

General Synod of the Church of England 23 and 24 April 2021 via Zoom

REPORT from the General Synod members from the Diocese of Salisbury

We had barely got started with the Introductions before there were changes to the Order of Business, the first of which were tributes to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh led by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who spoke of the Duke's life of service and his remarkable funeral which the Duke had planned himself. Other members of Synod testified to different aspects of the Duke's life including an excellent tribute to the benefits of his Award scheme.

A motion expressing heartfelt sympathy of the Archbishops, Bishops, Clergy and Laity of the General Synod of the Church of England on the death of His Royal Highness Prince Philip, The Duke of Edinburgh, assuring Her Majesty of the honour in which his memory will be held by them and of their prayers for Her Majesty and all the Royal Family' was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Synod with three abstentions.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Presidential Address was given by the Archbishop of York and took the form of a response to the Panorama programme which had been broadcast four days earlier on the subject '*Is the church racist?*' One of those interviewed on the programme was the Revd Arun Arora who had commented that the time of talking about racism had run its course and now action needs to be taken urgently. The Archbishop endorsed this comment, apologised for the Church's lack of action, and made a commitment to change. He drew Synod's attention to the report of the recent Archbishop's Anti-Racism Taskforce Report, '*From Lament to Action*'.

In the debate that followed, several speakers urged the church to act on recommendations made in the Archbishop's report particularly noting the urgency for the leadership of the church to reflect more diversity by including UKME members. Bishop Graham Tomlin's blog '*Grace and Race*' was recommended as excellent reading. There will be a chance to debate the question of race and discrimination more fully in the July Synod when this topic will be on the agenda.

BUSINESS COMMITTEE REPORT

This was the first meeting for the first lay Chair of the Business Committee, Robert Hammond of the Chelmsford Diocese. We saw rather a lot of him as changes were made to the Agenda. One of his first notices at the meeting conducted via Zoom (no chat function, little social media use and only a few short breaks) was that, subject last minute government changes, General Synod at York would go ahead from 9-13 July 2021 following which Synod will be dissolved with elections taking place in the early autumn.

As regular readers of our Reports will know, the Business Committee has the important and difficult job of organising what items will be taken and how much time will be allowed for the debate. It is especially difficult in the last few groups of sessions because if the Measure or Order does not finish its journey through the legislative process, the item will lapse and it will have to be started all over again in the next Quinquennium. One member asked whether his Private Members' Motion which had been on the list for debate for more than two years would get on the York agenda to be met with the predictable response that it will be a challenge to get all motions on the order paper.

There are always questions about why items are or are not on the agenda. For example, a member asked when there would be a debate on the armed forces covenant after all their sterling work during the pandemic. Clearly one of the Reports which Synod rightly wants to debate sooner rather than later is *From Lament to Action*.

DRAFT SAFEQUARDING (CODE OF PRACTICE) MEASURE - Revision Stage

Given the Church's track record on Safeguarding, it was vital to pass this Measure as speedily as possible: it was revised *and* approved at group of session. The Drafting Committee had listened to the debate at the first consideration of the Measure in November 2020 and those recommendations had been incorporated into the wording of the new text. The new Dean of the Arches, Morag Ellis QC, led the task of amending the Measure and this was done over a series of votes which were passed almost unanimously.

INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION

The motion's opening clause set the tone for this major debate, that 'this Synod, 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:'. The problem is that active discrimination against those with a belief, particularly Christians, is rising and Pew Forum (the Religious Landscape Study) estimates that 83% of the global population live in countries where the free practice of faith is restricted.

Ecumenical Representative Archbishop Angaelos, of the Coptic Orthodox Church (which includes the largest Christian congregation in the Middle East), in opening the debate told of numerous atrocities which involved Christians and those of other religions. There were several supporting voices and others pointed out the religious freedom is becoming an increasing problem for the West as well.

An amendment was tabled seeking to include further personal situations that were attacked in a similar way to religion, but a majority of Synod (188/ 89 with 39 abstentions) resisted this, largely because of its imperfect wording.

After a passionate debate Synod in essence passed a two-part motion: (1) Whilst noting the size of the problem and affirming this freedom is a necessary condition for human flourishing it called upon the Mission & Public Affairs Council's resources to assist the Church to advocate freedom of religion internationally; (2) To call upon Her Majesty's Government to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's review and to strengthen its commitment to uphold and protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all in its foreign international development, defence and trade policy.

DRAFT LEGISLATIVE REFORM (CHURCH OF ENGLAND PENSIONS) ORDER 2021

The Legislative Reform Measure 2018 enables the Archbishops' Council, with the approval of the General Synod and subject to Parliamentary oversight, to make orders (known as "Legislative Reform Orders") removing or reducing burdens that result from ecclesiastical legislation. In this context, "burden" means a financial cost, an administrative inconvenience, or an obstacle to efficiency. It is a shortened form of introducing legislation without full consideration from Synod. Under this shortened procedure, the Order cannot be amended. It is either approved or sent back. It has some key reforms including:

- The Board should be reduced to twelve trustees from its current twenty members.

- Nominated candidates for election to the Board will be required to demonstrate their experience and potential contribution to the work of the Board, and only those who are suitably qualified will be eligible.
- The term of each member of the Board will be up to five years, with no member serving more than ten years.

Each year, the Board will be required to lay before the General Synod a copy of the annual report for the preceding financial year.

The debate started with concerns about the negative affect of limiting the period of tenure of office, and also the reduction to a quorum of four, giving a very small group considerable powers. There were also concerns about the removal of the electorate's right of nominating members to the Board, by insisting on a pre-selection of candidates by the Board. Our Debbie McIsaac delivered an excellent speech outlining the difficulties in supporting this proposal for these reasons.

Further speeches encouraged the Synod to support this Order as the most effective and efficient way of introducing the reforms - and the motion was carried by a large majority.

57th REPORT OF THE STANDING ORDERS COMMITTEE GS 2198

Perhaps not a title bound to set the heart racing, but it is the first time in 50 years that the legislative procedure of the General Synod has been reviewed and is probably the most important bit of simplification for the national church.

Concern had been expressed about the lack of attention given by the Synod to legislative business.:

'Legislative business is often poorly attended; it is often squeezed by other items on the agenda; some members appear not to see themselves as having a duty to engage with it. The voting figures for the final approval of Measures reported to the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament often show that only about half the members of each House of the Synod actually voted on the Final Approval Stage; sometimes it is fewer still. The Committee is concerned about the impression this creates, given the Synod's privileged constitutional position as the only body other than Parliament and the devolved assemblies which can make primary legislation.'

The amendments to Standing Orders will simplify and streamline the conduct of Synod business, improve the diligence with which legislation is reviewed and decrease the time it takes for new provisions to conclude the process.

As this Synod comes to the end of its life, the General Synod is indebted to people such as Mr Geoffrey Tattersall QC who chaired the Committee and the recently retired Dean of the Arches and Auditor, Charles George QC, who expressed concerns about meaningful engagement of the Synod with its legislative business.

GENERAL SYNOD ELECTION: Allocation of Seats

The 2020 seat allocation for General Synod, as always, is based on the then-known electoral role diocesan numbers. The Lincoln Diocese subsequently submitted updated numbers. A review revealed that the original number was an 'estimate' and the downward change had a material effect on its seat allocation, reducing Lincoln's by one. This exercise in some dioceses seat allocation being adjusted by +1 or -1 seats. The accuracy of electoral role numbers is important for the democratic process.

This process has highlighted, both in Canterbury and York, that electoral role numbers have almost universally dropped. Also, it emphasises the need for individual parishes to take care in their accuracy when submitting their numbers to their diocese. The motion adjusting the numbers of seats allocated to a few dioceses was passed.

CLERGY DISCIPLINE MEASURE RULES 2021 (Amendment). GS2199

Revd Paul Benfield (Blackburn) put forward to Synod the rules to be amended. He reminded Synod that there were working parties looking at the CDM process in the light of IICSA recommendations and that a new measure would appear in due course. The Clergy Discipline Measure needed to work well for all those involved.

The amendments were based on four areas:

- 1) Efficiency: there was a problem of delay in the current system. The amendments facilitate online communication. Paper forms will still be available and can be used, but online forms will be included in the guidelines at each step. Delivery of forms would also be simultaneous to the Diocesan Bishop and Registrar.
- 2) Clarity: the complainant should provide a timeline of events in chronological order. The complaint will also be renamed, 'Allegation of Misconduct'. The word 'complaint' is too specific; change to misconduct allows a broadening of the category. Word and page limits are also included – the intention to make the allegation more focussed and precise.
- 3) Active Case Management: ensure cases progress with due speed. Consideration given to the one-year time limit currently in place. In the current guidelines, anyone not party to the complaint, cannot provide documentary evidence. This would be removed.
- 4) Vulnerable Witnesses: support available for all those who may be regarded as vulnerable.

These amendments were considered by Synod. A question was raised whether the respondent would be told what they were being accused of. The use of mediation was strongly encouraged to avoid escalation of alleged misconduct. The question of pastoral care was raised; whether it is sufficient for this to be offered, but not followed up.

The reform of the CDM process was also briefly questioned. Bishop Tim Thornton has led the review thus far and he was able to assure Synod that there would be a report in July, and he supported the amendments being suggested.

A question was raised about those for whom English was an additional language or who had poor literacy skills. Synod was reminded that all dioceses had to provide assistance for anyone who may find it difficult to complete the paperwork.

Assurance was also sought for those suffering from trauma, for whom the need to prepare a timeline of events would cause stress and difficulty as they would need to relive the events that had caused them such pain. Again, it was noted that they should be supported appropriately.

Revd Benfield when responding to the discussion noted the comments made and accepted that this would not be a panacea to solve all the problems but would hopefully make helpful amendments.

The amendments were passed with no votes against and no abstentions.

RESPONSIBLE REPRESENTATION: A Review of the Election Processes to the Crown Nomination Commission (CNC) GS 2202

The CNC is the body responsible for discerning those to be nominated to the Prime Minister for appointment to becoming a bishop in the Church of England. Since many bishops serve for over a decade, its recommendations have important and long-lasting effects for the church.

A review of the CNC Review was initiated in 2018 and had broad terms of Reference. From the outset, our own Peter Breckwoldt has been a member of the Review Group.

As for the debate, there were three amendments tabled of which only one was passed. There was an adjournment motion seeking to postpone any vote at all. It was lost. Presently, there are six permanent members of the CNC, plus the two archbishops and a secretary. When, as currently with Salisbury, a new bishop is required, the Diocese also sends six elected members to represent the 'local' perspective at the commission.

The review recommended a 'cultural shift or change'. The individual member's aim when serving on the commission must be for 'the mutual flourishing' of fellow members and 'represent the common good' for God's church as people of Christ, regardless of their own views, politics and beliefs. To achieve this it was recommended that the number of permanent members is increased from six to twelve. Further, it is proposed that these members are paired and are elected as such by General Synod. The pairs would themselves decide which of them would serve as part of a particular episcopal selection. To stand the best chance of being selected the prospective members would need to appeal across the spectrum of Synod and so likely to have to stand with someone who differed from their own views - or so it was said. It would increase diversity of views, gender, race, mobility and sexual orientation through the pairing. It is important to note that this can be an onerous appointment as bishop's nominations can come along, like buses, in groups of three or four at a time. When both wish to sit on a particular selection of a new bishop, lots would be drawn as to whom it is to be. The review also dealt with the Vacancy in See Committee making recommendations on its format and representation at the CNC. Overall, in total over 30 recommendations have been made. Much work is still to be done to refine and adjust the measure but on this its first exposure to Synod, the Motion was welcomed and passed.

APPOINTMENTS

Mr Clive Mather has been appointed for a further term of three years as Chair of the Pensions Board. Dame Caroline Spelman has been appointed Chair of the Dioceses Commission.

FAREWELLS

The Archbishop of Canterbury bid farewell to our own Bishop Nick and to the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and the Bishop of Portsmouth. All will be greatly missed by their dioceses and the wider church.

Do listen to the Farewell to + Nicholas Holtam, for whom this was his last Synod meeting. He has guided us wisely and generously. Go to <https://youtu.be/eRXQ3dDsYhs?t=28780n> at 7h 59m 40s.