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Vicar of Birkenhead St James with St Bede

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:5, ESV)

That verse from the Prologue to John’s Gospel struck me as especially relevant this Christmas. When I look at the world around us it’s easy to see darkness, in the terrible wars and conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza and over a hundred other places, or in the effects of our changing climate and the more frequent extreme weather events being experienced. I see the daily impact of the cost of living crisis across our community, and there is the legacy of the Covid Pandemic, not only in the tragedy of lives lost but also in the continuing impact on the NHS and the lasting effect on the mental health and wellbeing of so many, particularly children and young people. These are hard times, and these are our times.

It is in the true light that is Jesus Christ that I believe we find hope. Our Church family in Birkenhead is not large and we are not wealthy, there are issues with our buildings, and our financial reserves and resources aren’t enough. Yet meeting together to worship and praise God as we share the journey of faith together is always a blessing and encouragement. I see the way our Church, like many, has welcomed people from Hong Kong and Ukraine and elsewhere over the past couple of years. It’s humbling to see just how incredibly generous people are in donating to our local Foodbank, and in cash collections for those in crisis. I see the care and concern our Church members have, not only for each other, but in reaching out to those at the bottom of society, not always waiting for appeals for help but just getting on with it. The Church, the gathered people of God, still has a big heart and a role to play, and we have good news - the best news - of a God who gave everything for us.

When I was a student at Theological College back in 2007, I wrote my final Dissertation on what it was to *be Anglican*, not simply to be *an Anglican*. In other words, what it means to engage with God, other Christians and the local community and wider society generously and graciously in an Anglican manner, how it can mean more than just being involved in the Church of England. I wrote about our calling to the whole nation and the comprehensive nature of the Anglican tradition, and how I believe it remains relevant to society today.

It is with this in mind that I offer myself to serve on the General Synod in this election. Since my Ordination as Deacon in Chester Cathedral in 2007, I have had the privilege of serving in a variety of Churches and contexts. While I can be described as an ‘open evangelical’ myself, the Parishes where I have served have ranged from the Evangelical (St Mary’s Upton, where I was Curate), to the more Catholic (St Paul with St Luke Tranmere, my first incumbency), and the Central or Liberal-Catholic (St Peter’s Hale and St Elizabeth’s Ashley). For the past five years I have been at St James with St Bede Birkenhead, where I believe God has called me to stay. It means now is a good moment for me to see how I can also give back to the wider Church, something I am keen to do at this time.

I wish to draw on the experience I have gained, not only as an Ordained Minister but from my previous career in Industry and Local Government, where I worked as a Chartered Management Accountant in Finance and Management over a period of eighteen years. I can also draw on experience serving on both sides of our Diocese, in Urban Ministry in Birkenhead, suburban ministry in Hale and rural ministry in the farming Parish of Ashley. In Hale and Ashley I was the Vicar of a United Benefice, and while at St Paul’s Tranmere also had responsibility for the ‘Open Door’ Fresh Expression, working with the Church Army.

Why should anyone vote for me?

I have outlined above my experiences serving in Churches large and small, and across the traditions and the socio-economic spectrum, as well as my previous career in Management and Finance. I would aim to draw on all this experience when representing the Clergy of our Diocese. I believe it is important for General Synod to hear voices from smaller Churches, with the challenges we face, alongside larger Churches with more resources. While I have experience in both, have managed staff and worked on my own, I now speak as a minister committed to small Church ministry.

Having a Parish Church building that occupies a central location in our community (it really is on a roundabout in the middle), I'm very conscious our buildings and the associations our communities have with them bring both opportunities and problems. How to manage our estate and the testimony it offers is a big issue nationally where I'd hope to contribute.

I am keen to support the development of new ministries while honouring the traditions that have brought us here, just as I have throughout my own ministry, and I am keen to encourage ministry of and by young adults (my four daughters aged 16 to 28 are all involved in Churches in various capacities). Young people I speak with often don't identify or connect readily with formal or structured organisations and institutions, and I realise this presents a challenge for the way the Church of England General Synod is expected to work.

I am also able to bring an informed view on the internal workings of the Clergy Discipline Measure, being a panel member who has served on a CDM Tribunal, and understand why concerns over the implementation of the CDM process are an issue nationally too.

My wife Jane is also an Ordained Minister in the Diocese of Chester. She lives with Multiple Sclerosis, and this has given me fresh insight into just how many unintended barriers people with disabilities can find in front of them when called to serve. I have also recently discovered I have been living with an undiagnosed health condition of my own, and I can speak from personal experience about experiencing and recovery from exhaustion.

It is understandable that colleagues will want to know my understanding of Living in Love and Faith at this time. In my time as a Minister, questions of human sexuality and identity have arisen only very rarely. When they have, it has always been both personal and pastoral, and it is through this lens that my understanding of this sensitive area has grown. While I do have evangelical roots, and a long association with the charismatic evangelical New Wine network, I want to provide an inclusive welcome to all people worshipping with us, and would not wish to withhold blessing from someone in a same sex relationship coming to Church. They may have experienced rejection or hostility elsewhere, and in an urban community where values such as commitment in relationships can be rare, I would want to support anyone asking about Prayers of Love and Faith. It is what I do when someone who has been divorced asks about remarriage in Church, for example, or when parents in a same-sex relationship enquire about Baptism for a child. While wanting to embrace all God's children, at St James we are treading cautiously, as there are different views across our Church family. I would bring the same commitment to careful listening and compassionate prayer when voting at a national level. Having studied the Prayers of Love and Faith and the associated Pastoral Guidance, I would have voted in favour of them. I recognise they try and balance on an impossibly thin line of being seen as either a step too far, or as an offering of very little. I am uncomfortable with the degree of polarisation too often seen in discussions, and believe in working together in a Church with room for all.

I understand there is a strong field of nine candidates offering to serve at this time. It is my hope and prayer that Clergy here in the Diocese of Chester will have time to prayerfully consider the statements of all, and that you'll feel there are people you can support in this Election. With that, and with prayers for God's blessing on your ministry this year, can I just close by saying thank you for taking the time to read my offering. Yours, Keith.