

Bill Sanderson

“We do not want a church that will move with the world - we want a church that will move the world.”

So said Christian writer GK Chesterton - some 100 years ago, it's true, yet this same challenge remains with us today. It is just what St Paul had in mind when he wrote, *“Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.”* (Rom 12:2, JB Phillips)



Let me introduce myself. A native of Stockton-on-Tees, I had a happy childhood, in a village next to a farm. I moved here to work in the north west after completing my Chemistry degree. A few years later I married a trainee nurse and we have two grown-up children - the whole family are believers. Our daughter, a Business IT graduate, was a company director in the utilities service sector, but has now switched career and teaches computer science in secondary school. Our son worked for many years in the care sector and hospital A&E, latterly as an Assistant Practitioner, and then did his degree in Operating Department Practice, so now works full-time in the theatres. I spent 25 years in a large company R&D department, reaching a senior management role, followed by another 20+ as an independent consultant; I am now mainly retired and give much more time to unpaid work. My wife retired last year after 40 years as an orthopaedic Staff Nurse. Her main church activity - and love - is working with small children.

In terms of the church, I am not big on labels. However, the fact is that I have been almost a life-long Anglican. I was baptised in Norton Parish Church, which is mentioned in the Domesday Book, and in my early years attended Sunday School at the CofE church in the next village. My parents were believers but did not regularly attend while I lived at home. I myself went through a period of doubt in my teens, and God found me again at the age of 18 during the 3 years I spent studying (supposedly, among many other things!) in Sheffield. I was confirmed the following year by Bishop Gordon Fallows at St Thomas' Crookes (before it was famous), where I worshipped while a student.

In 1973, a month before my 21st birthday, I started work in Widnes, and have lived in the Warrington area for nearly 45 years - St Paul's Penketh has been my place of worship throughout. I have been involved at different times in every part of church life - making music, teaching, Churchwarden, PCC, leading young people's and adult groups, cooking and serving in the café, finance, maintenance, fundraising etc - at some time or other. I have also served on Deanery Synod, including 5 years as Lay Secretary and 6 as Lay Chair. My time in industry taught me a lot about how people work together, and was rich in training and experience towards being in and leading teams. I have tried to put this into practice elsewhere, which I am now freer to do in retirement. I am used to looking into the future with others and helping formulate a response to what we see.

In truth, I have lots still to do in St Paul's, and had no thoughts at all about standing for General Synod, but a few weeks ago was asked to consider it by a current member. I tested the idea on a few close friends and gradually came to the view that this request is of the Lord. Coming back to the opening quotation, I believe our desire to move with the world means brings us face to face with Paul's warnings to Timothy in his second letter, about false teachers who tell people what they want to hear. I think the CofE is in danger of making the flesh into the word, in the name of a love that is genuine but falls short of the “agape” that is the love that only God gives. This love does not need any other love to make it complete. It is the principal part of the fruit of the Spirit, yet it comes with eight other elements or “flavours” in that same fruit, including self-control - a mark of holiness - which is largely scorned by the world. In this life we are in a foreign land, and we are pilgrims, not tourists. God's word must be given priority over our perceptions and “take” on the world.

There are many more lay people trying to live out the Christian life than clergy. Hence, while our leaders can set the direction, lay ownership and engagement above all, submitted to God, will

determine whether plans are carried through. God is persistently moving us out of our comfort zone to meet the challenge of living as His people in these days, where we have seen a move from general support towards widespread hostility to the Christian beliefs and principles that underpinned our best times as a nation. We exist for our non-members, and what we try to keep for ourselves inside the church will die there. Our faith leads us both to serve - where in many places Christians are the backbone of the voluntary sector - and to witness - where we know Who holds the future and can give an account of our hope to the many around us who have lost theirs.

Hence, I do feel moved to contend for the faith in General Synod and to uphold the simple understanding of God's Word that has brought tribulation through the ages but has also brought growth, and continues to do both. Church growth - or the lack of it - is another pressing issue facing the CofE in these times. There is a natural tendency to water down the demands contained in Jesus' call, "Follow Me", in order to get more people interested. In truth His arms are open to receive whomsoever comes to Him - yet who could expect to encounter the living God and carry on just as they were? The way forward is to look for those places where the seed bears a good and sustained harvest, and this will show where the soil has been prepared to receive it.

People might get the idea on reading this piece that I am a "conservative". I would say firstly that this is not a description that any of my friends would recognise, and secondly that the Jesus I know is the most radical leader anyone could find - and if there's any mould into which I want to be squeezed above all, it is His.

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