

General Synod Election Address: The Reverend Canon Fiona Shouler

What an honour it is to be asked by friends and colleagues to throw my hat into the ring for this General Synod election – and I am very grateful to Lydia and Garreth for supporting my nomination to represent a diocese I love and where I have spent all my adult years.

I became a Christian at the age of 16 at a Lee Abbey Camp, then moved a couple of years later from Surrey to be a student in Nottingham. Here my young faith was nurtured by the prolific student ministry at St. Nic's, where I learned that faith flourishes and matures when you give as well as receive, are active not passive about faith and seek to follow God's lead and be obedient to Him and His call.



Vocation included teaching English and RE at Henry Mellish Comp in Bulwell – a tough school that confirmed my love of working with young people, especially those with less privilege than myself, and sharing my faith where I could. In my 20's I was deeply influenced by the teaching of John Wimber and the charismatic movement. This is still core to who I am, but I also find much richness in other expressions of faith and worship.

For me vocation includes marriage and 4 children (and now embraces 6 grandchildren). Becoming a stay-at-home Mum (who was rarely found at home as the world of volunteering in church and school governance opened up) and taking on some meaty roles in a large church gave me a different insight into the workings of church from the one professionals necessarily see – I learned the perspective of the volunteer from the inside. As an SSM now, I find myself back among those who tirelessly support, innovate and strategise, with no financial incentive.

The call to ordination came as a complete surprise - not least because some of my strongest encouragers were not people of faith themselves. I was ordained in 2001, after training at St. John's College. I served my curacy at St. Martin's, Sherwood and realised that this privileged Home Counties girl was not really seeking a suburban ministry. In 2006 I became Vicar of Selston with Westwood, in the Coalfields of West Notts. A place where local people often felt forgotten and sidelined by the people who should have been helping with regeneration after the pit closures and a whole generation lost its way of life. A place where the BNP thrived and that has one of the first Reform MPs. A place where I experienced firsthand a mistrust in authority: governments, schools, councils, the police, and, sadly, the church.

For 16 years I worked, wept, laughed, learned to drink tea that could strip the back of my throat and found ways to reach out to the community I grew to love. I reached "up" to receive what I needed each day to serve 2 churches, 1 Church school. 4 other local schools, a Showmen's community, care homes and, most of all, 2 communities that needed God's love and hope for the future. We started lots of initiatives – some worked, others didn't, but we kept trying and kept growing gently. I had the joy of training a few curates and supervising students and am thankful for the challenge and provocation that could involve. I was kept on my toes.

Serving in a very "closed" community, I knew I needed to "get out more" and have enjoyed several terms on Diocesan Synod, time on Bishop's Council, and more than 10 years on the clergy consultative group. Becoming an Area Dean and serving throughout Covid and its aftermath presented more challenge and the

chance to support churches through vacancies and the complexity of parish life. As someone with a heart for the local parish, it has been helpful to be involved in helping deliver the diocesan and funding strategies. I also loved the breadth of worship, visiting many churches.

Becoming an honorary Canon was another unexpected privilege and has given me many new insights (and the chance to be on the interviewing panel for the new Dean). Getting my head around the complexity of the organisation and all the different roles has enabled me to understand something different from my usual workplace and another strand of what it means to be Anglican.

According to the 'Save the Parish Consultation' (March 2026), the CofE priest is in danger of becoming an "endangered species". The report makes somewhat depressing reading, whilst acknowledging the positive energy that was in the room during the consultation. There is mention of the disconnect between people working in the parishes and the centre - both diocesan and national. I believe it is VERY important that the local parish (and not just 'resource churches') are well represented on Synod. Whether the debate is about childhood poverty, the care system, pensions, safeguarding, AI, neurodiversity, accepted forms of worship, racial inequality, the energy crisis, clergy welfare, global warming, human sexuality and "equal marriage", or global issues, those working daily at the "chalk-face" must have a place in the discussion and their voices heard. We are the ones encountering many of these things almost daily in a pastoral and local context, yet it seems as if much of the debate in Synod is commandeered by those who theologise at a distance from the reality of day-to-day ministry, or who are there with a theological axe to grind unwilling to be influenced by anything they listen to or encounter in another.

I would like to offer myself to you, the voter, as someone still in ministry in an area of deprivation, who is seeing a church grow as we reach into that community. We all live in an increasingly polarised world, where fear for the future abounds, especially among Millennials and Gen Z. Jesus is not a mascot for anyone's political agenda; rather he offers and challenges us to a whole way of seeing power and people differently. I would love to be part of a General Synod that is energetic about Good News of Jesus and what that looks like to the lost, the poor, the displaced, the broken and the hopeless. A Synod that does not spend too much time looking inwards, but looks out and is united by its passion for Jesus, ardently believing that the local church is the hope for the nation...and beyond. In John 17, Jesus prayed for his followers for protection, joy, sanctification and finally for unity and love. In the complex business of the Synod, these are the marks of good governance and sound leadership. I hope you will vote for me and that I can become part of a synod managing change well and always inspired by the transforming love of our amazing God.