

General Synod report

Background

There have been two meetings of the General Synod since it was newly elected in 2021. Gloucester Diocese's representatives, alongside Bishop Rachel, are Henry Curran, Dana Delap and Katrina Scott for the clergy and Karen Czapiewski, Jennifer Fellowes, Robert McNeill-Wilson and Margaret Sheather for the laity. 60% of this Synod's members are newly elected, though some have served before.

One of our new Gloucester representatives comments "how moving and inspirational I have found the Synod to be. Both in November and in February, I was struck as much by the consensus that I found in the room, as by the differences. I have found it happily to be a place where faith is talked about deeply (not just church structures!), and where God is worshipped. At this last Synod, I felt the unanimity of the conversations around racial justice, human slavery and the persecuted church were hugely important - and giving us all a reminder of the place of the prophetic voice of the Church, speaking to wider society too."

The **November meeting** was largely taken up with induction sessions both on the national vision for the Church of England and the practicalities of Synod activity, so there was very little formal business transacted to report on.

This report therefore focuses on the **February meeting** held over three days at Church House, London. All Synod papers can be found on the Church of England website.

Remote and hybrid meetings

The first business of synod was to extend the temporary measure allowing remote and hybrid meetings. This had allowed the Synod to continue to do business during the period of Covid 19 restrictions and is being kept in place pending greater certainty about the future. The provision remains temporary for purely practical reasons – a permanent change would require a new measure.

The Synod worships together at the beginning and end of each day's business.

Presidential Address

This was given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, one of his main themes being the tension between individual and community, suggesting that the pandemic had demonstrated rather than undermined our inter-connectedness and the effect on others of all that we did and do. He quoted "the strong do what they will and the weak suffer as they must" to point up the danger of failing to look at the world as one.

He challenged us as a church – "we are richly endowed but have talked ourselves into a position of impoverishment and inability" – to recognise and give thanks for the resources we do have and work from that viewpoint.

The Business Committee Report outlined the proposed structure for this meeting of synod and drew attention to areas where members' views had been taken into account, for example an additional time for questions. Another innovation was a feedback session a couple of weeks after synod, at which members would be invited to comment further. This

report contained a reminder that synod is, primarily, a legislative body and it was important that members understood the responsibility this carries, participating in the legislative work as well as the wider issues debated.

Introduction to the Archbishops' Racial Justice Commission and update on Racial Justice work

This is one of the church's key areas of current activity, arising from the report "From Lament to Action"¹ on the church's poor record in racial justice. The Commission, chaired by Lord (Paul) Boateng was launched in Autumn 2021 and will report twice a year over its three-year life. Lord Boateng gave a challenging and inspiring speech, highlighting the urgency of the issue.

Questions

This is a standing item at all Synod meetings. Written questions are submitted in advance of the meeting and written answers provided, but in this session members can ask supplementary questions to pursue the point further. This was a lively session with strong engagement but members were asked to limit supplementary questions to allow more questions to be covered. This caused some tension as some felt stifled, but on balance, it meant more questions were covered and there was less use of the opportunity to move discussion off topic.

Safeguarding

Bishop Jonathan Gibbs presented a thorough report on the work of the National Safeguarding Team on all the various work-streams it is pursuing, largely in response to the findings of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)'s report on the Church of England. He noted that the report was a general update in order to bring all Synod members up to speed on the issues. Although reassuring, it also emphasised how much work is still needed.

As part of the presentation, Professor Maggie Atkinson, Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB), introduced the work of the ISB. This is the last piece of the new governance arrangements for safeguarding that the church has established. It is a three-person board with immense experience across the range of safeguarding including experience as a survivor of abuse. It is currently in a stage of information gathering and consultation and will then set out its intended work programme. While being clear about the progress still needed, Professor Atkinson also praised for the tremendous work being done every day in diocese, parishes, cathedrals and other settings.

Faculty Jurisdiction (Amendment) Rules 2022

This rather dry-sounding item, which takes effect on 1 July this year, was enacted as part of the church's commitment to achieve carbon net zero by 2030, making it easier for parishes to implement 'green' decisions. There was a strong reminder that all such decisions must be well informed, for example do not replace a boiler until it dies – the disposal of a fossil fuel boiler has more adverse impact than a new boiler can compensate for in the same time period.

¹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf>

Challenging Slavery and Human Trafficking

The timing of this debate challenging slavery and human trafficking took place at the same time as a similar debate in parliament in which some bishops were speaking. The motion seeking better legislation on this topic was passed overwhelmingly

It was reassuring that this and the previous safeguarding debate were allowed to overrun, acknowledging their importance.

Clergy Remuneration Review

This item had been held over from last July and delay had enabled people to study the report in greater depth and there was constructive debate and responses.

God's People Set Free

Bishop Rachel then presented a report on the implementation of Setting God's People Free including a film "A Holistic Vision for Being the Church" in which she features. What had been done was interesting, but the debate that followed also considered the positive effect as this work supports so much of the work in parishes and in the church as a whole going forward. The church is always good at changing labels but SGPF has already had an impact and, under the ongoing vision and strategy work, will continue to do so.

Because of the extended debate on earlier topics, some proposed group work was omitted: this reflects synodical priorities that business must be completed.

Diversity, Different and Disagreement: resources for effecting culture change

The last day of synod did, however, start with some gentle group work on this topic.

We discussed:

- listening to others' stories and seeing the world through their eyes;
- encountering others with authenticity and confidence, and
- finding hope and opportunity in the places where we long to see change.

The Difference course was introduced and may be something that Deaneries and parishes may wish to explore.

Governance Review Group Report

This report on progress to date had been introduced at the last session and is seeking to make governance better suited to the needs of dioceses and parishes. Currently there is a view that work at the centre takes place in silos, on top of which many questions and topics fall between those silos. The working group is seeking to ensure that structures are fit for purpose and effective. This was a take note report, which members were asked to welcome. After lengthy debate, the phrase "that this Synod welcome" the report was changed to "that this Synod thank" the group for its report and work continues to consider legislative proposals for synod to debate in due course.

Persecuted Church in the World

After committee chair appointments were made, synod debated a Diocesan Synod motion to support the persecuted church. This was a useful highlight to difficult situations faced by our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

See of Canterbury: Membership of the Crown Nominations Commission

Synod was invited to note proposed changes to membership of the Crown Nominations Commission for the See of Canterbury, the body that recommends the appointment of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The proposals, which were also out for wider consultation, seek to reflect the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury as Head of the Anglican Communion and not only the Church of England. Some tetchy debate took place, but this matter will be debated fully in July. The vote to “take note” of the report on this occasion was carried.

Church of England Mission in Revision (GS2222)

This item was not on the agenda on this occasion but has attracted a lot of attention and some controversy so it seems useful to mention it here. The initiation of the “Save the Parish” campaign is linked to this. The original thorough paper was presented to the July 2021 Synod as the start of a wide consultation, which brought a significant volume of responses. Those were summarised and reported in a background paper for the February Synod (GS Misc 1312) rather than a more formal next stage. This will now come to the July Synod as a “white paper” i.e. for further discussion, and any proposed legislation arising will be considered at Synod in February 2023.

Bishop Robert’s recent blog addresses these issues

<https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2022/save-the-parish-a-response-from-bishop-robert/>

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