



Revd. Caroline Ralph

I am the Rector of the Dunster benefice, comprising six churches in five village parishes in rural west Somerset. My benefice lies between the hills of Exmoor and the sea and is a beautiful place to live. I have been Rural Dean of Exmoor since 2017.

Our age demographic is above the national average in the general population and also in our churches. All the benefice churches are grade 1 listed and vary from the tiny chapel of St Bartholomew to the mighty priory church at Dunster. I am aware every day of the limited resources and hard work which the church communities pour into their worship and their buildings. I see my future as part of this community, with all the joys of the countryside and the problems of expensive housing, high unemployment and falling congregations. I love travelling around the deanery, being with churchwardens and clergy colleagues and hearing about what is happening. Village life in Exmoor is busy.

I keep bees, plus two dogs and three chickens. I try and keep my garden under control, the menagerie in and the rabbits out. I enjoy bell ringing and I am an amateur potter.

My background is in law. I was first a solicitor and then a barrister in Bristol between 1990 and 2004, when I left to train for stipendiary ministry. I was ordained deacon in 2006, priested in 2007 and served my title at Holy Cross in Crediton. I spent three years as an incumbent in Birmingham and returned to the West Country in 2013.

I have undertaken ministry in a large church in a market town, a single church in a multi-ethnic suburb of a city and rural ministry in small villages. I understand the many differences between rural and urban life for clergy and the stresses and strains that affect each.

I have previous experience on General Synod, between 2008 and 2010 taking part and speaking in a variety of debates. I sat on the revision committee for the *Ecclesiastical Fees Measure*. I was re-elected in a by-election in 2017 representing the Diocese of Bath and Wells. In the pandemic, Synod has been on zoom, which has challenged everybody. I am a member of W.A.T.C.H.

I serve this diocese as a member of Bishop's Council and Diocesan Synod. I sit on CDM tribunals as a clergy member. I am a marriage surrogate.

I challenged the proposals under the Reform and Renewal agenda concerning the package for clergy made redundant as inadequate. I began a private member's motion suggesting clergy be entitled to two days off per week rather than one, which was poorly supported. I have a particular interest in the proposals to improve the CDM process for all parties involved.

In my previous dioceses I was a member of the team looking at safeguarding issues and proforma paperwork for volunteer job applicants in churches. I was an MDR consultant. I have been a spiritual director since 2009 and completed the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola in 2008. I have trained two readers, supervised an ordinand and mentored a person on a Growing Leaders

course. In 2019 I took part in the Leading Women Course and I was chosen to attend the *sharing conversations* forum from this diocese concerning human sexuality.

I belong to two reflective practice groups and find it very helpful to meet with a small group of others, both clergy and lay, to discuss problems in ministry and spiritual direction.

I believe rural ministry is practised out of the church doors, in schools, flower shows, markets, sports grounds and where ever people already gather. I believe it is a fruitless exercise to only measure the validity of the church communities in the countryside by attendance on Sundays. I believe missional church is done by going out where people are, not expecting they will come to us.

I do not believe that living faithfully and biblically means restricting the roles of women or those in same sex relationships. I see the injustice and inequality that results as damaging. Women clergy (full and part-time) remain under-represented in senior posts and over represented in multi-parish benefices. The call for young ordinands has not so far been answered by younger women.

I want more directed theological discussion of the declining state of rural churches and the inevitable change that is coming from retirement, re-arrangement of parishes and benefices and the simple fact it will simply not be possible to maintain all of the churches that are presently open. Every day I see the stress placed on church members and clergy in maintaining their buildings, meeting the bills and paying the common share.

I seek transparency in diocesan finance and posts being made redundant. I believe the Church of England must be pro-active in examining its present practices and the terrible burden it has placed on LGBTI ordinands and priests in the way they are required to live their lives. None of us know what "good disagreement" looks like or if it is possible, but talking is always better than silence. I do not have any desire to see the Church split. I want better provision for the needs of single clergy and improved and adequate working conditions for all in ministry, so gifts are better utilised.

Issues arising in this synod are certain to include proposals concerning *Living in Love and Faith* agenda and Archbishop Stephen Cottrell's vision for the church in the 2020s, "Simpler, Humbler, Bolder". There are further reports concerning abuse within the Church of England that are due to be released and these are certain to be damaging. This Synod will be testing.

I think it very important that your representatives on General Synod come from as wide a base as possible and parish priests are properly represented.

I support lay leaders, whether licensed or otherwise and Reader ministry. I seek local training for lay ministers and clergy. Travelling to Wells is prohibitively time consuming for those on Exmoor.

If I am elected, I would encourage and uphold new models of church such as "festival churches" and look for a better understanding of how rural ministry affects the lives of those who only come to services once or twice a year. I will actively represent the interests of all the clergy, both personal and in their ministerial capacities and serve diligently and faithfully in a role for which I am well prepared and actively enjoy.