

Jonathan Bish

Priest in Charge, United Benefice of Batley



About Me

- I am 36 years old and have been in ministry for 11 years. As a younger priest, I am keen to represent the voices of Millennials and Gen Z Christians to a church where older voices are often heard more than younger ones.
- I am a convert to Anglicanism, having been formed in my faith through an evangelical Presbyterian church in the United States. I believe in the Church of England: a catholic church with a vocation to serve a nation and share the good news of Jesus.
- I currently serve as priest-in-charge of the United Benefice of Batley, including two parishes that are among the poorest in the diocese, and have served all my ministry in urban parts of the Diocese of Leeds. I know the challenges that the church faces on the ground: a decline in numbers, volunteers, ministers and confidence. But I also believe at the root of all this is a spiritual crisis in the Church of England: we have forgotten what is distinctive about our faith and our church, and have placed too much confidence in strategy and planning, and not enough in prayer and the sacraments. I want to see a spiritual revival in our churches, something that I believe will only come through a renewal in the church's worship, prayer and study.
- I value learning and education. I have always taken my time to serve in local schools (I'm on three boards of governors). I believe education is central to the Christian vocation, and that the church must do more to communicate its message in an intelligent and engaged way at a time when more young people are going to further education and university than ever before.
- I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome as a teenager and live with autistic spectrum disorder as an adult. I believe the church must do more to accommodate disability and diverse people in all their forms.

What I stand for

Supporting the Parish Church: I would support legislation which strengthened the place of the parish church at the heart of the Church of England, and in particular would advocate for:

- **Worship at the heart of the church:** The first question in the Westminster Confession says our purpose "is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." We need to renew the Church's worship and see it as something which is not a means to an end, but as the heart and purpose of Christian life. I would advocate for the renewal of an Anglican identity centred on worship as well as encouraging daily prayer and worship both in churches and individually.
- **Reorienting the church around the parish:** A church committed to a Christian presence in every community must begin with the presence we already have and strengthen it, rather than creating new forms of church to compete with it. Our parishes need to be at the centre of our mission, properly funded, and enabled to flourish.
- **Repurposing Strategic Development Funding:** I support the Save the Parish Network's manifesto proposal for integrating Strategic Development Funding and the parish system. SDF projects currently spend an average £12,000 for each new disciple reached for Christ. One major scheme in Wigan was found to have actually accelerated the decline in church attendance, rather than reversed it. This scandalous state of affairs cannot go on: it is not faithful stewardship of our resources, nor effective mission, nor does it build up the body of Christ to have well-funded churches in some places and struggling ones in others.

Mission to the Nation: I would advocate for the church's ministry to the whole nation, and in particular support:

- Real dialogue with younger people: With only 1% 18-24 year olds identifying as members of the Church of England, the church must do more to engage young people. I would support actively working to promote people under 40 in visible leadership roles in the church.
- Safeguarding our built heritage: I serve on the DAC and would support moves to see church buildings as assets for mission, not burdens. A recent study found church buildings to be more effective in shaping younger people's faith than youth groups, chaplaincy or any other form of outreach. We need a national church buildings strategy to make our buildings suitable for mission, capitalise on their value to our communities, and make them environmentally sound.
- Civic engagement: The church needs to be more engaged in political and community life at all levels. I would advocate for the church to be more literate on the issues of the day, like economic growth, the housing crisis, regional inequalities and the gap between rich and poor.

The Inclusion and Safeguarding of All: I would support intentional measures to promote the inclusion and safeguarding of all. It is especially important to me that we:

- Include the disabled: As someone with a recognised disability, my experience has been that the church does not always actively value disability and diversity for its own sake as a manifestation of the *imago Dei*. I would advocate for a change of culture away from simply addressing access issues and towards one where we actively listen to and value the disabled.
- Reckon with racism: It is not enough for the church to not discriminate on the grounds of colour; it is important that the church takes active steps to grow the participation of UK minority ethnic people in all levels of leadership in the Church of England.
- Affirm LGBT+ people: I would not be a Christian today without the friendship, prayers and mentorship of a number of LGBT+ Christians. I believe that blessing LGBT+ relationships faithfully witnesses to the Christian understanding of marriage as something defined not merely by procreation or social context, but as an indissoluble and sacramental union. I would advocate for the full inclusion of LGBT+ people in the sacramental life of the church, and support the full implementation of Prayers of Love and Faith in our churches.
- Safeguard God's people: Safeguarding is an essential precondition for faithful mission, but it is also something still subject to too much potential church control, and something increasingly burdensome for struggling parishes. I would advocate for measures which placed more control into the hands of safeguarding professionals.

A Learning Church: Richard Hooker said that reason is the common possession of all, and at the heart of our faith. I would advocate for the importance of learning and education in the church's life, and especially would support:

- More robust theological education: In an age of doubt, it is essential that our clergy and lay leaders have the tools to advocate to communicate the message of Jesus. I would support moves towards more academically rigorous theological education for all ministers and would see intellectual formation as just as important as pastoral or spiritual formation.
- A national strategy for church music: We need to see church music in all its forms as a national priority, both as an aid to mission and a treasure of the church. I would work towards funding music as a resource for the church in every place, from cathedrals to local churches.
- Engagement with education: I see schools as places of formation, encounter and service, and would support the church actively promoting a more distinctively Christian education and ethos in our church schools, as well as offering what services we can to other schools.

I hope you will consider voting for me!