

General Synod Report – July 2021

This meeting of Synod was by Zoom based in London, having been first planned to be a face-to-face meeting in York. Covid-19 blocked us twice.

Friday 9th July

After the opening worship there was a **presidential address** in which the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, reminded us that six years ago in Westminster Abbey we were visited by Her Majesty the Queen and the now late Duke of Edinburgh to start off what would be the tenth General Synod.

The preacher then was Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa of the papal household who spoke on Haggai 1: 1-8, 'Rebuild my House'. This was the template for the rest of the points that the Archbishop made. He reminded us of the call to unity, to strive for what Pope Francis calls 'reconciled diversities' which he felt we had made a fair stab at; and to focus on the purpose of Christ saying that God is calling us to a fresh and radical obedience to Christ and a Christ-centred and Jesus Christ shaped church.

He went on to list the achievements of the life of the Synod over the last six years: the publication and distribution of the 'Living in Love and Faith' work; that we have started to bring in important legislation following the IICSA report on Safeguarding. We have been trying to simplify legislation, and on the environment we have committed ourselves to becoming net carbon neutral by 2030. The Church Commissioners under Loretta Minghella had done a great deal on making sure our investments are green and using shareholding power to change the boards of carbon-producing companies.

He noted there had been debates on racial justice with reference to Windrush; the ethics of nuclear weapons; estates evangelism; advertising and gambling; Setting God's People Free; growing in faith; cathedrals; clergy wellbeing, and much more besides. We were also the Synod who had lived through the first wave of the Covid pandemic.

He paid tribute to the churches' resourcefulness and the creativity of our parishes, chaplaincies, and church schools, and the ways we have found of sustaining the life of worship, built new online communities of faith, and how we continued to serve our local communities. The church continues to face big financial challenges, but he wanted to thank clergy and lay leaders for their faithfulness, and he emphasised again that he had no plans to reduce them significantly. He also wanted to emphasise deep gratitude to the NHS and other frontline workers. He believed that as we emerge from Covid the church would find a simpler, humbler, and bolder way of being the church.¹

We then had a short debate on **Business Committee Report** which enabled Synod members to comment on the agenda, or what was missing from but which they thought should have been included. During the debate it was explained why a private member's motion on the Five Guiding Principles, scheduled for debate on Monday, would not now be moved (see below.)

¹ Read the full address at <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/news/latest-news/presidential-address-general-synod-july-2021>.

A **racial justice presentation** followed, which was about how much progress we have made in setting up structures to deal with this in the church, but it was also noted that as yet no racial justice officers have been appointed in individual dioceses because of lack of funds.

After a screen break Synod debated a series of **propositions to amend Standing Orders relating to CNC elections** ahead of voting on detailed amendments to the SOs on the Monday. The proposals, derived from the report of a group set up to review the process for election of the six 'central' members of the Crown Nominations Commission and diocesan representatives to Vacancy in See Committees, were said to be linked to the need for a culture change in how CNC representatives lived out their role, and to increase the diversity of perspectives and experience of those chosen to nominate diocesan bishops. The principal changes are:

- (i) the election of central members (next due in July 2022) will be by the combined membership of the Houses of Clergy and Laity at a group of sessions of the Synod, with only those members present (including those participating remotely in the case of a remote or hybrid meeting) entitled to vote. This will replace the current system of postal voting. Several members (including Jonathan) spoke, either to defend postal voting or to point out problems, such as the potential exclusion of some members. The proposal was approved by 185 votes to 86 against, with 12 recorded abstentions.
- (ii) the election of central CNC members in pairs: three pairs from the House of Clergy and three from the House of Laity, with one member from each pair serving on the CNC for the consideration of a particular vacancy. Again, after a lively debate, this was carried by 217 votes to 69 against, with 26 recorded abstentions.

We then had a presentation on the **national investment bodies' approach to climate change**. Loretta Minghella spoke on how much progress has been made by the various bodies that hold our investments in bringing in carbon neutral policies in the companies they invest in where necessary and changing the boards of those companies. Exxon Mobile is an example where three of their directors have been changed because of our pressure.

The day concluded with **Question Time**. Unfortunately, although 129 questions were tabled, only 48 were dealt with by way of oral supplementaries, in part due to delays in operating on Zoom.²

Saturday 10th July

We began at 9.00 a.m. with a joint presentation by the **Archbishops' Council and Church Commissioners on their annual reports**. They continued to get a good return on their investments and had made them both ethical and green. The long term future of the Church of England looked very good considering the volatility of the markets and the economic downturn.

The Archbishops' Council Budget was presented by Canon John Spence (Chair of the Finance Committee). The main point is that giving across the Church of England by the parishes to the dioceses had dropped on average by 7% - 9% in northern provinces and 6% in the southern province, and this downward trend at present was continuing to an approximate drop of 10% which is putting a great strain on church finances across the board, even though there has been a significant bail out from central church funds and from the government towards maintaining

² All Synod papers, including the Questions Notice Paper (with the 129 questions and the written answers) can be downloaded from the General Synod pages of the C of E website:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/agendas-papers/general-synod-july-2021>.

churches and cathedrals. Nonetheless the budget resolutions were passed, with only a handful of votes against.

After a mid-morning screen break (a necessary feature of online synods) Robert Hammond, chair of the Business Committee, moved a motion to **further amend the allocation of seats for the 2021 General Synod elections**. An amending resolution, as explained in paper GS 2214 and for which Robert apologised, was necessitated by further errors that had been detected since April in the application of the seat allocation formula. The Elections Review Group (to be re-established after the elections) will need to look at the issues and perhaps consider whether there should be an external audit of the allocations. The motion was approved overwhelmingly. (St Eds & Ips representation is unchanged at three clergy and three lay members.)

The Safeguarding report. This presentation brought us up to date on the implementation of the IICSA report and the parish dashboard scheme, which is already operating in our diocese. There is slow progress on setting up the independent panel to supervise safeguarding complaints, but progress is being made. Twenty members asked questions during the hour allocated for this item.

After the lunch break, Synod voted on a series of **amendments to Standing Orders** proposed in the 57th Report of the Standing Orders Committee. Among the amendments approved by large majorities were amendments intended to streamline the legislative process for draft Measures, and to make it easier for Synod to debate controversial proposals at the revision stage – a change prompted by the unsatisfactory position in February 2020 when Synod was barely quorate for the revision stage of (what is now) the Diocesan Boards of Education Measure 2021.

There followed a presentation on **Living in Love and Faith**, called ‘Passing the Baton,’ because the people who brought the process thus far will be standing down. It has been acknowledged that the Covid lockdown has slowed the process down. While there was not a precise promise to delay, this may have to happen, given the deadline of reporting back by the middle of 2022.

Synod then returned to legislative business, this time the **draft Legislative Reform (Church Commissioners) Order 2021**. Controversially, this proposes an overall limit of 10 years’ service (two 5-year terms) for commissioners (excluding ex-officio commissioners). A vote by the scrutiny committee to omit this provision was defeated by 5 votes to 4. The issue in the GS debate centred on whether the proposed change was within the scope of the Legislative Reform Measure 2018, and thus whether the proposed change should be sought by a draft Measure rather than by Order. A motion to refer the Order back to the scrutiny committee for further consideration was lost by just 140 votes to 144 against, with 16 recorded abstentions. Subsequently, Synod voted by houses to approve the Order (bishops 22-2; clergy 80-40; laity 79-61), but it now requires parliamentary approval to become law.³

The day ended with a presentation and debate **‘Responding to the housing crisis: what is the role of the Church?’** This updated us on the decision for the church to play a more leading role in addressing the housing crisis by making resources available, by offering both houses and land for new houses to be built, leased, or rented out. This was not an obligation that would fall equally on

³ The current position (as at 23 September 2021) is that an Early Day Motion (EDM No. 378) was tabled on 18 August 2021 by six MPs, including Sir Peter Bottomley and Tim Farron, “That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Legislative Reform (Church Commissioners) Order 2021 (S.I. 2021 No. 842), dated 13 July 2021, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27 July 2021, be annulled.”

all dioceses because some were better resourced than others and others were poorer than some. There were some very heart-warming stories shared about curate's houses being used for people leaving prison without homes. It does beg the question though, if houses are given for curacies and we have an upturn in clergy where are we going to put those new curates?

Sunday 11th July

Usually, at York, Synod members would join the congregation at the Minster for the Sunday Eucharist. This year, the morning was left free to enable members to worship at their local churches. In the afternoon, more legislative business followed the opening worship. Synod approved overwhelmingly (261 votes to 17 against, with 5 recorded abstentions) an **amendment to the Church Representation Rules** whereby the imposition of a **terms-limit for lay members of deanery synods** will now be a matter for decision by the APCM in each parish rather than a two-terms limit being the default position (see the substituted paragraphs M8(5)-(7)). Synod also approved a late amendment to add rule 50(1A) whereby a lay candidate for election to General Synod is to be treated as having met the first condition for election (receipt of Communion according to the use of the C of E at least three times in the 12 months preceding the relevant day – the date of dissolution of the Synod: in 2021 11 July 2021) “if the persons would have met it but for matters connected with coronavirus (within the meaning of the Coronavirus Act 2020.”

Synod then approved the **Ecclesiastical Offices (Terms of Service) (Amendment) Regulations 2021**. These amend the 2009 regulations and relate mainly to residentiary canons in cathedrals, but also provide that where an office holder gives up some stipend in return for some other benefit (e.g. an electric car) the stipend is nevertheless to be treated as having been received by the office holder for the purposes of the rules relating to the National Minimum Stipend.

The nature of ordained public ministry and the Clergy Discipline Measure. In summary the Bishop to the Armed Forces and Bishop at Lambeth, Tim Thornton⁴, has done a major piece of work in coming up with proposals for changing the Clergy Discipline Measure, differentiating between serious misconduct and misdemeanours. However, more work has to be done before it becomes full legislation. In addition to that we need a precise code of conduct so that clergy and others will know what is expected of them and also what is expected of laity and bishops in their relationship and treatment of the clergy. These two items were the basis of a good debate and concern but at present it is still very much a work in progress. A following motion, proposed by the Revd Simon Talbott (Ely), encouraging the Business Committee “to enable the implementation group to present its initial proposals on a proposed approach to Synod in November 2021 so progress can be made with serious intent through the Synod sessions of 2022” was passed by 238 votes to 32, with 20 recorded abstentions – indicative of Synod members’ view of the urgency of the need for reform.

We finished the day with approving the appointment of **John Spence as a member of the Archbishops’ Council** for a further term, and of Crowe UK LLP as the **new external auditors**.

Monday 12th July

The excellent worship which came from the St. Anselm community in Lambeth Palace was followed by a debate on the consultation paper **Mission and Revision: A Review of the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011**” GS 2222. This sets out various proposals for revision and

⁴ As from 20 September 2021, succeeded as Bishop to the Armed Forces by the Bishop of St Germans, the Rt Revd Hugh Nelson, who continues also as Bishop of St Germans (a suffragan bishop in the Diocese of Truro.)

improvement of the 2011 Measure. As a church we need to be much more flexible and imaginative in our use of un-needed buildings we can save and find joint use and resources to maintain them. It was not a licence just to cut buildings willy-nilly. This is the beginning of an eight-weeks period consultation process in which everybody can be involved. Further background material and consultation papers can be accessed through the MPM2011 review page at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/parish-reorganisation-and-closed-church-buildings/review-mission-and-pastoral-measure>.⁵

The Archbishop of York did a presentation explaining the **Vision and Strategy report, 'Simpler, Humbler, Bolder'** followed by a take note debate. This is arguably one of the most exciting things the Church of England has done recently. Unfortunately, there has been a lot of disinformation about it, but it is worth recording the main tenets of what is involved here. They are trying to build a church for the whole nation which is Jesus Christ centred and shaped by the five marks of mission, leading to three strategic priorities for the 2020s:

- 1) A church of missionary disciples
- 2) A church where a mixed ecology is the norm
- 3) A church which is younger and more diverse.

From these three priorities six bold outcomes have been identified under the title 'A church for everyone' through:

- 1) Doubling the number of children and young active disciples in the Church of England by 2030.
- 2) A Church of England which fully represents the communities we serve in age and diversity.
- 3) A parish system revitalised for mission so there is a pathway for every person into an accessible and contextual expression of church
- 4) Creating 10,000 new Christian communities across the four areas of home, work/education, social and digital.

Empowered by:

- 5) All Christians in the Church of England envisioned, resourced and released to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the whole of life, bringing transformation to the church and world.
- 6) All local churches, supported by their diocese, becoming communities and hubs for initial and ongoing formation.

A presentation on **Transforming Effectiveness** followed, led by our own Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. Here the church is trying to simplify its working between its various structures to reduce duplication and waste and to increase efficiency. This was very well received.

After lunch, the Bishop of Rochester, James Langstaff, introduced a take note debate on an update 127-pages report (GS 2225) from the **Implementation and Dialogue Group** (IDG) relating to the 'Five Guiding Principles'. This is the review of how we are caring for people in the Church of England who do not accept the ordained or episcopal ministry of women. There was a range of stories from people who on the one hand continue to think women are persecuted because they have to work with colleagues who do not agree with their ministry, through to women who wanted to pay glowing testimony to the fact they have been well supported and protected by clergy who do not agree, with a range of comments in between. It would seem that the five guiding principles (FGP) are working well. In a vote by houses, Synod duly took note of the report,

⁵ Note that the consultation period has now been further extended to end on 31 October 2021. Pages 47-48 of the paper set out 31 specific questions on which responses are sought, with cross-references to the relevant paragraphs of the paper.

which proposes the establishment of a Standing Commission on the House of Bishops Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests, its aim, responsibilities, and membership set out in Annex 2. (Voting: Bishops 25 for, 1 against, 6 abstentions; Clergy: 93-39-14; Laity: 93-40-20.)

This item was scheduled to be followed by a **private member's motion** (PMM), inter alia requesting the House of Bishops to review the FGP. The motion had been tabled in March 2017 following the Bishop of Burnley's decision to withdraw acceptance of his nomination to the see of Sheffield. A briefing paper GS 2226A set out how the motion had been overtaken by time and events, especially the IDG report. As the mover of the motion had explained in the Business Committee report debate, the decision to withdraw it followed, in particular, the receipt of representations that it would be in the best interests of the diocese of Sheffield to do so: it was unfortunate that the PMM had been so long delayed in reaching the Synod agenda—the position would have been different had the motion been scheduled for debate in 2017.

To fill the gap we agreed after a brief debate to progress to the next stage of our **joint covenant with the Methodists**. This item was moved from Friday when there was not enough time to cover it that evening.

Business concluded with consideration of detailed **amendments to the Synod's standing orders** to implement the changes to the process for electing the central members of the CNC. Following Friday's debate on the principles, the changes were all approved by large majorities. Synod then turned to consider the **Vacancy in See Committees (Amendment) Regulation 2021**. As Aiden Hargreaves-Smith said, the committee is 'mostly dormant', and it was hoped that the proposed changes would generate more interest. One change (which will affect the election, due this autumn, to elect members of our ViS Committee to serve for three years from 1 January 2022) is that the Houses of Clergy and Laity of the diocesan synod will now constitute a single electorate. A controversial change to make the chair of the committee ineligible for election as a diocesan member of the CNC was approved after an amendment to omit this prohibition was lost by 123 votes to 133 against with 16 abstentions. Those supporting the amendment felt that this should be left for local decision. Another change that was approved will bar any member of the ViS Committee in episcopal orders (e.g. a suffragan bishop) from being elected to the CNC. A non-controversial amendment enables a ViS Committee to meet remotely.

After that we had the farewells, the reading of the writs for the dissolution, a Service of the Word, and then the prorogation and dissolution of the Synod. This brings my time on synod to an end.

Jonathan Ford (reports of legislative business by DL.)

Further notes:

1. Zoom synods do not allow people to meet privately so they can be congratulated or challenged on their speeches and therefore the cohesiveness and mutual respect of synod is lost.
2. It was very clear that 360+ people had tuned in but for most things where there was a vote fewer than 300 voted, which means that for most of the synod many people had tuned in but did not actually participate in the debate that was going on. Perhaps this should be taken into account when future synods are planned.
3. The Lumi voting system, which was the third attempt to do votes, after initial teething problems worked very well.