

## Revd Canon Mark Bennet (*Zoom face on*)



I am Team Rector in the Thatcham Team and have spent my 20 years of ordained ministry serving in large urban parishes. In five years as Area Dean of Newbury I came to a deeper understanding of the challenges facing my rural colleagues and worked to break myths and promote better conversation between those of us from different contexts.

Theologically, my roots are in the Bible which tells of the immense love of God for creation, as well as God's love for humanity shown in Jesus. As a practical theologian, I expect my theological work and Biblical study to challenge and change how I live and worship.

My parish focus is on pastoral mission, including occasional offices, as well as extensive work with schools. I have served on the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education for nine years and have been a governor in both primary and secondary schools as well as chair of directors of a (non-Church) multi-academy trust based in the parish. In my last post I spent six years in a complex Local Ecumenical Partnership, working with Methodist, URC and Roman Catholic colleagues.

My affiliations include membership of WATCH (I was on the national committee for several years), PRAXIS and the Alcuin Club (reflecting an ongoing interest in liturgy and worship), BIAPT and Contact Pastoral Trust (both of which I serve as trustee – both are involved nationally and internationally with Practical Theology as a discipline). Training curates has put me in touch with the world of Theological Education in various aspects and I am currently serving on the Council of Westcott House.

General Synod is important to me for several reasons. First, it is a place where the national narrative about our Church is set. I believe that my colleagues in parish ministry should be cherished and valued and given a full and proper place in this national narrative.

I am not against “fresh expressions” – I grew up in one near Wokingham, and we have a mature church plant in Thatcham and various projects to make contact with unchurched groups. I would like more support for indigenous initiatives, and more focus on theological virtues like faithfulness, rather than an over-dependence on short-term success criteria, but I do recognise that there is a place for resourcing projects which are fresh and new and perhaps beyond local capacity. Please note that I am not a member of the “Save the Parish” group, though I clearly have some sympathy with their agenda. My concern would be (as it was in the Newbury Deanery) to promote a better conversation in which we learn to value and support each other in practice as well as in theory.

Second, General Synod is the place where our laws are made, including the laws governing worship, and where our intentions are written into our rulebook. This needs to be done well. In the early days of the flawed Clergy Discipline Measure, I led a motion for a General Synod review through Chelmsford Diocesan Synod. Sadly the problems remain, and I have joined the Sheldon Hub to ensure that the current revision fully addresses all the key issues which have emerged in practice. More

recently I proposed a successful amendment to the Oxford Diocesan motion on climate change to be debated by General Synod, and would be keen to follow this through to practical implementation.

Third, General Synod is where we consider together the strategic allocation of scarce resources. Though much of this is in the hands of other bodies (either devolved, or in the hands of the Church Commissioners), it is clear that both money and ordained clergy are in short supply. With a recent focus on money, the deployment of clergy has been neglected – of course there may be many necessary functions arising in areas like safeguarding and supervision, but every ordained minister in such a role is one fewer in the parishes – that is simple arithmetic: recruitment to front-line parish posts is becoming increasingly challenging, and vacancies are increasing. The collective impact of small-scale local decisions really does need to be seen from a strategic perspective. Questions are a tool for raising these issues. On the money front, I worked as a Chartered Accountant before ordination and have followed the Church Commissioners' finances since the crisis of the early 1990s.

Safeguarding is a particular interest. Before ordination I spent four years working with expert lawyers on claims for personal injury damages. While our Church has put in place a complex and expensive network of training in safeguarding, I am ashamed that we still do not have a workable support and redress scheme for victims – which also needs to express our faith in practice through a compassionate understanding of the effects of abuse perpetrated in a faith context.

I am currently the Living in Love and Faith advocate for Berkshire. LLF is not perfect, but it is a vehicle for promoting better and deeper conversations in relation to divisions and practices which have given rise to much profound and personal hurt. It will not solve all our differences, but I hope for a practical outcome which recognises and celebrates the diversity we have in our midst, and receives as a gift each person God has sent us. That will clearly be a key debate for the General Synod.

In summary, I have long taken an interest in the whole General Synod agenda and offer myself to make my own contribution to moving forward well. My priorities would be better conversation across differences, the active and practical support and encouragement of parish ministry and mission, and better governance and delivery in areas like the CDM and safeguarding. In specifics I want to support the Oxford Diocesan Motion on climate change and to make a decisive step forward in our thinking and practice on sexuality and gender. But above all, I want the whole of what we do to be more closely connected with our theology, our faith and our worship. To quote from a traditional prayer I remember from my youth (my emphasis):

... and we beseech thee,  
give us that due sense of all thy mercies,  
that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful,  
and that we shew forth thy praise,  
***not only with our lips, but in our lives;***  
by giving up ourselves to thy service,  
and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days ...

Such is the foundation of all our worship, mission, service, governance and administration.

See also my comments at [www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk](http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk) for my contributions to current debates (not the only forum I engage with, but I make more regular contributions there than elsewhere).