

Questions to candidates for General Synod House of Clergy – Rev Charles Hope

Q1. Are you familiar with the recently published Equalities and Human Rights Commission guidance that single-sex spaces such as changing rooms and toilets must be used on the basis of biological sex and do you intend to respect, uphold and follow it, or if not why not?’

Yes, I am familiar with the EHRC statutory Code of Practice published Aug 2026 and I do intend to uphold and respect it.

It stems from the legal judgment of Supreme Court of 2025 in the case of Women Scotland Ltd v the Scottish Ministers and the interpretation of the Equalities Act 2010 and the definitions of sex and gender as protected characteristics under the act. The EHRC Code issued under the Act gives statutory guidance as to how that judgement should be applied by public bodies and charities. As churches are charities, they are not exempt from this (except on explicit faith matters).

We do provide services to our members and users. So if we provide toilets in churches and church halls, then if they are gender specific the use of those toilets is for the gender people have at birth. Having said that, many churches have unisex toilets – so the impact is not great.

The application of this judgment in an educational context is covered by the latest version of ‘Keeping Children safe in Education’. Biological sex at birth is the key for how a school should treat children as regards sports, residential, toilets etc. Under KCSiE, in a school context, transitioning should be viewed as a safeguarding matter and managed in partnership with parents unless there are very clear safeguarding reasons for following another course of action. In Church-based youth work, in the absence of other guidance, we should follow similar principles.

In a Christian pastoral context, the key for me is the notion of human dignity stemming from the ‘imago dei’ in which we are made together (Gen 2) with the notion that ‘in Christ we are a new creation’ (2 Cor 5.17) and ‘in Christ there is no slave or free, male or female, Greek or barbarian for all are one in Christ’ (Gal 3.28). From this flows the importance of respecting fully matters of identity and gender identity if/when people question and explore their gender and sexuality. Pastorally, I have walked alongside a small number of people as they have transitioned; I have also walked alongside some who have explored the issues (be it theological, spiritual, sexual, psychological etc) and stepped back from transitioning. Whatever choices people make, I have assured them they are known and loved by God for who they are.

Q2. Parish ministry is becoming increasingly difficult to fund locally. What do you believe the Church of England should do to ensure that the cost of stipendiary ministry does not fall disproportionately on small, rural and ageing congregations?

The ecclesiological question is who is the CofE for? Those who can pay or everyone? I am committed to the Church of England, as the church that is available for everyone in every community. I am committed to seeing the CofE as part of God's great mission to our country. But that mission is local in its rooting and effectiveness.

But we need to be clear about roles and responsibilities. The Church of England does not exist in law – we are a complex entity that consists of 42 independent dioceses. Each diocese has a bishop, a board of finance, a synod and lots of parishes. All are related to each other, but independent of each other. Even at a national level there is complexity – the historic resources of the church are the responsibility of the Church Commissioners who give funds to the Archbishops' Council – both of which are independent of the General Synod but can be scrutinised by the Synod.

Some funds are the responsibility of General Synod. Controversy has surrounded Project Spire and its fund of £100m – is it a reparations fund for historic slavery or an investment fund? How you answer that question is political judgement. But this is a capital fund and so cannot be vired into direct support to diocese / parishes as revenue income.

However far more money has been allocated by the Church Commissioners to the dioceses via the Archbishops' Council through the SMMI / SDF / DIP programmes, amounting to about £1bn in 2024 over nine years (CofE press release of 21.5.2024). These enable competitively funded projects to be approved. The criteria seems to have been centrally set, based 'on evidence of what works'. But is a competition based model of church funding, based on what works one context being assumed to work in all contexts the best way of doing things? Where is local differentiation, knowledge, wisdom and accountability?

Clergy need to be paid, our volunteer clergy and other ministers also need to be supported. Posts need to be of a 'do-able' nature. A commitment needs to be made to fund, support and resource local ministry that, when asked, can demonstrate how it is making a positive difference, in ways that are locally determined, not by central dictates.

We need to find ways of 'bearing one another's burdens' in a way that is just and fair, effective and sustainable. We need less centralized control and more trust to the local. We need systems that ask how 'work' is making a positive difference to the ministry and mission of the church, without central presumptions of what works. And we need to be better at communicating why things are being done in this way and not some other way.

Q3. There are churches with urgent needs for roofs, heating, accessibility, structural repairs and other capital works, but grants can be extremely difficult to access and often require significant match funding. What would you do to release more Church of England resources for capital investment in parish churches?

Successive governments have been taxing our building work more and more. From the amendment of VAT Notice 708 in Oct 2012 removing the zero rating on approved alterations to Listed Buildings, to the Listed Places of Worship VAT Scheme with VAT at 5% to the more limited grants from the Places of Worship Renewal Fund – the government has been increasing the tax burden on church building work.

Our buildings are also their buildings – the parishes churches of England belong to the whole parish in ways that other community buildings do not. People have rights on the parish church even if they don't come to church including occasional offices and the right to be consulted about the future of a church under the Pastoral Measure 2011 and still under the draft of the new measure likely to come to Synod in 2027.

First of all, General Synod has a role in speaking in matters of national religious and public interest. The future of our church buildings is one such example. 45-50% of Grade 1 listed buildings are CofE properties. Of our 16,200 churches over 12,000 are listed. Listing implies that there is something about the building that is of national significance. General Synod needs to be saying to the Government, they have some responsibility here too and to stop trimming that responsibility.

Secondly, General Synod has a role in examining how the Faculty Measure is working and within that whether there is a way of making the process lighter, less costly for the parishes and more flexible – as building projects develop, plans change and the current system is almost too rigid to be able to cope with variations of project development and implementation.

Thirdly, General Synod does have a role in advocating for some centrally funded advisory posts on building / planning matters & charity funds / finance matters; as well as some seed fund type pots.

The reasons for these centrally funded but locally accountable and effective posts are:
[1] Some Parishes, as independent charities, have funds that may be tied up as endowment funds or restricted funds. But these limitations can be challenged and loosened, if asked, by the Charity Commission in accordance with their guidance FRS 102 (Statement of Recommended Practice). PCCs may need technical help with this.
[2] The responsibility for the maintenance of a parish church lies with the local PCC as an independent entity. But PCCs can be 'squeezed' by all the pressures they are under from safeguarding to building regs etc. PCCs need to be supported to meet their regulatory responsibilities. [3] We also know from experience that a small amount of seed money from the wider church to a project can be significant game changer – locally being a morale boost, and in the eyes of the funders, an indication of intent that needs to be taken seriously and backed.