



## General Synod Elections 2021

### House of Laity

### Election Address

### Brendan Biggs

#### About me

I live in Clifton, Bristol, with my wife and 8-year-old daughter. I worship at All Saints Clifton, where I sing in the choir, and at Christ Church Clifton.

I work as a solicitor in the corporate team at Ashfords. Before turning to law, I was a college lecturer in English, specialising in the medieval period. I studied theology for a year at Trinity College Bristol.

I was brought up in a Christian home and came to faith as a teenager. I have been most influenced by the open evangelical tradition in the church, and in the 2000s I was a churchwarden of St Andrew's Church in North Oxford. More recently, worshipping at All Saints, I have come to value the Anglo-Catholic tradition. We have enjoyed attending New Wine (in person and online) for the last few years.

I have been a member of General Synod since September 2020, when I was elected to fill a casual vacancy in the House of Laity. I have been a member of Bristol West Deanery Synod since 2011 (and was Deanery Secretary until 2018), and of Bristol Diocesan Synod since 2012. I sat on Christ Church PCC for seven years and am now a member of All Saints PCC. I enjoy listening to classical music, art and architecture, walking, and travelling by train.

#### General Synod

I have learned much from my year on General Synod. Reading the (voluminous) papers has deepened my knowledge of a variety of subjects, and the debates have been helpful in developing my understanding. As to current issues, human sexuality, safeguarding and clergy discipline will continue to be important matters for debate and decision over the next year or so. In the longer term, the vision to be a simpler, humbler and bolder church is likely to lead to far-reaching changes in structures and governance.

#### Human sexuality

The work of the co-ordinating group of **Living in Love and Faith**, a project commissioned by the House of Bishops, was published as a book in November 2020, alongside an online suite of teaching and learning resources. These materials are now being explored at all levels of the church, with discernment and decision-making expected next year.

Living in Love and Faith seeks to understand human sexuality in the context of biblical studies, theology, history, and social and biological sciences, alongside testimonies from those who, from a variety of viewpoints and experiences, have been willing to share their stories. The aim is to help the church 'understand what it means to follow Christ in love and faith given the questions about human identity and the variety of patterns of relationship emerging in our society, including marriage, civil partnership, cohabitation, celibacy and friendship'.

I welcome the fact that the Living in Love and Faith materials have been published as a range of resources. It is important that due weight is given both to the scriptural and theological foundations of

the church's traditional teaching on marriage and sexual relationships, and to contemporary understandings of human sexuality and gender. In making accessible to the church the best biblical and scientific scholarship on these matters, alongside stories of the lived experience of individuals, the co-ordinating group has performed a valuable service to the church. I have been reading its work with interest and look forward to participating in a Living in Love and Faith course in the autumn.

Among the aims of the project are to provide 'clarity about the extent, and limits, of consensus within the Church, mapping the areas where we continue to disagree'. I hope the ensuing discussions will clarify the best and strongest arguments on each side of the debate. This, in my view, will, at this stage, be a more helpful exercise than trying to construct a consensus where none exists.

The aim, nonetheless, should be to find a way in which we can be both faithful to the scriptures and properly inclusive. I have connections on both sides of this debate: my background is among those who, having a high view of scripture, take a conservative position on sexuality, but (as I said in my election address last year) I no longer consider it sustainable, or desirable, to maintain the status quo unchanged. When it comes to same-sex relationships, we need to be able to affirm those who, in good conscience, believe themselves called to faithful partnerships, as well as those called to celibacy.

In relation to women bishops, the church was eventually able to enact change while making provision for those of a contrary view. I hope the discussions resulting from Living in Love and Faith will, similarly, result in a way forward enabling all to live according to their calling.

### **Safeguarding and clergy discipline**

A second important publication last year was the final report of IICSA, the **Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse**, into the extent of institutional failures to protect children from sexual abuse within the Church of England and the Church in Wales. General Synod has accepted the recommendations of the report, and an Independent Safeguarding Board is currently being set up.

While it is self-evident that safeguarding children and vulnerable adults should have the highest priority, it is also important that any allegations of abuse are investigated with due process. In response to sustained criticisms of the operation of the **Clergy Discipline Measure**, General Synod has amended the Clergy Discipline Rules and made changes to the relevant Code of Practice. A new Clergy Discipline Measure is being drafted and will be brought to Synod next year.

The new General Synod must ensure that reforms in both these areas are completed, so that in both safeguarding and clergy discipline we follow best practice as well as we possibly can.

### **Vision and strategy**

The Archbishop of York has presented to General Synod a vision and strategy for a **simpler, humbler and bolder church** which is 'centred on Jesus Christ and shaped by Jesus Christ through the five marks of mission'. The strategic priorities for the 2020s are to become a church of **missionary disciples**, to become a church where a **mixed ecology** (of parishes and fresh expressions of church) is the norm, and to become **younger and more diverse**. Work has begun in reviewing the church's governance structures and use of resources to enable these priorities, and bold outcomes have been identified, including revitalising the parish system, enabling more churches to be worshipping hubs for children and young people, building leadership for a younger and mixed-ecology church, and increasing diversity across decision-making bodies.

I find this vision inspiring. There will, of course, be much to be worked out over the coming years, not least in ensuring an appropriate balance between local and central decision-making as the strategy is developed and put into practice, but the challenge to make Christ known through a renewed church is compelling, and I look forward to being part of it.

I hope you will give me your support as I seek to continue to serve on General Synod. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at [brendan.biggs@gmail.com](mailto:brendan.biggs@gmail.com), or call 07982 611183.