

GENERAL SYNOD ELECTION ADDRESS FROM ALLAN MARKS, CENTRAL DEANERY

After much thought and prayer I have decided once again to offer myself as a candidate for General Synod for this coming term. I don't have a high expectation of being elected, but I am more than willing to give of my time and energy to be a voice crying out in the wilderness of Westminster (and York) if I am chosen. That's up to you? I am however grateful to Nick Chamberlain and Lesley Chapman for being willing to propose and second me, and in doing so place their confidence in me as being someone who will raise and challenge issues and concerns for which we have a common concern and care.

I have four principal reasons for putting myself forward for General Synod at this time, as I seek to represent those like me, who have been given the privilege to share in the work of God's Mission, to minister faithfully as a priest in the service of the Church, and to be an enabler and encourager all who believe, to be more confident in sharing the Good News in the communities into which they are called by God.

First of all, I am passionate about being a voice for this our Diocese of Newcastle, with its richness and diversity in city, town and country, filled with a people who have an instinct for being community and neighbour in a way which is both warm and friendly, but also is honest and realistic enough to laugh or cry in the good times and in the bad. Having served as a priest in three parishes, and in Tynemouth, West and Central Deaneries, I have enjoyed the privilege of seeing how effective the Church can be and is, as it engages with the people around it, sharing in the life of the world through its work of prayer, pastoral care and practical mission. As those who represented us on Synod in previous years, I would want to ensure that the call from the North is heard down South, but also remind ourselves that the primary work of the Church of England is to be an active prayerful presence in every parish, encouraging and reminding people of all faiths and none that we are there for them, as God is for us all. I will resist where possible any temptation to try and shift the direction of the CofE from being parish based into a more congregational model, which either might brand us (Macdonald's), or might lead us into our own small corner, without any responsibility, care, support or concern for our poorer, smaller, rural, or urban neighbour in a church up or down the road in this our diocese and province.

Secondly, whilst I have great confidence in God's Grace to build the Church and equip it for the future, and in the flourishing growth of God's Mission both Spiritual and Numerical, I have a number of worries and concerns around both the process and the object of the more recent programme called Reform & Renewal. A concern which I know is shared with many in our diocese and across the Church of England, both amongst the clergy and laity alike.

Firstly I am not impressed by the way it seems that this vision and process is now regarded as the given way forward for the Church of England as a whole, without any real collective process of discernment or discussion having taken place, either through the synodical process, let alone by any form of consultation amongst the ordinary priests and people of the parishes which make up a diocese such as our own here in Newcastle.

I have no problem with the idea that the Church should grow, as this is the sign of a healthy and flourishing community which is part of God's blessing upon people created in his/her image. But what I do question and would (with many others) wish to challenge, is not just the quantity of growth (bums on pews) but also the quality and even more so the spiritual dimension of what growth means, both in the Church and within the World where God's Mission is most clearly to be found. As Fr. Stephen Spencer recently commented in Church Times (14.08.15), It appears the vision of Reform and Renewal, in particular in its aim for church growth is limiting itself, and not taking into account the fuller description of this as shared by Rowan Williams in 2010 which was, 'To take forward the spiritual and numerical growth of the Church of England, including the growth of its capacity to serve the whole community of this country'.

I also think that the Diocese of Newcastle has an example and model through its proven work in Ministry and Mission over the last decade to offer to the wider Church. This might well be seen as an alternative and different approach to those being currently offered in the Reform & Renewal programme. It is a model which is based around the traditional parish system, which is also strategic as it encourages intentional mission and evangelism in the local context through a wide range of options and opportunities for worship and nurture, as it seeks to engage with the parish and wider community.

If the devolvement of central financial resources were left as it were, Newcastle would be proved to be an example which bucks the trend, as it can be seen to be growing (relatively) both in number and in the quality of its engagement within the communities and parishes it knows well, principally because of the long term commitment and investment of resources in this intentional way over a consistent period of time.

Thirdly, the ongoing conversations around the issues of human sexuality, and who can and can't be married, or have a loving sustaining relationship which can be blessed by God through the Church, is I feel taking place in another room, from which many of us are excluded. The Church of England has clearly missed an opportunity, whilst albeit concentrating its energy on the important issue of who might become a bishop, it has allowed this most human of needs, that is to affirm all loving relationships, to be passed by. I am concerned that whilst I might still have some reservations in my understanding and emotions about same sex marriage, we have not yet managed as a Church to welcome, or offer, or give, God's Blessing to those whose calling is to a lifelong relationship (same sex) which is already being blessed by the gift of God's Love of itself.

And last of all, I am greatly encouraged by the number of younger people who are offering themselves to serve as priests in our diocese as well as across the CofE, and would want to support every effort to encourage and enable all whose vocation is discerned to be true by the Church in its widest and most universal sense. However, I do have a number of concerns about the nature and the future of their ministry within the Church of England as it is currently being re-imagined, both ordained and lay.

Will the selection process, if more localized offer the same integrity of calling which currently is accepted across the whole of the Church of England and Anglican Communion.

Ideas around fast tracking for leadership, or a more managerial model being offered as a way forward to foster vocations to the episcopate, seem somewhat inappropriate and not at all in keeping with the prompting of the Holy Spirit? Though I may be mistaken?

Many of the recently ordained I have spoken with, express a clear calling to Parish Ministry which for them is understood as full time stipendiary, as they give the rest of their life to serve Christ in the Church. Does the re-imagined strategy accept this as a valid calling?

Also, the rush to ordain numbers, may not match up to the numbers called by God? and the resources as proposed in the future plans may also not be adequate for the full and effective process of training and formation required to provide us with both confident and competent priests in the future. This alongside the further development and diversification of a more contractual tenure could lead to a sense of insecurity and being undervalued, especially for those clergy who find themselves in shared posts which may not be sustainable in supporting full time ministry, or might increase the burden on those who undertake part-time or house for duty or ordained local ministries.

In closing this address, my hopes for the Church of England, and especially for the Diocese of Newcastle are positive, and I think we have good reason to be confident in the way we do Church here in the North East and be ready to offer it as an example to others.

If you agree with any or much of what I have said in the above, I would ask you to give me your first choice vote and encourage other who may have similar views to do the same.

My prayers are with you in your choices and with the other candidates who are standing alongside me. And please pray for me, a sinner too!