

Report on the November 2014 General Synod from Salisbury Members

General Synod met in London from Monday 17th to Tuesday 18th November 2014.

General Synod meets three times a year, but if it can be managed that we do not meet in November, the November Group of Sessions is not called. We met for two days this time because it would have been unthinkable to have cancelled this Group of Sessions, in the light of the speed with which Parliament had processed the legislation to allow **women to be ordained as bishops**. Meeting for these two days means that we will meet for two days less in February. After several decades of debate about the ordination of women, the legislation to allow women to be ordained as bishops became law with a simple show of hands and the signatures of the six officers of General Synod. The moment was captured by the television cameras and was received in the dignified silence that is reserved for decisions about the ministry of women.

The television cameras were not present for the other business done by synod, some of which was particularly significant. Archbishop Justin gave a powerful **Presidential Address** which focussed on the Anglican Communion. He is in the process of visiting all the Primates of the Communion in their own homes and so far he has visited 36 of them in 14 trips which have taken 96 days. Contrary to reports that the Anglican Communion has died, he said that it exists and it is flourishing in 165 countries, which encompass 500 different cultures and more than 2,000 different languages. The potential of the Communion is beyond imagining and our unity in Christ, despite our differences, is a prize beyond price. Yet the many differences and divisions, not just over human sexuality, leaves the communion in a very delicate state. Without prayer, fracture is almost inevitable. The Archbishop has not called the Communion together for a Lambeth Conference in 2018. If such a conference is to take place, it will be a collegiate decision, taken by the Primates, who will determine both the time and the agenda.

The following day the Archbishop preached about what it means to live as a persecuted Church. His Presidential Address can be found at the following link and no doubt the sermon will also be posted there in due course:

<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5443/archbishop-justins-presidential-address-to-the-general-synod>

Legislative business included changes which will make the faculty process easier and once more we found ourselves engaged in the issue of sheep grazing in churchyards, for which they require a faculty. Apparently you can graze an elephant or a giraffe without a faculty, but not sheep. The Church Buildings Council has a good website at:

<http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/church-buildings-council>

Decisions were taken about simplifying the ownership of property by PCCs and the constitution of the Diocese of Europe.

A longer discussion took place over the **Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy**, an important document which first appeared in 2003. Rather than being a rule-book, this sets out the Church's aspiration of the highest standards for its clergy. It has needed to be revised because the world has moved on, not least in the development of social media and the internet and in issues of safeguarding. Overall, the document is uncontroversial, except for some unfinished business, which is the matter of the confidentiality of the confessional. The issue needs to be addressed as to whether or not the seal of the confessional (in cases of formal sacramental confession) can be broken, or should be broken, if and when what is confessed includes the abuse of children or vulnerable adults. The current practice of safeguarding points to the need for disclosure, when in the past there has often been silence in the face of such abuse. The seal of the confessional still demands that, in the case of a formal sacramental confession, no such disclosure is possible. Further work needs to be done over this matter. A number of people spoke about this issue. Once broken, the seal of the confessional is gone. It creates a sacred space which can be a step by which an abuser moves towards giving himself up. It can also create the sacred space in which the victim of such abuse might speak out and start finding the way to healing. It was also said that we need to hear the voice of the abused, before any further proposals are made, and that the ministry of lay people also needs to be included.

Questions is an important part of the synodical process, in which any aspect of the work of the central church structures and institutions can be brought to account. Questions touched on issues of human sexuality, our relationship with the 'breakaway' Anglican Church of North America, the national post of Liturgical Officer and many other matters. You can

find details of the questions, together with all the other papers from this Group of Sessions at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/agendas-and-papers/november-2014-group-of-sessions.aspx>

Jane Charman asked questions about **The Lord Green Report**, which has given rise to a significant sum of money being set aside to identify and equip future leaders of our church. Concern has been expressed about the report and the processes that have been set up. The Bishop of Ely promised that a digest of the report will be made public and available in January 2015. Do ask one of your Synod members if you want more information about this report.

A very important session was a panel discussion on **Violence against Religious Minorities in Iraq and Syria**. It was led by the Bishop of Coventry and included the Bishop of Leeds, Shaykh Fuad Nahdi (the first Muslim to address General Synod), Bishop Angaelos (of the Coptic Orthodox Church) and the Revd Rachel Carnegie (Joint Executive Director of the Anglican Alliance). Members of the panel spoke of the appalling brokenness of the situation in the Middle East. Bishop Angaelos spoken of hope and quoted one person as saying that 'the world has been broken, but it will be healed in the end'. There has been a complete breakdown of trust. Dr Nahdi spoke of the way that the Muslim population of our own country is paralysed by what is an incomprehensible situation. He spoke of the magnificent history of coexistence between Christians and Muslims, which needs to be rediscovered. We need to see one another as partners, committed to show compassion and to be living out a faith which lies in prayer. Bishop Nick Barnes said that we are reaping the harvest of what was sown a generation ago, just as what we are sowing now will determine what will happen in the future. Rachel Carnegie spoke of the unprecedented level of humanitarian need there exists in Syria. Dr. Nahdi said that this is not all about religion. We are praying, he said, but we do not know what to pray for.

There was a discussion about allowing Diocesan Boards of Finance to restructure their finances to allow capital gains to be used as income, a move which puts the Church of England in line with the practice of other charities. Paul Boyd-Lee warned of the need to be careful in following the rules in this matter and the need to preserve capital for the future.

We spent time discussing whether dioceses should be allowed to change their name to a geographic one (rather than a city). One overheard comment was to ask if we are now in the business of rearranging the labels on the deck chairs.

A debate on the **Anglican/Methodist Covenant** was unremarkable, but it did allow the sharing of some good news stories. Debrah McIsaack spoke of the need to remember the importance of the network of lay preachers in the Methodist tradition. Our own decision to ordain women as bishops has now unlocked a major sticking point in our move to mutual recognition of ministry in our two churches. It was resolved to accept the recommendations of the Joint Implementation Commission which include moving towards the acceptance of episcopal ministry in the Methodist Church and a mutual recognition of each other's ministry.

A very important debate on the **Spare Room Subsidy** (Bedroom Tax) took place, with many stories told of the incredible suffering of some of the poorest people in our society. There has been a significant rise in rent arrears, evictions, the use of food-banks and the disintegration of communities, as people are forced out of their homes in places where there is often no suitable alternative accommodation. The Synod overwhelmingly passed a motion calling for more work in this area and also calling for action to ensure suitable housing for the most vulnerable members of our society.

You can find more about the various debates at

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2014/11.aspx>

You can also hear sound recordings from this Group of Sessions on Sound Cloud:

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

There are only two more Groups of Sessions before the end of the life of this Synod. We meet:

London Tues 10th to Thurs 12th February

York Fri 10th to Tues 14th July

The following Group of Sessions will be from Mon 23rd to Wed 25th November 2015 and this will be the start of a new General Synod, elected for a period of five years. The elections will be next year and it is important that you now start looking for people to propose and second you (if you are standing for Synod) or start thinking about whom you might propose. A good field of candidates will give the electors (members of Deanery Synods) a good selection of people to choose from. Several existing members are standing down next summer, so we need new candidates to come forward. Existing members (see Diocesan Directory) will be happy to give advice as to what being on General Synod entails.