

MRS REBECCA HILL



WHO AM I?

I am a church warden in the rural parish of Barningham Winter in North Norfolk which is part of the Maltase Benefice and near where I live with my husband and two sons. As a barrister in London, where I have practised in property and agricultural law for over 20 years, I also enjoy attending St Bartholomew the Great when I am able. I embarked on the part-time MA in Church Law last year and have recently been elected as a trustee of the Ecclesiastical Law Society.



REASON FOR STANDING

- Our benefice is blessed to have a dedicated and enthusiastic rector where the individual churches have, as Lord Williams described, “a rooted presence...in every community.” My first foray into church politics, however, came about a decade ago in a different diocese. I was asked to assist a group of parishioners troubled by the intended creation of a benefice from 2 small parishes to 6 following the retirement of the incumbent. Compared to other multi parish benefices the figures may appear relatively small, but for a rural parish that had up to that point a parish priest who was present daily and integral to parish life this marked a dramatic change. The loosely veiled threat of church closure led to a breakdown of trust between diocese and the parish. Whilst closure was averted and a smaller benefice was achieved, the interregnum lasted over a year, leading to a decline in attendance. The subsequent appointment of a priest who did not conform to many of the traditions of the parish led to further departures.
- More recently, the drive for multi parish benefices to form joint councils has presented a further headache. Whereas the promise of easing the administrative burden appeared at first blush attractive, I spent some time considering the difficulties it posed (not least the loss of control by PCCs, parish identity and the ability to reverse the position).

There are two main reasons why I wish to stand

First, we need to focus on the presence of a parish priest in every parish. This is not borne out of nostalgia. Rather, I have been concerned for some time that the priest is there to have cure of the souls, preach and administer the sacraments.

Secondly, I am fully aware we are facing a crisis in the discrepancy of numbers between those coming forward for ordination and those departing. According to the Church of England 2016 report, *Going Deeper*, “an increase in clergy is associated with the likelihood of growth in attendance, while a decrease in clergy is associated, on average, with a decline in attendance.” Yet only 37% of all active clergy are in stipendiary roles, and there has been a 25% reduction in new ordinands between 2020 and 2025.

We need to find a way not only to stem the tide but to increase numbers of priests.

WHAT I WILL DO

It is for those reasons that I support Save the Parish and stand with its commitments for the next Synod. A copy of the manifesto may be accessed here <https://www.savetheparish.com/general-synod-manifesto-2026/>.

I would like to highlight the following.

Parish:

- Restore Church Commissioners funds to their founding purpose: **stipendiary parish ministry**
 - In 2024 the Church Commissioners held £11.1 billion in endowment which generated a distributable income of £491 million.
 - During the last Synod, **the National Church Governance Measure** was amended so that the income paid out must have “particular regard to the requirements of section 67 of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act 1840 relating to the additional provision of the cure of souls in parishes where such assistance is most required”. Since then, the entire Measure was withdrawn (the Ecclesiastical Committee having deemed it inexpedient). **This will need to be fought again at the next Synod.**
- Return to **Formula Funding**: The Archbishop’s Council was established to “co-ordinate, promote, aid and further the work and mission of the Church of England” (National Institutions Measure 1998, s1). The move from a formula (funding going to dioceses determined by need and poverty in the parishes and dioceses) to grants for projects reflecting “Vision and Strategy” in 2017 has not had the anticipated outcome and has contributed to a growing bureaucratic burden at the diocesan and national level.

Priest:

- A twinned approach is called for:
 - **Training**: Theologically rich, ordinand-centred education which is fully funded so that our priests have a strong theological training and understanding what it is to be an Anglican priest. The recommendations set out in the Save the Parish led consultation at St George’s House on Parish Ministry involving participants representing the breadth of Anglian traditions are to be welcomed.
 - **Support**: we need to protect our valued clergy from the physical and mental exhaustion and the administrative burden they labour under. I support the proposed Clergy Charter of Care which advocates, inter alia, an immediate halt to clergy cuts (which have resulted in part due to the change in funding from the Archbishops’ Council), and manageable benefices.

- A joyful, supported priest is the most effective vocations officer for the Church.

People

- **Churchgoers’ charter**. We need to honour volunteers who hold the parishes together. Much work has been undertaken in that regard in my own diocese. But there is an acute concern that many are burdened by complex compliance rules and procedures, some of which are not even statutory. It is deterring volunteering and lowers morale in a dwindling volunteer base. Steps to reduce that burden, or use of exemptions, particularly in smaller parishes, must be considered together with caps on the period of vacancies.

WHAT I WOULD BRING

- **Legal issues**: I am perturbed by hearing anecdotally of members leaving the chamber when important legal issues are to be discussed. This is an area in which I hope my training as a lawyer will be an advantage. In the next Quinquennium, the revision of the Mission and Pastoral Measure will be critical. Moreover, in my role as church warden over the years I have had to grapple with multiple Church Law matters, ranging from chancel repair liability, disputes over selection of clergy, faculty applications, and pastoral restructuring which has involved a detailed analysis of the legislation. Being able to understand that legislation had been critical where clergy were being coerced in a particular direction. And my desire for a more in-depth understanding of Church Law led me to study for the Masters.
- **Rural Churches**: I grew up in a rural parish, and I returned to one when I had my own family. Together with my practice in agricultural law (where I frequently undertake pro bono cases), I am acutely aware of the problems faced by these parishes and small communities. Sunday attendance is not always reflective of the importance of the Church to the local community.

There will be other issues which will be more important for others. And I will listen to the debates and pray about them.

VOTING

Please consider giving me your first or high preference vote. I am, of course, very happy to answer any questions so please feel free to contact me.

rehillapc@yahoo.co.uk