

Revd Geoffrey Fenton**Team Vicar, Ashburton and Moorland Benefice**

The Vicarage

geoffrey.fenton@wildyeast.co.uk

Widecombe in the Moor

01364 621334

Newton Abbot

07791 725184

Devon

TQ13 7TF

I am a House for Duty Priest at Widecombe-in-the-Moor, with a 40% stipend. I run an IT business alongside my ministry. I believe this balance of ministry and employment gives me a wide professional perspective on the dilemmas the church is facing. I am married with three grown-up daughters. I am also fully engaged in the local community:

- on the Parish Council
- a Trustee of Shallowford Farm Trust, which has inner city children coming to stay on its farm on Dartmoor
- a Project Leader for “Moor than Meets the Eye” (a £4m Heritage Fund on Dartmoor)
- an active Committee Member for Widecombe Fair
- a bell-ringer still learning the ropes

My candidature for General Synod has been prompted by my desire to contribute to a new vision for the Church of England, in particular in rural areas, starting with a new vision for priestly rural ministry:

- I have a passion for rural ministry, and believe that the Church of England is immensely privileged to have churches in almost every village and town.
- But this wonderful legacy is in great danger of being neglected by increasingly harassed stipendiary clergy being stretched ever more thinly.
- I believe the church needs to take far more seriously the inevitable transition from stipendiary ministry to non-stipendiary ministry, and recognise the value of SSMs who are always deeply committed to local churches and communities.
- A recent survey in the Bristol Diocese (Church Times 15th May 2015) estimates SSM's save that diocese “in excess of £1.8m a year” in stipends.
- SSMs now make up 28% of clergy, and this proportion is rising. In 2012 there were 8200 SMs and 3150 SSMs.
- But SSMs are hardly represented at all at General Synod, with the 2010-15 House of Clergy only having 3 SSMs among the total of 200 clergy.
- I will seek to promote the role of SSMs within the church.

Recently I have been contributing nationally to the debate on the Rural Church, and I am concerned by the unreality of this debate. I would like to see it take a new direction.

- The current focus is on retreating from villages and creating ever bigger groupings.

- But people cannot easily relate to a team, (though the team structure can be beneficial in supporting ministers.)
- I believe every village really needs a well-trained church leader (mostly unpaid) – be they churchwarden, reader, SSM or SM.
- Such people in each community will be a focus for Christian commitment and action.
- The church has to work out how to manage this transition from thinly spread stipendiaries to local energised ministries, and this will bring enormous benefits:
 - It will engage people on the ground with more enthusiasm
 - It will benefit and empower the community
 - It's a whole lot cheaper

I also think that for many other reasons the next five years will be a crucial time for the Church of England:

- There are many issues to be tackled such as child abuse, falling church attendance, financial and funding problems, retirement of many priests.
- The move towards women bishops is only the first of many steps that I believe the church needs to make to regain public trust and to become fully inclusive.
- I observe that the general public have lost trust in the church as an institution and as a moral guardian. A recent poll shows that only 29% of 18-24 year olds think the clergy can be trusted. I think this is tragic, yet I believe the church has only itself to blame.
- Tough decisions and a new vision for the Church will be needed.

I will contribute actively to the General Synod debates, just as I have been actively engaged in debates at Diocesan Synod over many years:

- First elected to Exeter Diocesan Synod in 1985 as a lay representative from Okehampton Deanery.
- Following ordination in 2000 as an SSM in Bath and Wells, I was again on their Diocesan Synod, as well as serving on Bishop's Council and the Diocesan Finance Committee.
- One national task which I was pleased to be engaged with was co-authoring the long-overdue "Dignity at Work" – the C of E's bullying and harassment policy.
- Moving back to Exeter Diocese, I am once again active in the Diocesan Synod here, making contributions to many debates.
- I have no affiliations to any church grouping. I am equally comfortable with the BCP, Common Worship and the noise and bustle of Messy Church!

On a small scale, I am much encouraged by seeing a growing confidence and steadily growing numbers in some local rural Churches, and I want to share this and learn from other's experience, so that across the country the Church of England can once again be engaged at the heart of every community