghan women. In 2003 I commenced training for ordination at Ridley Hall, serving my title at Selby Abbey in North Yorkshire before moving 'back home' to London in 2008 - I'm a Londoner by birth! Since then I've been based in the Kensington Episcopal Area, initially as Associate Vicar at St Mary Abbots on High Street Kensington and then for seven years as the Vicar of All Saints' Hampton and Chaplain to the Shooting Star Children's Hospice. For eight years I also served as one of the Assistant Directors of Post Ordination Training for our Episcopal Area. In March 2020, just as lock-down began, I moved to the Parish of St Clement & St James in W11. Familiar to many as the parish in which Grenfell Tower is located, our parish reflects some of the greatest racial diversity and the highest disparities in wealth and poverty to be found anywhere in the country. I spend part of every day in our parish CE Primary School, along with my therapy Labrador, a 'pastoral assistant with a dog-collar' who is a great asset in working with many of our Grenfell-impacted children. I also serve as a School Governor and as a Trustee of the Clement James Centre, an award winning local charity founded by the parish, which seeks to serve the needs of our local community.

One of the most frequent criticisms levelled against General Synod is that it is too inward looking. Of course, General Synod is primarily a legislative body, the only law-making body other than Parliament, so inevitably, a certain amount of time has to be taken up with the business of the National Institutions, ensuring they are conducted according to the highest standards. But there is much more the Church of England can do to communicate and promote the values and principles of what we believe to our wider society.

Our Christian faith has much to say about how public money is spent, about child poverty, racism, climate change and creation-care, education, health, prison-reform, and about how we treat the most vulnerable in our society – to name just

a few examples. We need to become better at ensuring the decisions we take enhance our Church's outward looking purpose and vision. For every negative news story, we can all cite many more examples of faithful clergy and laity quietly making a difference, day-in and day-out, in the lives of their communities without ever drawing attention to themselves. In some particularly deprived places, it is only the Church of England which remains dedicated to serving the local community – this needs to be acknowledged, supported, celebrated and made known. It also needs to be reflected in the ways in which the church allocates its resources. Sadly, too often our motto, in terms of personnel and resources, seems to be: *“to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”* Luke 19:26, NRSV.

One of the beauties of Anglicanism is our breadth of opinion. It is, however, difficult to communicate God's love from a position of power, and that continues to be a challenge for us as the Established Church. Along with our privilege goes a huge amount of responsibility, which I believe, on the whole we undertake with great commitment, dedication and integrity. However, there is a growing gulf emerging between the church and the nation we seek to serve and this is especially true in the area of thinking about human sexuality. For much of society and to almost everyone under the age of forty, the church's stance on same-sex relationships is incomprehensible and seen as on a par with racism and misogyny. Such toxic attitudes are dishonouring to God and risk creating the kind of environment in which tragedies like the suicide of Lizzie Lowe can occur.

The work of LLF, clergy well-being and much needed CDM reform as outlined by the Sheldon Hub, are best understood in the light of the painful lessons we have learned about ourselves as a church through the witness testimony and reports of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. IICSA has shown us plainly that a key reason the Church is an unsafe place is because it has allowed the subordination of women and discrimination against LGBT+ people and fostered a culture of secrecy. Shame and secrecy concerning sexuality was also found to have played a part in the tragic murder of Peter Farquahar by a Church Warden in his parish. Likewise, shame and secrecy featured prominently in the abuse scandals involving John Smyth and the Iwerne Camps and with Jonathan Fletcher and Emmanuel Wimbledon. There is a vital need for joined-up thinking between LLF and the learning to emerge from IICSA if the Archbishops' vision of 'radical new Christian inclusion' in terms of gender, sexuality, race and disability is to be realized.

I am excited about the future and meeting the challenges that lie ahead. The generation of young people now in their teens and early twenties is more informed than ever about the issues facing us, nationally and internationally, and passionate about doing something to change our world for the better. They need our help and support to learn how to integrate their views with Christian values and will learn best by watching how we live our lives - at work and at home. If elected to General Synod, my deepest desire will be to encourage all that fosters faith and trust in Jesus Christ and in the truth of a Gospel that has the potential to transform lives. For as long as we remain the Established Church, we have both the right and responsibility to speak out for Christ and to counter a view of the world that does not allow for the existence of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In all that I do, I will endeavour to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ. If elected, I would ask for your prayers for me and all those elected to serve on General Synod, both lay and ordained.

I also ask that when you vote you would give me your first preference vote.

With my love and prayers,



The Revd Gareth Wardell, The Parish of St Clement & St James, W11