If elected to represent the diocese at General Synod, I intend to be a voice for the rural church, in all her diversity of circumstance. Rural churches make up forty percent of all regular churchgoers in the Church of England, but we are not represented by that proportion at General Synod. I am the Rector of a six-parish benefice in West Dorset, I also sit on the diocesan Discipleship, Vocations and Ministry Committee, and am part of the team of Vocations Advisors that support those at the initial stages of discernment. I grew into my baptismal faith and vocation in a benefice of fourteen churches in this diocese, mentored and encouraged by the whole worshipping community, lay and ordained.

As a rural priest, five of the issues currently facing the church sit at the forefront of my mind and prayers:

Vocations and "growing younger": Vocations to ministry are not nearly as rare as the papers like to suggest; the vocations team are currently inundated with enquiries. However, when I came to the end of my time at a residential Theological College, I was continuously encouraged not to return to rural ministry, but to move to an urban church where there was "more to do". Whilst this is nonsense, it demonstrates what happens when the rural church is not well represented in settings where vocations are formed and decisions are made. As a relatively young, rural incumbent who thrives in multi-parish ministry, I feel it is important to encourage our church to ponder what God is doing outside the towns and cities.

Church funding and closure: This is a topic that sparks fear in the rural church. In farming communities, commuting to church is viewed as an activity for the wealthy; lambing, calving and harvest all work to God's own timings, not to a benefice rota! Five of my parishes have no public transport, and the sixth has no bus at weekends. The reality of removing services from local parish churches and insisting on a gathered church model is that Christians who don't own vehicles, live on state pensions, benefits, or disability allowance, and can't always access lifts, or those who need to remain close to home or work, simply won't feel that they belong any more. Clergy and laity are already seeing increasing demand for pastoral visits, and we battle with the guilt of losing touch with souls entrusted into our care, as our roles as priests and deacons start to look very different to the ordinal that first formed our vocational discernment.

In most contexts in our diocese, painfully expensive buildings compete with share requests. However, we are also "holy ground". We have buildings and communities entirely devoted to the glory of God, easily identified by locals, and used daily for prayer. Surely this is the meaning of the *para-oikos,* and the DNA of parish churches – to be the church 'within and alongside' each local community.

There are funds in the Church of England that were once set aside to support the ministry of parishes. Over recent years, these funds have been channelled into projects applied for by complex bidding systems, often making rural parishes feel overlooked. I am not naive enough to say that much can be done to change this quickly, but, if elected, I would add my voice to those already calling for equity over competition.

Biblical Literacy: I feel very strongly about the importance of proper biblical scholarship and theological education for all Christians, lay and ordained, but most especially those entrusted with the souls of their parishioners. As a Hebrew Biblical scholar, I have worked locally in my own parishes to increase biblical literacy in churches and school, and have encouraged our parishioners to engage with 'tricky bits' bible studies, looking at parts of scripture that the lectionary omits. As someone for whom the best prayer times centre around both word and sacrament, I am firmly egalitarian and inclusive, and I stand with the values of 'Together for the Church of England', despite not being a signed up member of any church societies.

Social and Environmental Justice: Our Anglican heritage includes some catastrophic historic and contemporary error. Countless lives and livelihoods have been lost to the failings of priests, laity and the institution. My poorest church has an history of a slave-owning vicar, of abusive husbands paying off clergy for their silence, and of poor choices driving divisions between church and community that are still felt. We have no financial means with which to make reparations (nor to fix the hole in our tower!) but it is more important that we choose to act with integrity and transparency at all levels of our decision making *now*. This, to me, means excellent safeguarding practices, listening to and believing victim survivors, and expecting not just our leadership, but every member of our church community to demonstrate trustworthiness, whilst holding those in power accountable. For example, where we see well resourced churches grow in number, how often do we assess how many churchgoers are from the parish, and how many are drawn in by resources, perhaps depriving their local parish church of their spiritual gifts and the chance to grow.

Christian Unity: The wider Church can learn from rural churches, who gather to worship God with those among whom they live, bringing all their differing expressions or preferences into their worship. Jesus prays that his disciples 'would be one' and that their oneness would be a sign of God's glory. We have come to a stage where, yet again, parts of the church have begun to look at each other say 'we have no need of you'. This isn't just awkward, it is heart breaking, because the world sees a church in crisis over our divisions. I have close friends who cannot accept my ministry because I'm a woman and a priest. We still worship together, we still pray with each other regularly, we still encourage one another, because our mutual love amongst our many differences is a gift, and a sign of God's glory.

General Synod is a vital decision making body of clergy, laity and bishops, each supposed to represent the views of those in their diocese. If elected to the House of Clergy, I would listen carefully, celebrate our differences where they exist, and seek to represent our rural communities, which form the heartbeat of the worshipping, missional life of our diocese, alongside our market towns, urban parishes, and gathered churches.

Rev'd Leila Mather
CSCSV Benefice