

GENERAL SYNOD REPORT, 23-25 NOVEMBER 2020

This was in fact the second sitting of General Synod in as many months, as on the 24th September a 'skeleton Synod' met at Church House, under tight restrictions, to pass legislation to allow the November Synod to go ahead via Zoom. This passed, and so we were able to meet and vote online. It went smoother than the informal July Zoom Synod session, though technical hitches still occurred, which at least meant we were spared the dreaded breakout rooms!

We began on Monday afternoon with a debate to approve the special standing orders made by the Synod's officers to regulate remote meetings. David Lamming put in an amendment asking that zoom poll results (as opposed to formal counted votes) not be kept, as votes by a show of hands in physical gatherings are not recorded, but this was lost in favour of greater transparency.

The presidential address began with a double act between both Archbishops, talking about Covid-19 and its effect on the Church and the wider world, the IICSA report on the Anglican Church, and the future mission and direction we should be moving in. The text can be found here:

[General Synod: Joint presidential address by the Archbishops | The Archbishop of Canterbury.](#)

We then had a presentation on Living in Love and Faith (LLF) by Bishop Christopher Cocksworth and Dr Eeva John, commending the project to us and encouraging us to engage with the resources.

Next was a motion brought by the Archbishop of York that expressed the General Synod's support for all those killed and worst affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, for key workers, for addressing the inequalities which have been so on display, and to celebrate the role churches have played and ask the government to immediately review their decision to cease public worship. There was concern that the disabled community hadn't been explicitly named, and apologies given, and an amendment passed that remedied this. A further amendment (prompted by David and proposed by Archbishop Stephen) calling on the government not to renege on the UK's 0.7% of GDP commitment to overseas aid was also added (and subsequently ignored by the government). It was during this debate that the government announced that public worship would be able to resume after 2nd December! The amended motion was passed by 349 votes to 5, with 9 abstentions.

Tuesday began with a presentation by the Archbishop of York on the new vision and strategy for the Church of England for the next decade. To be a church that is "Christ-centred" and "Jesus-shaped", "Humbler", "Bolder", and "Simpler", younger, and more diverse. There's no explicit vision to grow numerically as in the past, instead it seems to indicate more a change in the character of the Church. There were some grumbles that synod wasn't formally part of the process, though some members had been.

Next was the Archbishops' Council Budget for 2021, which announced a slightly lower spend as well as a lower ask from dioceses. It was understandably downbeat, as £14m has had to be found for 22 dioceses in dire financial straits due to Covid-19 (Eds and Ips have received £600k of that). There were some requests (including from me) that some central Church funds could be found to subsidise parish ministry in dioceses that don't have historic reserves, as even quite healthy churches are struggling to fund

the costs of ministry. The response was that this can't be ruled out, but that their approach is still to fund specific projects (SDF) with this money.

We started the process of amending our Safeguarding Code of Practice in line with the IICSA recommendation that the legal language of clergy paying "due regard" to safeguarding policies was too weak, and so it will now say "must comply". There was some discussion about the disparity with the obligations on clergy as opposed to lay people in the Church, who are not covered by the same canons (as canons cannot be binding on the laity). We also heard that the Clergy Discipline Measure will be completely revised starting in February 2021 Synod.

Wednesday began with a fuller response to the IICSA report, and we heard from three survivors of clerical sexual abuse, who were clear and bold in saying that the time for change is now, and for both episcopal repentance and financial redress for the way survivors have been treated by the church. Bishop Jonathan Gibbs, the Bishop of Huddersfield, and the lead bishop for safeguarding, proposed a motion saying that we apologise and we accept the 6 key IICSA recommendations and will implement them. The motion was carried unanimously (363-0).

Final approval for the Diocesan Boards of Education measure was passed, which has revised the arrangements for how they are constituted in light of changes to education (such as the existence of academies) and how they relate to Diocesan Boards of Finance. There was some concern that an important amendment in February hadn't been discussed due to a quorate but quite empty chamber and that the second meeting of the revision committee had had a lot of absences, and so some argued this motion should be voted down to give a chance to revisit this, but this wasn't successful. (We were told that guidance will contain a strong recommendation that DBEs should not be constituted as unincorporated bodies, as St Eds & Ips currently is. As matters stand, it seems likely that our diocese will adopt the model of the DBE being a committee of the DBF.)

The final two items, which were strangely sandwiched within one another, concerned the budget for the Churches Conservation Trust, and a new national register of clergy. The Churches Conservation Trust is funded jointly by the Church Commissioners and the Government and looks after 356 churches that can be used for heritage tourism, occasional worship, and sometimes community use too. There was concern from Andrew Gray, a Norwich lay rep, that it was not delivering value for money, with only 14 churches taken into their care in the previous year, and a large increase in funding being asked from us for higher numbers of staff. Despite this impressive and aggressive attempt, the Order, approving £4.5m Church Commissioners funding over the three years 2021-24, was agreed.

We were told that the desire to have a national register of Clergy has been around for four centuries, to help put in context the complexities of the challenge before us. Particularly with regard to our safeguarding checks that need to be done whenever a visiting clergyperson wishes to do anything, this would make a complex process much simpler, and help to more quickly ascertain someone's credentials. With a few minor technical amendments, including some relating to the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, the regulations were approved.

Tiffer Robinson
December 2020