

General Synod 2021 Election Address Revd Peter Charles Bellenes

*On country mornings sharp and clear
The penitent in faith draw near
And kneeling here below
Partake the heavenly banquet spread
Of sacramental Wine and Bread
And Jesus' presence know.*

*And must that plaintive bell in vain
Plead loud along the dripping lane?
And must the building fall?
Not while we love the church and live
And of our charity will give
Our much, our more, our all.*

John Betjeman



“Save the Parish”

I am standing in this election for General Synod with one aim in mind and that is to promote and protect the vital role of the parish church as part of the glorious inheritance of the Church of England and to counteract any notion that clergy, their theological training and our buildings are “limiting factors” as some would have it. I stand as part of the “Save the Parish” movement and would invite everyone to watch the video of the inaugural meeting in August: **Save the Parish – YouTube**

At the inaugural meeting Rev'd Professor Alison Millbank of Nottingham University declared we are at a crossroads in determining the future of the Church of England. Are we to continue to be a Church for all people or a sect? If the former, then maintaining the parish structure is vital to that end. However, she highlighted that sustainability of the parish structure is seriously threatened by plans for widespread church plants. Professor Millbank alluded to her study which showed such plants gave scant support to the parishes within whose boundaries they were set and drew on average 35 to 38% of the congregation of the existing parish. That is a direct hit at the sustainability of most parishes.

In his address at the same meeting Rev'd Stephen Trott, member of General Synod and a Church Commissioner, reminded us of the transfer of parish endowments and glebe to the national Church back in 1976 to fund uniform stipends for parish clergy. In view of what is happening to the central resources and how they are being directed he thought that experiment could be said to have clearly failed. I would liken it to an insurance company taking your cash for an annuity and then telling you to be self-supporting in retirement!

Closer to home I would ask how can we ask the same MMF from a parish that has seen services reduced from twice on a Sunday to once a month? How with imagination might we serve such a parish better? Bishop Philip has already shown imagination in allowing Communion by Extension and there are other developments to ensure parishes remain both fruitful and sustainable.

So what can I bring? In Truro diocese I have served as honorary curate first at Liskeard and then later at Menheniot to free up the vicar to lead the Decade of Evangelism efforts in Cornwall. In 1999 I transferred to Exeter Diocese to take up the role of team vicar of Marldon & Berry Pomeroy returning to Cornwall in 2009 to be near my grandchildren. At Marldon and Berry Pomeroy I led the use of Communion by Extension as a diocesan experiment approved by the bishop. It proved a successful way of releasing the abilities of several in the Totnes Team congregations to lead worship and at the same time maintaining sacramental services weekly in all the 7 parishes of the widespread rural team.

I went on Sabbatical 15 years ago to the USA and discovered how RC parishes were kept alive by lay pastors under the oversight of the ordained clergy. The pastors were a focus for parish life and events and their existence a response to communities wanting to keep their local worship centre. I reflected on that experience when one Anglican bishop said to me pastoral reorganisation was difficult in the Church of England because Catholics went to Mass and Anglicans went to church – i.e. they don't travel ! Perhaps the RCs in the USA can show us different ways of maintaining a "parson" in the parish, sustaining the local link?

In retirement I helped out in the early days during vacancies in the east of the diocese and later for four years as Honorary Rector of Duloe & Herodsfoot where I served as a governor and worship leader at the primary school. I continue to hold PTO and regularly lead services still at Herodsfoot. While rector of Herodsfoot we developed the parish church as a festival church in embryo. The national director of the Festival Churches Association visited us at Herodsfoot and invited me to give a presentation at the inaugural meeting of the Association. I was able to show how a small very rural church can survive, remain to serve their locality and enjoy the support and engagement of the local population.

I have spent most of my professional life in the social work sphere and for 11 years was a manager with Cornwall Council and was Head of Training for 5 years leaving at the age of 50 to become a full time parish priest. In parish life I have tried pastorally to use my professional and managerial skills to the benefit of the wider community. In Exeter Diocese I was a trustee of Torbay Churches Homeless Trust & chair of the trust's hostel for the homeless management committee, an archdiaconal safeguarding advisor and CME supervisor.

Throughout my time in parish life I have experienced the importance of the parish church as the beating heart of rural communities bringing vitality to village life. Parish church sponsored activities are a powerful way of engaging with the wider community. These activities also underline that there are many facets to the ministry of all believers. Church life is like gardening and if I can quote Kipling:

*For, except when seeds are planted and we shout to scare the birds,
The Glory of the Garden it abideth not in words.....
Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing:- " Oh, how beautiful," and sitting in the shade*

I would welcome your vote to swell the voice of those who wish to save the parish. I am very keen to hear your views and to represent you on General Synod. I can be contacted at any time on my email address Salamanca1968@outlook.com before and, if I am elected, especially after the election. Please invite me to your PCC and to your Deanery to share with you what is happening on General Synod and to reflect your concerns there.

Revd Peter Belienes