

Answers to Questions for General Synod House of Laity from Susan Leighton

Q1. Do you fully support the equality of women at all levels of ministry, including ordained and episcopal ministry?

Before I began my Reader Training, I spent time pondering the role of women in ministry. I concluded that women were equally loved and valued by God and have gifts and abilities that enhance the ministry and mission of the Church.

I recognise that there are differing views on this. I respect these views and am happy to work to encourage all to serve in ministry with its variety of opportunities. I do have concerns though, that any undisclosed positive discrimination (a bias towards either men or women) in any selection process is neither fair nor a true discernment of 'calling' to any particular role.

Q2. In July the General Synod was asked to "affirm that all baptised, believing and faithful persons regardless of sexual orientation are full members of the Body of Christ" and that "recognise a legitimate range of theological perspectives, held in good conscience, across the Church of England, on the right ordering of committed, faithful, intimate same-sex relationships". If you were on Synod, did you vote in favour of this. If you were not on Synod, how would you have voted?

This will be my first time on Synod, and I look forward to the various debates and formulation of motions. If elected, I will seek to continually demonstrate that all members expressing differing viewpoints on any subject, will be equally heard, and treated with respect and Christian love.

I would like this motion to have included some explanation of the boundaries regarding the phrase "legitimate range of theological perspectives".

I fully agree that all baptised, believing and faithful persons regardless of sexual orientation are full members of the Body of Christ.

The unease I have regarding this proposed motion surrounds "the right ordering.." of "intimate same-sex relationships," as being a legitimate theological perspective; one which remains faithful to the historic foundations and teachings of the Church of England.

The two segments of the motion being put together in this way would have led me to vote against it.

Q3. Parish share is intended to support all churches across the diocese. Has your church ever applied restrictions on who can benefit from receiving parish share, for example through making use of the Ephesians Fund to prevent your contribution supporting the majority of clergy in the diocese?

I am aware that The Ephesian Fund has enabled some people, who have found that they cannot fully accept the direction that the Church of England is being led in, to continue to make a financial contribution.

I have been part of Archdeaconry discussions regarding financial matters and aware of the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF) decisions for several years. I fully trust the Carlisle DBF to distribute the parish share appropriately.

The Church I am part of has not seen a need to make use of the Ephesian Fund or sought to apply any restrictions on who can benefit from receiving parish share.

Q4. To what extent do you consider the decreasing number of stipendiary clergy and increasing lay-led congregations to be an issue that needs addressing across the Church of England?

I consider that this is a matter of real concern.

A fully absorbing vocation is a precious gift to the Church, but with any gift of value it is costly, both personally and financially.

At this time the clergy in many dioceses (including ours) are stretched to cover multiple parishes, and already the dioceses are challenged as to how to meet the current stipendiary costs.

This issue needs addressing as soon as possible, especially for the rural parishes across the Church of England whose position is becoming fragile.

One way forward may be through the increased practice of lay-led congregations. However, this concerns me, as sustained biblical teaching and the receiving of sacraments may not be consistent with the Church of England's traditional understanding and practice.

Q5. Do you agree that the Church should commit fully to training and ordaining local leaders as self-supporting priests?

I agree that the Church should fully commit to having vocationally discerned local leaders, trained and ordained as self-supporting priests, as part of a team ministry. These priests will have a supporting structure to guide them, continuing training expected of them, and accountability required of them.

I would also consider another possibility, and that is of the creation of the role of 'Permanent Deacon'.

This does not mean a reduced role for stipendiary clergy, but an opportunity for those who are full time to use their gifting and calling to a greater depth.

Q6. What do you consider to be the Church of England's priorities for the next 5 years?

- To Finance the ministry of clergy - whether stipendiary or self-supporting at an appropriate level, and to look at a continuing provision for when some reach the age of retirement. The message of the Gospel needs to be continually broadcast by all believers, and the clergy available to minister to the needs of their parish.

- To continue the broad aim of reaching Net Zero Carbon Emission - However, this needs to be carefully thought through as to how this will impact across the diversity of parishes that make up the Church of England. There is a real climate emergency which we all need to work towards reducing in every way that we can. We are all called to be stewards of God's creation. Land use and the livelihood of its workers also need to be considered, which will involve the Church Commissioners.

- Through the ethos of love and compassion, be a voice to Government for those who might not be able to speak for themselves. This would include the vulnerable, the lonely, those experiencing mental health issues, those with a terminal illness, those living in poverty, and so many more.

- To bring the voice of Godly Wisdom into this increasingly secular world. One in which examples of neighbourly love, generous care and unending compassion are being drowned out by the ambition to seek profit and expansion, regardless of who might be trampled on in the process.

And to provide an insight into a safe culture where people are enabled to find their uniqueness and diversity through a relationship with the God who created them.

Q7. Do you feel that the Bible's teaching on sexuality and marriage is still relevant for the Church in 2026?

The Church is a unique entity and does need to speak into today's culture with a freshness of voice. However, that does not mean that its message needs rewriting, whether that be on sexuality or marriage, to be seen to be relevant now.

Christian marriage (which celebrates sexuality) has been shown to have a positive effect on the children it potentially bears. It also has a positive impact on the wider society, where an early experience of being loved and cared for is essential to the wellbeing of all, whether single or married.

Q8. What are views in taking forward the Living in Love & Faith (LLF) process, which appears to have come to a natural ending?

Looking back on the LLF process from this point in time, it seems to me that it has been financially costly, and has demonstrably, and sadly, possessed the ability to divide and distract the Church of England for a number of years.

It has been a painful time for many people. Including those seeking affirmation in their same-sex relationship; those who find themselves same-sex attracted yet seeking to live in celibacy out of faithfulness to God; and for those for whom it has increased the need for pastoral care of wounded and hurting people.

I look forward to the reports of the two new working groups being consistent with the long held doctrines of the Church of England; and include some recognition of the need for the continuing support of those for whom this is an ongoing painful and challenging issue.

Q9. What personal qualities do you have that you feel are suitable for serving on General Synod for the next 5 years?

- A desire to seek God's wisdom - I aim to balance the various aspects of my life in order that I have time to seek God's wisdom regarding all the issues that Synod is considering.

- A desire to be inclusive – of those adults with varying physical and mental health conditions. I am keen that the General Synod become a lead in seeking a better way of welcome, support and inclusion; influencing health service provision; and increasing the awareness and understanding of society. I see the Church as the family of God, and an example to be followed as we seek to show love and inclusion in all that we do.

- A desire to seek to support for young people - As a grandparent and school governor, I am keen to see that the need to support and give stability to young people is recognised. Many are persuaded by media influencers to 'choose who they want to be', or to 'reinvent themselves frequently'. In doing this they lose track of who they really are.

- An ability to listen - I find that in listening to people, it is as they speak out their situation, they themselves come to a place from which they can move forward, without any intervention from me.

During my time on the Keswick Town Council, I learned to listen to, respect and work with people of differing views to mine, and to adjust my assumptions when this was needed.

- A willingness to consult and speak out - I am aware that my knowledge on some issues needs the input of information from experts in that field. For example, the Climate Change Emergency. Having consulted others, I am able to use their information and experience to bring a greater depth to the discussions.