

Report of the February 2025 Church of England General Synod from Robin Lunn Lay Member.

The 5 day General Synod which took place between February 10th and 14th occurred at a very challenging time for the Church nationally. The agenda was dominated by the debate on Tuesday about the future direction of safeguarding, but the other subjects discussed were,

The Makin Report and its aftermath.

Racial Justice.

Proposed changes to the Crown Nominations Commission.

Diocesan Finances Review Update.

Sports and Wellbeing Ministry.

Strategy for Working Class Ministry.

Final Approval of the Clergy Conduct Measure.

Growing Younger and More Diverse. Kenson Li.

Proposed Changes to the Standing Orders of the Crown Nominations Committee. (This took 4 hours)

National Church Governance Measures and

Vacancy in See Committees.

As always, any views expressed here are purely my own and do not reflect official views of the Diocese of Worcester.

Before commencing the report, I would like to thank the over 60 responses I received from members of the Evesham, Pershore and Kidderminster Deanery's, in response to the email I sent out at the beginning of the year re what the Church's position should be on the future of its safeguarding. The detailed responses were greatly appreciated and reflecting these I supported a fully independent model of safeguarding as set out in the Jay report. I spoke in the debate on February 11th to that effect.

The Future of Church Safeguarding.

It is important to start with the debate on the future of safeguarding which took place on Tuesday. The result was that given a choice between Model 3 which was a high degree of independence but still ultimately overseen by the Church and Model 4 full independence, we ended up with in effect Model 3.5! The wording of the amendment from the Bishop of Blackburn and what Synod ultimately voted on is as follows.

“Noting the significant reservations around Model 4 in paragraph 62 of GS2378 and the legal advice from VWV dated 31st January 2025, endorse model 3 as the way forward in the short term and call for further work as to the legal and practical requirements necessary to implement model 4”.

The debate reflected peoples uncertainty as to whether they should go fully to full independent safeguarding despite the comments from Lesley Ryder the Chair of the Independent review group and the Bishop of Stepney, Lead Bishop of Safeguarding. They highlighted the sheer level of complexity in the Church and survivors had asked for this to be highlighted. Safeguarding does not operate in isolation and we must not hide behind the networked nature of the Church. This is Synod's moment, please use it wisely. Bishop Joanne also said that no one decision in itself could save the reputation of the Church, it was what followed from this.

The main difference between the two models was bringing the existing local diocesan safeguarding models under the control of an independent body. This was a way of stopping the Church interfering or marking its own homework. She supported Option 4.

Peter Howell Jones who had a particular insight, said that the Church must give away and be seen to give away power. He supported option 4.

By contrast Shane Ardron from Leicester wanted to support option 3 and used the analogy of having a leg break. Safeguarding is also about relationships. She quoted the advice from her Safeguarding officer, and said that we were in danger of asking someone else to do our homework for us.

A significant contribution came from the new 2nd Church Estates Commissioner Marsha De Cordova MP who had faced a baptism of fire from when she took over, due to the Safeguarding related issues. This must be a watershed moment for the Synod and much needs to be done to keep the Church safe. It needs to be trusted by the survivors and must be consistent across all the whole Church. In her opinion only Model 4 offered this and could restore trust.

The Bishop of Rochester declaring that “culture eats structure for breakfast”, thought the opposite and stated that full independence would make it more difficult to challenge our institutional self-protection.

Kashmir Garton from our diocese spoke about survivors and quoted the experience of the Probation service when their functions were farmed out to an independent company. 7 years later they were brought back in-house again as it did not work in the desired way. She was concerned that Option 4 would just add more complexity and not solve the issues we were trying to solve.

Vicky Brett criticized the 3.5 option as a half measure. She said that survivors need to be at the heart of the solution. Prioritizing survivors and justice and security was key.

The senior member of the clergy in the Canterbury province declared that you would not fix safeguarding unless you fixed HR.

When I spoke, I commented on the feedback in response to the 3 questions I had sent round to Deanery Synod members and the strong feelings towards independent safeguarding. I stressed that while no system would be perfect, at least if mistakes were made in a fully independent model, survivors and others would think that they have been made for the very best of reasons and not for malign ones. I asked for clarification that the funding from the Church would be the same for both methods. Closing, I described Safeguarding failures as “a malignant tumour which needs to be cut out fully from the body of the church”. Also urged support for full independence.

Miranda Threlfall-Holmes spoke about the abuse that she had suffered and how it was difficult to talk about. Model 4 shows that the Church is serious about its response. We cannot have a postcode lottery.

The Bishop of Birkenhead and deputy lead bishop for safeguarding, said that rebuilding trust is not the same as building it in the first place. We had to be seen to go the extra mile.

Martin Sewell who has campaigned so ceaselessly on this matter declared, “This is High Noon for the COE”. The correct definition of independence is number 4 with no strings attached. Option 4 was the consumers’ choice with Option 3 being the producers.

The Bishop of Leicester spoke about his lengthy thoughts on the subject and how he now supported Option 4. “The nation has lost trust in us and we need to put that right”.

Clive Billenius another tireless campaigner on this subject reminded Synod that if we voted for 4 we would still get Model 3 in its entirety. **(Tragically Clive who represented the Diocese of Europe died on his way home on Saturday 15th having spoken in a debate on Friday morning. A great sadness to all who knew him).**

The Archbishop of York stated that he was ordained into a Church which had no safeguarding policy at all. We could not go on the way we are, and he was concerned about the disparities between resources in different dioceses and supported full independence.

The Bishop of Winchester reassured members that the Bishops would back whichever vehicle was agreed.

The Bishop of Blackburn set out his opposition to Option 4 for 3 reasons. These were doubts about the Jay data, nightmare law and it would take too long. He set out his “3rd Way”. In response the Bishop of Stepney opposed by saying that this approach would take longer which I fully agreed with. Nigel Bacon supported him as he was concerned that Option 4 would make the parishes further away from the center.

The Bishop of Bath and Wells also supported as he thought otherwise, we were in danger of creating an institution which was too large to fail.

This was carried in all 3 Houses and in votes by 243 to 165. I voted against.

Once this was decided, the debate moved towards its close but only after we added a lament stating our heartfelt apologies to all those who had suffered due to Safeguarding failures. The final vote on the amended motion was 315 For, 24 Against and 36 Abstentions.

Report of the CNC and Miscellaneous Changes to it.

There were two debates on this matter, one on the report on Tuesday and an altogether more lively and 4 hour long affair on the provisions on Thursday. The Archbishop of York updated people on the process for the selection and discernment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Several other speakers spoke about the Liverpool CNC and expressed their annoyance at the leaks which had come out of it.

Morwena Ludlow urged people to remember the theology rather than just the process.

Thursday’s debate seemed never ending as we went through various proposals from the House of Bishops to make the process potentially less prone to the recent failures to appoint Bishops in the dioceses of Carlisle and Ely. The Bishop of London referred to the House of Bishops Meeting last September and pointed out fairly that this was a matter which impacted on all of us and was not solely their issue. She thought that behavior and culture needed a change, and we need to remember that we are the custodians.

The Bishop of Guildford thought that we were using 3 large sledgehammers to break 3 small nuts. Less contentious matters such as using an interpreter when required or allowing the content of the 6 national pairs of people on the CNC to swap with the other person were passed.

However, matters such as allowing a majority to be 9 out of 14 rather than 10, along with a Chair having a casting vote and the end of the secret ballot were defeated albeit narrowly in one of the 3 houses.

Kate Massey criticized the CNC for its Conservative nature and with the current take up, it was very difficult to get Progressive Women elected as Bishops. She also warned about women not wishing to put themselves forward for preferment if they perceived that they had little chance of being chosen.

The secret ballot was the most lively subject and it was the 2nd time in this quinquennial that this had been debated. The Bishop of London wanted to remove it as secrecy is viewed as a barrier.

Martin Davey stated that the Secret Ballot protects people and also makes it easier for anyone opposed to a new Bishop from being criticized in their own diocese.

Cathy Rhodes from an NHS background expressed surprise that the ballots were secret and did not think this defensible in 2025. People should have accountability for how they vote.

The Bishop of Fulham by contrast declared that being elected under a secret ballot was an example of the Holy Spirit at work.

John Dunnett from Chelmsford quoted the 1984 Miners strike as an example of why secret ballots were so important as no coercion. While Bishops and Clergy voted for the change, it was voted down in the House of Laity.

Thus, the changes were not as great as the House of Bishops intended and is unlikely in the short term to have much impact.

Thursday was a very long day, as after the 4 hour debate on the CNC, we then had the final approval of the National Church Governance measure. This also took a long time as there were countless amendments, 13 of which were moved by one person who ironically did not get chance to debate any of them as they did not get 25 people standing to support them. However, the mover was able to speak for 5 minutes before each one and the debate dragged into Friday before the measure was passed.

The final debate on Vacancy in See Committees at the diocesan level was also contentious and at times fractious, not least when Jennifer Fellows from Gloucester moved that there should be no requirement for at least one female clergy and one female lay person on the group going forward to the national CNC. This aroused strong arguments against by other female members and clearly upset the Bishop of London who was responding. It took a helpful intervention from the Archbishop of York to point out correctly in my opinion that while it would be great to not have to have any restrictions due to equal numbers of people coming forward, we were not there yet and needed to have this provision. All 3 Houses agreed with him.

Another change to allow a Suffragan Bishop to chair a local CNC if none of the Laity wanted to do it (as has recently happened in Lincoln) was also agreed after a passionate debate.

Summary.

Progress was undoubtedly made in what was a long tiring week. If you have any questions or wish to raise any points about the Synod, please feel free to contact me on rlunn47@gmail.com or 07746-251083. I will be happy to try and answer them.

God Bless,

Robin Lunn. Lay Member of the General Synod.