

Making a difference in the public sphere

Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery is a national expert in health law and bioethics. He feels called by God to a variety of roles

WHEN Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery talks of feeling called by God, it's not a sense of vocation to do just one thing. In fact, he's said yes to many things.

He's a university professor, a government adviser who specialises in bioethics, a public sector chair who leads one of the largest hospitals in Europe – and he also chairs our diocese's Council for Social Responsibility. Just as importantly, he's a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a regular worshipper at All Saints Church, Botley.

And his Christian faith has been the watermark through all of these responsibilities – from advising government ministers on genetic engineering to being quoted in a Parliamentary report on end-of-life-care to helping to lead youth work at All Saints.

"I did think I was called to ordained ministry, but I now realise that wasn't my vocation," he said. "I've been privileged to have a wide range of involvements and experiences, and I've tried to be open to all sorts of vocational elements in my life. I try to understand which things are a divine call, and say yes to them."

Jonathan grew up in a church family and attended his Sunday



Jonathan Montgomery with (l to r) his wife Elsa, son-in-law Jamie, daughter Beth and daughter Rachel, at Beth and Jamie's wedding at All Saints, Botley

School, church youth group and school's Christian Union. He enjoyed both traditional and contemporary worship. He studied Law at the University of Cambridge and stayed on to study for a Masters. His

specialism is health care law.

He actually had a place at Ripon College Cuddesdon to study for ordination, but decided to get some secular experience. He ended



Professor Sir Jonathan Montgomery at work; right: his coat of arms

up lecturing at Southampton University, and discovered there was value in helping students think about complex ethical issues and in pastoral work. He ultimately became Professor of Health Law at University College, London.

Jonathan met his wife Elsa as a fellow committee member for their church youth group. They were both involved in youthwork in Guildford diocese. They moved to Botley and led groups for young people at All Saints. Dr Elsa Montgomery is now a senior lecturer in midwifery at King's College, London, and their daughters now work as a vet and a solicitor. Jonathan and Elsa have two grand-daughters.

In his professional life, Jonathan chaired NHS bodies in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight from 1998-2013. He chaired the Human Genetics Commission from 2009-12, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics from 2012-17 and the Health Research Authority 2012-19.

"I've never had a clear separation between faith and work, and probably not a sensible work/life balance," he said. "It might be because I've never been out of touch with education, where those boundaries don't exist."

"In previous centuries, it was Christians who pioneered advances in education, health, social care, and pastoral work. So what I'm doing feels like it is the work of God."

One turning point I remember is being in a committee meeting with a Quaker friend. We realised afterwards that in those meetings we talked in more academic, technical ways, rather than using the language of faith.

"The resources from our faith traditions are often neglected in the field of bioethics.

It's important to explain Christian virtues such as compassion in public debates. They apply regardless of people's faith commitments.

"If we are to take seriously that humans are made in the image of God, we need to find a way to articulate that in the public sphere that doesn't depend on other people accepting the authority of Scripture."

'I try to understand which things are a divine call and say yes to them'

"A big problem in public ethics is when faith leaders use language that is understandable only to their own folk, as it doesn't allow any further discussion. Pontificating from outside is rarely a good Christian witness."

"The debate about assisted dying is an example. There is a debate around what the rules should be, but it's more complex than that. There's also a distinction between the guidance faith leaders might give their congregations, and what should happen in the rest of society."

"And issues about our genetic make-up and how it affects our actions are rooted in complex questions about predestination that Christians have been grappling with for centuries."



In 2019, Jonathan became chair of the Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which runs four major hospitals and associated community services. As co-chair of the Department of Health's Moral and Ethical Advisory Group, he was kept busy advising about ethics during the Covid pandemic.

Jonathan was knighted in 2019 for services to bioethics and healthcare law. That meant he could have a coat of arms, and he chose as his motto a Latin phrase: 'Ecce, ego sum, mitte me', which was the response of the prophet Isaiah to God: 'Lo, here I am, send me'.

"I chose the Vulgate Latin version because it was the first translation of the Bible used across all Christendom," he said. "It reflects my attitude towards public service. Isaiah felt totally unworthy, but was granted a vision of the Almighty, had his lips cleansed and was called to serve. And I try to be open to God's call on my life too, so that I can live in a vocational way."

Since 2021 he has served as chair of the social justice charity based in our diocesan office, the Council for Social Responsibility, which inspires our parishes to impact society. Its most recent initiative concerns the emotional wellbeing of children and the need to address the growing mental health challenges facing young people.

And his desire to make a difference locally means he serves on Botley's PCC and Bishop's Waltham deanery synod.

"I really believe in the Church of England idea that your mission is to the place where you live, and there is a richness to the experience in Botley that I like," he said.