

Revd Robb Sutherland

**Vicar of Mixenden and Illingworth.
Area Dean of Halifax and Calder Valley.**

I am standing for election to General Synod so that we can build a Church of England that lives up to its aspiration to be 'a Christian presence in every community'. A Church of England that is united together to actively declare the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole of our nation in each and every place and community. A Church of England that provides the resources to enable our local churches to flourish in this great calling.



Getting to know colleagues across a diocese as large as ours is a challenge. Here I share a little of my personal background so that you may understand why I am so passionate to see our Church of England dedicate itself to working with and for people on the margins. I share a little of my experience working nationally towards that aim. And I share some of the challenges that I believe our Church must address so that our church communities and clergy may flourish.

My Story

I come from a mining family in the Yorkshire coal fields and lived through the strike in the 1980s. We moved to the North Yorkshire Moors and the potash mining industry. My childhood revolved around shift patterns and the communal life of the pit. At 18 I met my now wife Ruth who was the vicar of Osmondthorpe's daughter. She introduced me to the Christian faith and church life and spoke with great passion about Jesus transforming lives and communities. This small Christian community at St Philip's Church in Osmondthorpe on an outer urban estate was instrumental in shaping my understanding of the Christian faith. It was here that Ruth and I would marry as the estate community came together with flowers and sandwiches to celebrate with us. The ordinary lives of these modern-day disciples taught me that the good news of Jesus Christ is first and foremost good news for the poor. It was here that I learned what it meant for the first apostles to go out into the world to build the church as they went to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the slave.

The kitchen table during the miners' strike and the people of St Philip's Osmondthorpe taught me that people who have nothing will come together as community and give everything that they have.

Ordained Ministry

I was ordained in 2009 and following a curacy in Morley, I was appointed as Vicar of Mixenden and Illingworth. Here I was asked to bring together two parishes to serve the estates of North Halifax. There are many challenges to growing and building Christian a presence in an area of intense poverty, but the people of Holy Nativity never shy away from this challenge. Over the last twelve years the different roles that Holy Nativity has within the estate have shifted with the changing social needs of the area. We have developed social initiatives such as the Pay as You Can Café, Food Bank and Drop-In services. We have built strong links with the uniformed organisations, working together we have developed a Christian youth group and annual camp. The link between the church and the local schools has grown steadily deeper. This has enabled the Christian Community to serve the estate in ways that other local organisations sometimes struggle because of social stigma. Last year we were successfully invited to apply for UKSPF funding through the local council to appoint a development officer. She is now strengthening the church community's volunteer base and our community engagement as well as redeveloping the church building.

At the heart of everything we do are the teachings of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the good news. We are an unashamedly inclusive Christian Community that was planted 70 years ago to serve the local area because we seek a foretaste of God's Kingdom in the here and now. Each day we see lives transformed through the life changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

Serving the Wider Church

There are many key challenges that face our Church of England in the coming decades. We have seen that we can become easily polarised and sidetracked from our primary calling of declaring the good news. We must build a church that is able to support local churches across our whole nation and in the rich diversity of social circumstances we represent.

Since 2016 I have served as a member of the Estates Evangelism Task Group (EETG) which is part of the Archbishops' Renewal and Reform programme. Our vision is for "a loving, worshipping, serving Christian community on every significant social housing estate in England". In recent years, the Church of England has made decisions about where it cuts its cloth. In many instances this has not been strategic and has been at the expense of our poorest and most marginalised communities. The Church of England's aspiration to provide "A Christian Presence in Every Community" so often failed to materialise in the places of poverty. It is EETG's conviction that if our approaches to mission accidentally or deliberately exclude the poor, we will never see the renewal of the church for which we pray. Whether in Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, Ripon or Wakefield, we see the effects of long-term poverty and our Church of England should be confident and thriving within every marginalised community to declare the radical vision of Jesus.

In 2019, EETG brought a motion to General Synod that was carried unanimously: "to have a loving, worshipping, serving Christian community on every significant social housing estate in England". This year we returned to ask for further commitment: "We are challenging the church to increase the pace of change required to have a true and sustained 'bias to the poor' culture evidenced through intentional strategic decision making and resource allocation". I hope to be elected to General Synod to help shape and realise our church's vision for the future.

The Challenges that Face Us.

As we focus together on the future of the Church of England, we must build a national church that serves the whole of our nation whether estates or rural, young or old, regardless of class, race or gender or sexuality.

National finance: If we are to build a church that reflects the diversity of our nation, difficult decisions need to be made beyond a commitment to the abstract. For there to be a flourishing church in every community we need to have an honest appraisal of what areas of church life we invest in. Nationally, there is an undeniable disparity between those who have and those who have not. This cannot be easily addressed but neither can it be sidelined. Our current reality is that the dioceses with the least historic assets shoulder the greatest burden of being the good news to the poor.

Vocation and Governance: There are questions that our church has only just begun to address around vocation and governance and the invisible barriers that prevent people from taking roles because of race, gender or class. We must ensure that the voices of those we serve are present in the room, including the poorest in our nation.

Clergy Wellbeing: As with every walk of life, the rapid pace of change as we move through the technological revolution comes with many challenges. The world of modern ministry is vastly different to that of our predecessors with an almost constant call upon our time. Many clergy serve at great personal cost whether stipendiary, SSM, working in diocesan roles, chaplaincy or the myriad of other roles in modern ministry. We must address these changes and the increased workload of multiple parish benefices so that our local leaders are also able to live life in all its fullness.

Taking motions to General Synod has been a huge privilege and I have been encouraged by the senior leaders of the EETG to stand for General Synod in order to take a more participatory role in shaping the future of our church. I hope you will consider me for your vote. I pledge to work for the good of the wider church that I continue to love and serve.

If you have any questions, I would love to answer them at the hustings. If you can't make the hustings, please get in touch. vicar@holynativity.co.uk or 01422 353929