

General Synod Election Address: Rev Sister Heather Kemball



To be honest I'm not normally the biggest fan of committees, so I am somewhat surprised to find myself standing for the General Synod. But a few months back, after reading the email inviting nominations and praying about whether this was something God wanted me to do, I was left with that "nudge" that I've come to recognise as the Holy Spirit's whisper. In a few weeks' time I celebrate my 60th birthday and in the 44 years that I've been a follower of Jesus, I've never managed to win an argument with God yet! So, I'm putting myself forward in obedience to that "nudge".

I've read a few old electoral addresses and it seems the main thing is to share a little about myself, my experience in the Church of England and something of my walk with God.

I became a Christian in Cambridge at 15 after the curate at Holy Trinity took the time and trouble to meet with my older brother Peter, who had autism and learning disabilities, and prepare him for confirmation. I was impressed by that, and so I decided to take my first proper look at the Christian faith (even though I'd grown up going to church). I was amazed to discover God inviting me into a relationship with him through Jesus, and I took that step of faith and was confirmed. Even at 15 I had a sort of understanding that following Jesus would be an important thing in my life.

I left school at 16 because I needed to be financially independent and help my parents support my brother. God led me to a job with Lloyds Bank which I did for 7 years, during which time I took and passed all the banking exams. At 23 I was in a 20+ group at Holy Trinity and I had also started to go on missions led by Rev Daniel Cozens of Through Faith Missions. Several people at church independently started speaking to me about having the gift of an evangelist. I had always felt at deep sense of peace at work until that point. Suddenly that changed and with the help of the deaconess I discerned that God wanted me to leave my banking career. I looked at Church Army and God clearly opened the door for me to go to their college and train full-time for 3 years.

Receiving my commission from the Archbishop of Canterbury as a Church Army Evangelist in June 1988 was a very special moment of anointing. My husband Alan and I were married the following month, and I took up my first post (equivalent of a curacy) at St. Peter's Congleton. My husband worked for ICI back then and we were transferred to Brecksville Ohio in 1990 for 2 years, which afforded me a wonderful opportunity to work with the Diocese of Northern Ohio on their Mission Committee and to be on the staff (non-stipendiary) of St. Luke's Akron, leading the Evangelism Pastorate and participating in some of the regular mission weekends over the border in Canada. I also worked with Church Army in America. Our first child, Anna, was born there and we all returned to the UK in 1990.

Sarah & David completed our family and I worked informally back at St. Peter's Congleton – preaching, leading worship and running the toddler group, Mums' bible study group and Mums' confirmation classes. After Anna and Sarah had started school I began to look around for a formal part-time Church Army role. At that time 4 parishes in Congleton decided to come together as Congleton Team Parish in 1998 and I was invited to become Team Evangelist (part-time).

Over the next 19 years until July 2017, I worked across the four church congregations encouraging and enabling evangelism, and seeking to lead by example. Back in 2000 I chaired the organisation of a Millennium 'Party in the Park' for all 2000 primary school children in our town. I was asked by the diocese to help train lay evangelists in 2001 until that course came to an end. In Congleton, sometimes we used tried and tested resources, such as the Start Course, Moving On and Experience Easter/ Christmas. Sometimes we created our own, such as our Chocolate Evenings, our monthly Car Boot Outreach, our Harvest Festivals on our local Tesco car park. I was part of the diocesan committee for Back to Church Sunday and I have been a Deanery Vocations Adviser for many years. Within Church Army I was a selector for several years and am currently a reflector (mentor) to one of our evangelists-in-training. Over the years I have participated as part of the visiting team on a variety of missions in this country and sometimes invitations have come from further afield. In 2012 I helped with two diocesan training conferences introducing the Rooted in Jesus material to Kiteto and Arusha in Tanzania. More recently, in 2015 I chaired the Mission Committee that organised our own 9-day parish mission 'Connect'. In 2017, following a period of restructuring, I was made redundant.

During that year I spent time waiting on God to discern what next. When I was commissioned as a Church Army Evangelist back in 1988 women were not ordained. Almost 30 years later a lot had changed, and I felt God calling me to push on that door and see what happened. The door opened and I was accepted for 1 year's training at St. Mellitus in Liverpool.

I was ordained deacon in June 2019 and took up my post as curate at Christ Church Alsager. I was priested in October 2020. Most of my curacy has taken place during Covid, which has limited some of the evangelism I had hoped to do, but like many I have live-streamed services, recorded talks and assemblies and had many zoom meetings. I'm really enjoying my curacy, and as I write this it's great to see people coming back to church and our programme starting up again.

It's a bit of a shock to realise that I've been in Christian ministry of one form or another for 36 years. In that time, I've worked in a wide range of settings and experienced evangelism in a number of countries. Life has had its share of challenges and celebrations, and from time to time I have suffered with depression - from which I have learned a number of valuable lessons. If I am elected to General Synod I would hope that I can draw on all those experiences.

My main experience is as an evangelist, and I believe the core of the Good News we have to offer to every person is God's invitation to 'Come Home'. In Christ, God has removed every barrier and reconciled the whole created order to himself. The problem is that there appears to be a significant mismatch between the core message entrusted to us to share as the church and what substantial numbers of people outside the church actually hear, see and experience. Talking to non-Christian members of my own family and drawing on recent research in by one of our Multi-Academy Trusts, what is heard is very far from a message of welcome, love and inclusion. Instead, all too often what is heard is intolerance, arrogance and double-standards.

It seems to me the next 5 years in the Church of England will be important ones. I don't think we have ever had a period of listening and discernment quite like LLF. How we engage and listen together to hear what the Spirit is saying, how we treat those with whom we disagree, and how deliver the message of God's unconditional welcome to those who as yet don't believe will be crucial.