

GENERAL SYNOD GROUP OF SESSIONS, APRIL 2021

General Synod met by Zoom over the two days, 23 and 24 April 2021. This was the second 'remote' group of sessions (the first being in November 2020) and replaced the scheduled meeting in February 2021 when the then 'lockdown' restrictions made such administering such a meeting impracticable.

Day 1 – Friday 23 April

After opening worship, Synod welcomed the Revd Joyce Jones as the new prolocutor for the northern province and Robert Hammond as new chairman of the business committee, replacing Canon Sue Booy who had stood down after several years in the role. Robert (elected by a majority of 52:48 – where have we seen those percentages before?) is the first member of the House of Laity to chair this important committee, which prepares the agenda for each group of Synod sessions.

After a short debate on a motion in which Synod expressed its condolences to the Queen following the **death of Prince Philip**, the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell addressed Synod on the just-published **report of the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce, From Lament to Action**. Saying that racism is a sin which, like all sin must be confronted, the archbishop said becoming a diverse church is a gospel issue and that we have to become the change we long to see.

The regular debate on the **business committee report** enables members to raise issues that they think should be on the agenda. In answer to a plea by one member for the meeting in York in July to be a 'hybrid' meeting, enabling those to participate who were not yet willing to attend a 'physical' meeting, Robert Hammond said that there was no IT ability for this at present.¹

Synod then turned its attention to the revision stage of an important piece of legislative business, the **Safeguarding (Code of Practice) Measure**, which had been given first consideration in November 2020. The Measure implements a recommendation of IICSA in its May 2019 report and imposes a duty of compliance with the provisions of the Code (replacing a duty simply to 'have regard to') on all 'relevant persons'. These include all clergy authorised to officiate, bishops, churchwardens, PCCs and DBFs. The Dean of the Arches, Morag Ellis, explained a number of amendments being proposed by the steering committee, all of which were agreed overwhelmingly.

The Bishop of Leeds, Nicholas Baines, then proposed a motion on **international religious freedom**, "believing that freedom of religion or belief is of importance to everyone, everywhere, and that Christians who enjoy this freedom should be active in advocating the same freedom for others." A number of powerful speeches were made, and Synod agreed the detailed motion by 303-0 with just 3 abstentions.

¹ As this was a remote meeting, your correspondent was able to participate from his hospital ward (not bed as some thought!) at Ipswich Hospital - surely a first! The July meeting (from 9-12 July) is now to be in London, at Church House, as the University of York is taking no bookings this summer for outside events. This may change to a remote meeting if, as seems likely, the Government postpones the planned 21 June date for the lifting of all remaining lockdown restrictions.

A legislative reform order (LRO) to reduce the size of the **Church of England Pensions Board** and make other changes was agreed after a short debate in which several members were concerned at using the ‘fast-track’ process of an LRO to make changes to this representative body. Stephen Trott said that the proposals should have been in a Measure, allowing for full debate and the possibility of amendment by Synod. The reservations were reflected in the vote to approve the Order: 217-45 with 29 abstentions.

As usual, day one ended with **Questions**. 100 questions had been submitted, with written answers given in a questions ‘Notice Paper’.² The questions and written answers are taken as read. In the time allocated, 48 of the 100 were reached for supplementary questions, when the often-defensive written answers can be probed. Among the supplementary answers we learned from the Bishop of Lichfield that a group appointed by the House of Bishops to carry out a ‘theological and liturgical study’ of issues highlighted during the pandemic relating to the administration of Holy Communion is unlikely to report before the end of 2022. The phrase, ‘kicking the issue into the long grass’ comes to mind.

Day 2 – Saturday 24 April

Day 2 commenced with consideration of the **Clergy Discipline (Amendment) Rules 2021**, which make changes to the 2005 rules (such as introducing a word limit on a complaint and requiring the complaint to be accompanied by a separate ‘timeline’) to make the CDM process more efficient. They were described by the Dean of the Arches, Morag Ellis, as ‘quick wins’ ahead of a paper, to be brought to Synod in July 2021, setting out proposals to replace the current Clergy Discipline Measure. The amended rules come into effect on 13 July 2021. During the debate, Jonathan Alderton-Ford expressed concern about the lack of provision for prospective complainants who cannot read or write, or whose language is not English, saying that they are often chosen as victims of abuse for that reason. The amended rules were approved unanimously.

Synod then approved the appointment of Clive Mather as **Chair of the Pensions Board** and of Dame Caroline Spelman (as an MP, former second church estates commissioner) as **Chair of the Dioceses Commission**.

The **Safeguarding (Code of Practice) Measure**, returned to Synod for final approval with all three houses voting unanimously to approve the Measure, compliance with which, as Morag Ellis stated, will be a legal obligation. After a short debate, Synod then approved a **revised Code of Practice** (GS 2205), issued by the Clergy Discipline Commission under the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003. Significantly, as Peter Collier QC pointed out, this contains an appendix (A) setting out a separate procedure for the resolution of informal complaints.³

After a lunch break, Synod debated a detailed report (GS 2202) by the **Crown Nominations Commission Election Process Review Group**. The report proposes a number of significant

² As with all Synod papers, this is available to download from the General Synod section of the Church of England website:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/general-synod-meetings>.

³ Peter Collier (former senior circuit judge) chaired a working party of the Ecclesiastical Law Society on the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003, and the informal procedure is developed from one of their recommendations. The President of Tribunals, Dame Sarah Asplin, has recently affirmed in her Decision (dated 28 May 2021) on a CDM complaint against the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, that the Measure “is designed to deal with serious misconduct.”

changes to the process for electing (and membership of) the central members of the CNC (who serve for a term of 5 years), and for the election of diocesan vacancy-in-see committees and, by those committees, of the diocesan members of a CNC when there is a vacancy in the see. Some of the proposed changes are controversial, and Synod voted by 293 votes to 18, with 16 abstentions, to ‘receive’ (rather than to endorse) the recommendations in the report. [Specific proposals to implement the recommendations are timetabled to be considered by Synod on 13 July 2021: the details are yet to be revealed, but a lively debate is to be expected.]

Following a screen break, Synod voted (235:0) to ‘take note’ of a paper, **National projects and workstreams in response to recommendations made in the IICSA October 2020 investigation report** (GS 2204), introduced by the Bishop of Huddersfield, Dr Jonathan Gibbs (lead bishop on safeguarding). This brought Synod up-to-date on the work by the National Safeguarding Team (NST) and others in response to the recommendations by IICSA in its final report, dated October 2020, on the Anglican Church. It was a good debate. Among the 15 synod members who contributed, Archbishop Justin, in his speech, emphasised the need for greater transparency, for justice for both complainants and respondents, and for the commitment to independence in relation to the investigation of safeguarding issues. The 11-page report, available to download from the C of E website, is worth reading.

The final item of business was to approve a resolution amending the resolution passed by Synod in February 2020 setting the **allocation of seats for the General Synod election**, now to be held in September/October 2021. A report by the Business Committee (GS 2203) explained that following the resolution in February 2020, the diocese of Lincoln had notified the central secretariat that the number of names on the diocesan electoral rolls had been overstated by 4,618. It should have been 19,000, not 23,618. This meant that Lincoln should have been allocated 3 seats (not 5) in the House of Laity, in consequence of which Exeter and London dioceses have now been awarded one extra seat each. In a short debate, one member said that this revealed “a serious failure of Government,” and your correspondent pointed out the need for better scrutiny of the numbers being returned, noting a significant of round numbers returned by some dioceses.

One agenda item at most synods is **Farewells**. Usually ‘book-ending’ the welcomes with which Synod commences, this provides an opportunity for the Archbishop of Canterbury to say ‘farewell’ (often including amusing or embarrassing anecdotes!) to retiring bishops. On this occasion there were farewells to the Bishops of Portsmouth (Christopher Foster), Salisbury (Nicholas Holtam) and Bath & Wells (Peter Hancock), as well as to Sue Booy, retiring chair of the business committee (by William Nye) and John Rees, retiring after many years as Provincial Registrar. Archbishop Justin’s tribute to +Peter Hancock was especially moving: +Peter, who had served 4 years as lead bishop on safeguarding, during which time he had secured the confidence of ‘survivors’ by time spent meeting them and listening to their concerns, was retiring early, having been receiving treatment for leukaemia since August 2020. He will be much missed on Synod, and we wish him and his wife, Jane, every blessing in retirement.⁴

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14.vi.2021

⁴ An online farewell service for Bishop Peter was held on 22 May 2021: the video can be accessed at www.facebook.com/bathandwells/videos/782821989261429.