

Statement by Philip Billson for General Synod candidacy:

It is an honour to be one of the candidates standing for General Synod.

I have been a church warden for a small church in London Diocese, and a larger church in the Diocese of Manchester where I also serve on Bishop's Council, Diocesan Synod and as a PCC member. We brought up our family in Manchester where we have lived for more than thirty years. I currently, with others, run a monthly meeting at my church for people with learning disabilities from across Greater Manchester, and chair the committee of a local Christian charity serving and reaching out to the thousands of international students who study here. Currently my wife and I are supporting, alongside a number of younger families, a local church revitalisation with the aim of injecting new life into a parish church where many of its long-standing (and faithfully serving) members are struggling with the effects of advancing years.

I am trained as a church musician and theologian and have used these gifts throughout my professional career as an award-winning producer of church services and other religious radio programmes for BBC Radio 2, 3 and 4. As a result I enjoy the widest possible range of contacts with different denominations and traditions throughout the UK, and especially within the Church of England.

It is my prayer that all the rich traditions of our parishes and parish churches will be preserved and enhanced as they (necessarily) become more missionally focussed, and that it will be possible to avoid that sense of 'haves' (the resource churches) and 'have nots' (other parishes). The diocese has plans in place to help the least resourced and most disadvantaged parishes flourish. We need to ensure this happens. Whilst I am keen to see Resource Churches come into existence in all the wonderful traditions which constitute the Anglican presence in Manchester, it is undoubtedly a weakness that, so far, most are, in some form, evangelical. However, promoting flourishing and strategically placed resource churches may be part – but not the whole - answer to decline.

Anglicanism at its best rejoices in difference, but it is both our greatest strength and weakness. The comparatively recent reorganisation of our diocese into fewer deaneries seems to have received a mixed reception. Nonetheless, I believe that organisational streamlining should enable future mission and ministry, and that everyone needs to be prepared to work together across boundaries of whatever kind. I am certainly supportive of our diocese embracing the opportunities presented by its recent substantial financial awards from the Church Commissioners' Strategic Development Fund, but concerned for the future of some of our most disadvantaged parishes. Renewal of the depth needed across our diocese needs not only to be nurtured in every parish but also managed, as there is a frightening proportion of parishes in imminent danger of becoming unviable. Those parishes which are sadly no longer able to continue

are often in our poorest communities. They need to find renewal, revitalisation, and, only, if absolutely necessary, closure. Then, new uses need to be found for the redundant buildings, which are often of an iconic nature and in the very centre of a particular community.

“Living in Love and Faith” discussions throughout the last General Synod were a source of deep division and pain. It is a lamentable failure of our church’s witness that those outside the church often associate Anglicans primarily with what they see as a destructive and irrelevant battle around human sexuality. Although the process is officially ended, the issues are ongoing. In a deeply divided church ways forward must be found which accommodate the differences among us. It seems to me a vitally important part of the witness of the national church to the nation, that an accommodation is both sought and achieved which respects polarised but sincerely held views, which leaves all parties feeling they have a future in the Church of England, and which gives a model for future debates across the wider international Anglican communion. Although I tend towards the church’s traditional teachings on sex and marriage, if elected I would seek attentively to listen to, and to work actively and respectfully with, those whose views differ from my own. To quote the Bishop of Chelmsford Guli Francis-Dehqani, we need to “learn to love one another across a whole range of differences” - some of which may not yet have been dreamt of by anyone!

Finally I believe that, as a priority, we must seek to grow a new generation of young disciples with strong Christian convictions, who will enable the future Anglican church to regain a central position in our national story. Discipleship of children and young people is a key part of the Diocese of Manchester’s successful Strategic Development Fund bid. In the absence of such a new generation, the age demographics of our congregations paint a bleak picture! Our large number of Church of England schools (compared with other dioceses) is a real gift in this area and, together with the plans the diocese is already putting in place to grow children’s and youth ministry, it should be possible, under God, to make real headway in this area. Progress here is completely vital to our church’s mission and indeed its future existence.

I offer these thoughts as I seek your vote for membership of General Synod.