

Report of the Informal Meeting (by Zoom webinar) of Synod Members on Saturday 27th February 2021

After the opening worship, Sue Booy (Chair of the Business Committee) explained that due to Covid restrictions, Church House was not available to host the Chairs and technical staff who needed to be located together to manage a formal Synod meeting. Today's meeting was therefore Informal with no voting, and much of the business was being delayed to an additional Synod meeting on 23rd and 24th April, when it was hoped the Covid restrictions would be more relaxed.

The two Archbishops then gave their reflections on the pandemic. Archbishop Justin interviewed Dr Gary Bell, a psychiatrist from St Luke's (a charity that cares for clergy health and wellbeing), who explained that Covid had caused uncertainty and anxiety which had led to an upsurge in mental health issues with a 2-3 fold increase in clergy referrals. He talked about managing stress by communicating with others and the benefits of exercise and even movement rather than remaining crouched over our screens. Archbishop Stephen interviewed Kersten England, the CEO of Bradford Council, about the Church's response. Kersten said that at a national level, the Church should lead a national debate about who we are as a nation, and at a local level she highlighted how some parish churches had become community anchors in the pandemic. She suggested that councils and churches might co-venture to provide facilities/churches where none already exist to build the sense of community. Summing up, Archbishop Justin talked of the importance of clergy and laity well-being, and how the Church needs to be for everyone in the community, but with a bias to the poor.

Archbishop Stephen then gave an update on the Vision and Strategy work that he is leading. He reiterated the vision as being Jesus Christ centred and shaped by the 5 marks of mission. The Strategic Objectives are:

- A church of Missionary Disciples
- Younger and more Diverse – looking like the communities we serve
- Where a Mixed Ecology is the norm – not dismantling the parish system, but adding different pathways eg Digital

Overall he wanted the church to be Simpler, Humbler and Bolder, but said that this is all a work in progress. On finances, he said that central and diocesan overheads were being carefully reviewed to maximise parish clergy numbers and quoted our bishop Martin Seeley "The front line is the bottom line". He admitted that we were not quite there yet and that the Church's structures were too complicated and cumbersome. Answering a question on how he might re-imagine the parish system, the Archbishop said that we now live life in 4 spaces: Physical, Work, Leisure and Digital and the church should reflect this.

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs introduced the Safeguarding update which outlines the Church's response to the IICSA report. Zena Marshall (the interim director of the National Safeguarding Team) said that the Safe Spaces project, which provides a free, independent support service to survivors, has been running for 5 months and has so far had 95 cases. She also talked about Safeguarding Learning (the new name for Safeguarding Training), Policy Development and plans for Quality Assurance of Diocesan Safeguarding teams by the National Safeguarding Team. The Survivors Redress Scheme is still being planned (and in answer to a question is likely to be at least a year away), but the interim survivors support scheme started last October and has already made some payments.

Rev. Dr Malcolm Brown presented his paper proposing plans for setting up an Independent Safeguarding Board. This paper (which can be found on the CoE website at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Independence%20in%20Safeguarding.pdf>) is supported by the House of Bishops and the Archbishops Council. In Phase 1 it proposes a three person Board to be in place by July 2021, which would provide professional supervision of the Director of the National Safeguarding Team and other high-level advice, including its future remit in Phase 2. This Board would be funded by the Church, but would somehow be independent. It will be interesting to see how this works out.

Bishop Graham Tomlin led a presentation on "Coming Home – Tackling the Housing Crisis Together", which is the report of the Archbishops Commission on Housing, Church and Community. The report is available at: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/priorities/coming-home>.

About 8 million people in England live in overcrowded, unaffordable or unsuitable homes. This report highlights the five core values of good housing:

- Sustainable
- Safe
- Stable
- Sociable
- Satisfying

and recommends that the Church commits to using its land assets to promote more truly affordable homes. It proposes that the Church Commissioners, Dioceses and Parishes seek to set good examples of creative use of land and buildings to fulfil housing needs. The report also calls for the government to develop a long-term housing strategy and to remove the constraints on charities, including dioceses, selling land for less than market value when used for affordable housing. Rev. Lynne Cullens (one of the commissioners who wrote the report) spoke on the resources available to Parishes, including Housing study day materials and development guidance available at: <https://housingjustice.org.uk/what-you-can-do/response-to-local-housing-need>.

Interspersed with the presentations were four "Stories of hope and salvation":

1. Chemise Neo from Singapore had come to study at Warwick University, then became a student worker at a church in Coventry. Realising the problems suffered by refugee women, she started a bakery and baker training programme in 2017 employing primarily Syrian refugees. Covid caused the focus to change and they now supply 500 loaves each week to local food banks. Further details at: proofbakery.co.uk.
2. Rev. Laura Leatherbarrow found that her new parish had high levels of mental health issues and started the "A place to be" café where people could come for help. Covid caused this to close but created an even larger demand, so she set up various Sanctuary and Mindfulness courses and has become Chaplain to the local GP practice. She feels that the church has the opportunity to engage with the community through offering mental health resources.
3. Rev. Tosin Oladipo is a curate at Hackney church, whose vision is to bring hope to the people of East London. Before Covid their 5 churches were distributing 5000 meals each year. Now they are distributing 250,000 meals/year, in areas of high deprivation. Tosin says that the act of worship led to acts of service, and having invited people to join in, 200+ people now help with the distribution, 100 of whom had no previous church connection. Following this action, 1500+ people join in their on-line services.
4. Rev. Andy Dovey, a hospital chaplain in Croydon, talked about his experiences working in one of the hardest-hit hospitals in the country. As the hospital was closed to all visitors (including parish clergy) he and his multi-faith colleagues were the only ones able to minister to those dying of Covid. He described comforting a Jewish man and then holding an iPhone to the ear of a dying Muslim so that he could hear the farewell prayers of his Iman.

Although the church authorities are to be congratulated on trying to provide a national update under the present Covid restrictions, as it was in Webinar format one could not see any of the other Synod members, even on screen, and there was little sense of the Synod community. Although it was possible to ask questions, these had to be submitted in writing via the Chat, and only a selected number were able to be answered. The whole experience was more that of an observer rather than a participant, and the Diocesan Synod team looks forward to the resumption of Zoom and then physical Synods, so that we might help guide the Church forward.

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28.2.2021