

The General Synod of the Church of England

Report of Proceedings 9 – 12 July 2021

The General Synod met for four days by Zoom at the end of this extra ordinary 6-year period. The opening Presidential address by the Archbishop of York recalled the sermon in 2015 by Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Papal household, bidding us to ‘Rebuild my House’. In the words of Pope Francis, we should ‘strive for reconciled diversity’.

Archbishop Stephen then asked us to look at what has happened in Synod in the past 6 years – including the green agenda, the Windrush scandal, estates evangelism, clergy well-being, the pandemic and so on. He said we need more vocations, to be a bolder Church and take courage to work together for: “I am with you says the Lord”. The Business Committee Report elicited a number of speeches and a notice of withdrawal of a Private Members Motion on the Five Guiding Principles.

There was a call for fewer presentations and more ‘tough debating’. It was agreed to explore the possibility of ‘Hybrid’ sessions to enable those who are ill or prevented from attending in person sessions to partake in Synod debates.

A presentation by the Racial Justice Commission sought to root out systematic racism in the Church and set out an agenda for change. 12 members were selected for their expertise although there was criticism that there was no financial resource to pay for racial justice officers. We were given an update on the Church’s response to climate change. The Church had disinvested in certain companies and were holding others to account. Changes had been made to the Board of Directors of Mobil/Exxon. Other projects were being carried out so that the Church’s investments would reach its target of zero carbon emissions by 2030. There was a promise to report back annually.

The Archbishops’ Council and Church Commissioners presented a joint report. In it we heard about ethical investments and investment for the people and the planet. In the debate that followed it was argued well for the need for priests. The apportionment of the Archbishops’ Council budget was agreed.

A safeguarding presentation showed that there was more to be done. It is important to continue engagements with survivors, to make the Church safer and healthier and the aim is to see safeguarding as an integral part of the Church at the ‘heart of the gospel’. There will be a small independent safeguarding board to oversee the National Safeguarding Team. This work will begin in the Autumn. Sunday 10 October has been earmarked for Safeguarding Sunday for which resources will be available.

As this was the last synod of the quinquennium (plus 1) there was legislative business to finalise. It may have seemed long and tedious but was important for the carrying out of our business. A number of amendments to the standing orders were passed including one which allowed for first consideration of a measure to be taken between sessions of the Synod.

The Church Representation Rules debate was suggesting the limit of 2 three-year terms on Deanery Synod should be removed though this limit could be imposed at the APCM. Further amendments to standing orders included those regarding elections to the Crown Nominations Commission. After lengthy amendments and debate it was agreed that 6 pairs should be elected

and that one from each pair would sit on the commission for a particular case. The elections procedure for such nominees would include both houses (clergy and lay). A non-voting co-option would be allowed to join the CNC. There was following this a lengthy debate on Vacancy in See Committees' rules. The chair of the committee would not be eligible for election to the CNC and those elected from the diocese would be 6 altogether from either House. Another debate was held on those elected to be Church Commissioners. It was proposed to introduce term limits (2 terms of 5 years each). There was an amendment to send this back to the scrutiny committee for further work which was narrowly lost (140/144). Arguments were put about loss of expertise and collective memory. In the end the Reform Order was carried but not easily.

Another presentation was given on the Living in Love and Faith Project. It is intended to help people to learn together, to be inclusive, radical and above all Christian. Our engagement with the course should lead to feedback and listening, from discernment to decision. Housing and what is the role of the Church? We heard about the land which is owned by the Church which could be used for affordable housing. Although the Church is a charity and should get the best possible price for land sold it is possible in such cases to sell land at less than the market value. The Archbishops' Commission on Housing is to explore such changes to the legal framework, giving each diocese freedom and to consider proposals in February 2022.

A debate was held on the nature of the Ordained Ministry. Care, accountability and behaviour were key themes as was the need to re-examine the nature of the Diaconate – all those in Holy Orders are deacons. It was acknowledged that there was a need to replace the present Clergy Discipline Measure with a new one as the present one is not fit for purpose. There is a need to separate misconduct from complaints, the latter could be dealt with by local assessors. There is detailed work to be done on this and we look forward to a clearer, fairer measure to be made.

A review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure of 2011 needs to be undertaken so that the whole simplification process means we as a Church are more effective for mission. Flexibility is required so that different sorts of reorganisation can take place, however, it was recognised that work needs to be done on 'Dispossession' of clergy – there are tax implications with compensation and ongoing care of the clergy family dispossessed. A code of practice should be put in place.

Following this debate Archbishop Stephen talked about the Vision and Strategy project. We must be 'Simpler, Humbler and Bolder' and become a more Christ-centred Church. In response, I think, to some of the news reports he emphasised that lay-led mission remains under the priests and bishops. Children and family are at the heart of the strategy. It will be 'fresh air for the CofE'. Following this an item on Transforming Effectiveness was tabled. This is seen as a third stream of work with Vision and Strategy and Governance Review. It looks at how flourishing in local churches can help others; how the CofE works in international engagement; how can expertise from other dioceses help so that there are not 42 different ways of doing things.

On Monday afternoon we looked at a report from the Implementation and Dialogue Group. This was a group looking at the 2014 settlement and the 5 Guiding Principles following the decision to ordain women to the Episcopate. We heard from members of Synod who were still amazed that provision should be given to those who had theological objections to the Ordination of Women, but from others (ordained women included) whose working relationships with those of a different view was seen as one of love and respect. We were asked

to take note of the report and agree to form a Standing Commission on the House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.

It was a long, tiring Synod. Not being all together it was often difficult to sense the mood of Synod. We missed those important conversations over meals and coffee breaks. At the end of Synod various farewells took place notably the Bishops of Beverley, Rochester and Lambeth and also Elizabeth Paver (Sheffield), the vice chair of the House of Laity, and a synod member since 1991; and Jonathan Neil-Smith, who has served in an administrative capacity for the Church of England at national level since 1981 in a wide variety of posts.

The 10th General Synod was formally dissolved on 12 July.

Elections for a new Synod will be held within the period from 30 July to 8 October.

The inauguration of the 11th General Synod will take place on Tuesday 16 November.

Richard Morgan