

BEN CHEESEMAM Seeking Election to GENERAL SYNOD

Being a Christian is not a private affair. We are called to go out into the world and transform it, and a foundational part of Christian life is to be part of the church, both at the level of the parish, and as a broader collective. We believe the Church to be a real and vital institution here on earth, established by Christ and requiring governance and guidance by the Holy Spirit, through its members. I feel called to take part in that, both as an expression of my Christian life, and to represent what is a small but growing population of young churchgoers in Southwark and across the rest of the country.

I recently took part in the CofE commissioned *Theos* research piece '*Understanding Young Adult Journeys to Faith in the Church of England*', giving testimony to my journey to faith as a young adult. YouGov statistics show that whilst belief in God increased moderately amongst 25-49s between 2021 and 2024, it almost tripled amongst 18-24s across the same period. I maintain that we will continue to see such a trend, and I expect a large influx into the church from the younger demographic, owing to ever-increasing pressures felt by all of us and in all areas of our lives, including the rise of social media, the development of artificial intelligence, political instability, and the climate crisis. It is essential that young people find in the church, today, a foundation that allows them to stand up in such turbulent times, and one that does not shy away from addressing the matters of the day yet nevertheless holds at its core the timeless and eternal message of Christ.



There are therefore key issues which must be addressed and upheld by the Church of England to ensure that young people feel they can find their home in the church:

Environmental consciousness: A key issue amongst young people, with a CAST report saying that “[young people] feel much more threatened by [climate change] and have stronger emotional reactions [to it].” As a first step, looking at ways to address energy inefficiency within the parish, and setting up sources of renewable energy, while noting the difficulties posed by financial constraints and practical challenges like sourcing contractors.

Diversity of Belief: Surveys have highlighted how many younger Anglicans followed paths into the church through avenues as diverse as: New Age Spirituality, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy - often not through direct Anglican paths. It is essential that the Church of England continues to allow all parts of itself to exist, affording the various temperaments and proclivities of young seekers.

Outreach: That the Church maintains its practices, ensuring a multitude of 'entry points' for young people. For myself this was finding a church that had multiple liturgical services throughout the week; for many others it's through local missioning, and increasingly now through online mediums. What forms and styles appeal to young people change from generation to generation, research and testimony stress that *confidence and authenticity* are key today.

Social Justice: That those whom society has all but forgotten about or rejected, are remembered and looked after by the church, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom experiences of discrimination and neglect are commonplace. And that this should be reflected both at the level of the parish, in coming together as community and through programmes like Food Banks, Men in Sheds, Boys' and Girls' Brigade, but also and most importantly, by witnessing the Gospel message of repentance and forgiveness through our day-to-day lives, loving our neighbour regardless of whom that may be, and at what personal cost.

I aim to emphasise the importance of the church maintaining itself in such a way that young people find it to be relevant and good, yet at the same time to recognise the tension between that and 'bending to the spirit of the age', wherein lies the risk of losing the core mission of the church; that of the salvation of souls. I think the church should ensure that positions it takes on today's issues are backed by intellectually rigorous and theologically careful reasoning, are the fruit of prayer, and consistent with the principles set forth in the Gospels, informed where relevant by tradition. I hold to a traditional view of marriage but think there is much to be done to alleviate the alienation that it can cause, both within the church and without, with more conversations required, better understanding from both sides, and across different demographics. It would be a great privilege for me to serve on General Synod, and I am confident that my voice would be a moderate and considered one, offering insight especially into those matters relevant to my generation as it finds its footing in the modern world, and upon whom will fall, in time, the duty of, to safeguard and steward the church into the next.

