

Questions to candidates for General Synod House of Clergy

Responder: Revd Madi Simpson

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 this guidance and intend to respect, uphold and follow it, and I am committed to ensuring that churches and all parish spaces are warm and welcoming to all.

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?

‘How the money works’ in the Church of England is a mystery to most, but this is an area to which, if I am elected to General Synod, I intend to pay close attention. The pressure on small, rural, ageing congregations is immense. Meanwhile, this question presents multiple challenges – ‘cost’, ‘stipendiary ministry’, size, shape and spread of congregations – and there are more interlinked themes and concerns wrapped up in this question. Permit me to answer slightly more broadly before I answer more directly.

To misquote one theologian, the church exists for the speaking of the gospel – to the world as a message of salvation, to God as prayer and praise. The local church needs to be equipped to carry out its mission. In other words, the problem as described is about more than money, and the solution is not necessarily stipendiary clergy.

Luke 4:18ff. The poor are God’s priority. The weak are God’s priority. The lost are God’s priority. They should be the church’s priority. As we think about ministry and cost, we also fundamentally need to think about the spiritual/missional needs of whole communities, not just individual congregations, and how best to carry out God’s great mission and commission, in every context. I’m all for saving the parish if the focus is on saving people more than saving a system.

Ordinations seem to have dropped off a cliff in recent years. So we have a recruitment crisis in the CofE, not just a financial crisis. We can’t talk about the cost of stipendiary ministry without talking about the shortage of stipendiary ministers – and shrinking congregations. All of this needs tackling.

To come back to the question as I think it was intended, I currently serve in a benefice of two, including one small rural church, and am in contact with various others. It is clearly an unequal burden that small rural congregations carry, financially, and I am trying to listen very carefully to different proposals being made. I’d welcome your thoughts and ideas. I am sympathetic to the case for using a portion of the Church Commissioners’ historic endowment as a kind of baseline national subsidy for parish

ministry, as I am to unifying PCCs in multi-parish benefices, and reducing costs and administrative burdens that way, but of course other problems arise with each of these proposals, so we need to be realistic and accept that no solution is perfect.

As mentioned, I am open to ideas, even radical ones. SSM ministry is biblical, powerful, valuable, as is lay leadership. If see value in expanding and more rigorously supporting these, alongside stipendiary ministry, though it would radically shake up what we do and how we do it. Maybe it would make apostles of us all.

When it comes to cost saving at large, I favour smaller central Church government and slashing the glut of resources produced every year. The Five Marks of Mission are everybody's business, I question the increase in specialist back of house jobs in the CofE. Likewise, we don't need more resources, we need fewer. I would rather clergy were sent out Bible in hand, with nothing else to go on, if it meant more money for frontline ministry and mission, especially in poorer, rural contexts. I would prefer that even without the cost savings.

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?

Ulverston Parish Church has all these needs. As mentioned, I have lots to learn with regard to how the money works in the central CofE, and what is actually at churches' disposal, but at present, in no particular order, I think I would like to:

- 1. Establish project officers in every diocese to help with the administrative burden of grant applications and management of capital projects*
- 2. Deter/cease expenditure on non-essential jobs and projects in the CofE if it means more funds available to provide grants of different types and sizes. All hands on the deck of mission, ministry, churches, parishes*
- 3. Scrutinise the proceeds of sales of closed assets (churches, vicarages et al) in dioceses and ensure a fair proportion is returned to deaneries to support capital projects in active parishes*
- 4. Reduce some of the demands or requirements of DACs for certain capital projects. Heritage matters. Aesthetics matter. Do listed buildings really need cast iron drainpipes? Reduce expenditure on things that matter less to enable expenditure on things that matter more*
- 5. Church Commissioners to match fund works on parish churches under a certain threshold and with certain criteria?*
- 6. Synod and MPs to lobby government to secure and expand the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, through which churches were able to reclaim VAT. I've already written to my MP about this.*