

Notes from General Synod November 2023 – Summary for Deanery Synods

A summary of the headlines and flavour of the November group of sessions. The majority of the time and press coverage was spent on LLF, but there was other business.

The session opened as always with worship. **Prayer** is always central to Synod and an important part of the proceedings. Archbishop Justin then welcomed new members, the most notable of whom was the former Archdeacon of Gloucester and now Bishop of Crediton, Jackie Searle, so we can claim a continued Gloucester takeover with Bishop Rachel, Bishop Martyn, Bishop Stephen and Bishop Jackie.

Normally the **Archbishops** give us a joint address but this time it was delivered severally, with Archbishop Justin giving a powerful exploration of what it means to be part of the global Church in a time of suffering, and particularly in a time when, as the Secretary General of the United Nations [had] said [...], the world is like a door off its hinges.

He spoke of the war in Ukraine, food poverty in Africa and elsewhere, civil war in so many places, and now of the devastating violence in Israel and Palestine. He spoke of how the bloodshed must cease and urged us all to pray, please pray – for peace, for wisdom, for justice, for hope.

The full address is worth hearing or reading – so do please look it up*.

Following Archbishop Stephen's more conventional address, the next section was the **Business Committee report**, in which Robert Hammond, as chair of the Business Committee, explained what would happen if the nine hours allocated for LLF was not used in full. Among the usual questioning and challenge, there was a particularly excellent question from one Jennifer Fellows who described her approach to synod bingo. Let me explain, there are some voices that are heard far too often. When preparing for synod, on each topic, Jennifer predicts the top four names likely to be called to speak – and sadly, she is usually right. Far from being simply an amusing aside, this intervention actually appeared to work – chairs of the debates which followed seemed far more inclined to call 'those who hadn't spoken before, and they were unafraid to say 'the person in the stripy jumper' and it did seem to make for greater balance in the debates, so well done, Jennifer.

One remaining small item of business on Monday was the reappointment of Clive Mathers as **Pensions Board Chair**. Clive had already been in the role for four years, and the vote was unanimous.

On Tuesday morning we had time given to discussing the first consideration of the **Safeguarding Redress Measure** which had been passed in July's session. This is incredibly important bit of work which is looking to bring forward a national redress scheme for victims and survivors of Church-related abuse. It was only a first draft that was brought to Synod and there seems to be a real effort being made to be survivor-led. The policy and legislation are evolving together which is a change from how other schemes would usually be created.

There were speeches from the floor highlighting the wide divergence of views amongst survivors. The draft Measure's initial provisions focus on the experience of the victim or survivor. It is intended that the Scheme should give a single point of access and make consistent provision which minimises further delay and trauma for victims and survivors as far as possible.

One area of the scheme which received several questions was the idea that financial contributions

would initially come from the body closest in governance terms to where the abuse occurred or was instigated, for example the parish, diocese, theological educational institution (TEI), cathedral, religious community, mission agency or bishop's office. It is hoped that, in certain circumstances, such a body may be able to discharge at least part of that contribution from insurance and the Scheme is also being underpinned by up to £150 million provided by the national Church.

Questions are always an interesting insight into what issues are troubling people. Katrina, Robert and Jennifer had all submitted questions and all three also asked a supplementary at synod. Katrina asked the Pensions Board about some of the implications of changes to their **provision of housing**, with a view to protecting the residents. The response was that any changes will come following a comprehensive consultation - so do all feed in your thoughts. Robert asked the Archbishops' Council what action it is taking to support better **stewardship of church land** which could lead to more funding at a parish level as suggested by the Housing Advisory Board. The answer given was it would consider this alongside the other calls for support it receives. Jennifer asked about the **pastoral provision** given to those in discernment and existing ordinands who could not in conscience, use the prayers of love and faith, with a supplementary of whether a deacon unable to be ordained presbyter whilst the LLF process is ongoing, should be asked to consider resigning their orders? The answer was clearly stated as no. [Jennifer was quick to point out that this was nothing to do with our own Diocese, but reflected unfortunate events elsewhere.] [There was also a question about the increase in wealth of the **Church Commissioners** which was three times the increase in the stipends bill, the question being, 'how much is enough?' We just mention that to assure everyone that we are not alone in pressing the Church Commissioners to keep their expenditure under review.]

The next item of business was to approve the grant to the **Churches Conservation Trust** for the next three years. The Trust works incredibly hard at keeping buildings open and accessible, and also supports those communities where CCT do not adopt the building. The Trust had invited an independent strategic and financial review and developed an improvement plan to mitigate risk. There were several anecdotes on success stories and an observation that the amount of the grant requested - £4.8mn – was a budget increase of only half inflation (and less than the amount we are taking from our unapplied total return to support our Diocesan budget over the most recent three-year period).

In preserving these highly-listed buildings for community use, the Church of England has been described as the spiritual wing of the National Trust, but it was also stressed that the amount is far less than the amount contributed by government. The measure was approved and will be laid before parliament.

We then moved on to **Standing Orders**. There was agreement to allow additional time in speeches for those needing an interpreter (usually sign language). However, the other topic which exercised many greatly was the provision that has been in existence for many years, to petition Synod. This is petition in the sense of request rather than something gaining lots of signatures, and has been used in slightly odd and disturbing ways recently. The proposal to tighten the rules around these was agreed, and the request from some, notably Bishop Rachel, to stop them altogether was noted.

The headline item, debated for nine hours, was the **Prayers of Love and Faith**. For some it was an incredibly hard few days, with a number of questions unanswered surrounding the pastoral guidance

and pastoral reassurance. We saw bishops disagreeing publicly both before and during Synod. This felt both right and healthy and representative of the church at the moment, in contrast with the previous Synod where the bishops gave a public face of unity. The votes were incredibly close: the Bishop of Oxford's amendment to allow the early trial of stand-alone services went through by one vote in the house of laity. The final vote was also close by four votes in the house of laity, seven in the house of clergy and 13 in the house of bishops (with two of the "dissenting bishops" having been called to see the King). The questions remain; 'Now what? Where are we going? Where do we go from here?'

From another perspective, the LLF debate was generally conducted with civility and grace. There was ongoing disappointment that the plans had not progressed as anticipated. That they did not go as far as hoped, or went further than hoped. The debate was chaired with love and care by Geoffrey Tattersall, a retired KC with extensive experience and a decisive mind concealed by a gentle, self-deprecating manner. Many of those who spoke were measured in tone.

The debate made the Gloucester members realise how fortunate we are to have Bishops who value us all, regardless of our views, and who respect the rights of those who disagree. In this Diocese it feels as though we have heard the message that if we cannot agree, we must try to disagree well. It was sad that this is not always so.

When the LLF debate and voting was over, there was one further item of business – the snappily titled **Vacancy in See Committees (Amendment) Regulations 2023**. This was the final piece of the jigsaw in the transfer of episcopal oversight for the Channel Islands to Salisbury Diocese, and gives formal provision for the Islands having a say in the appointment of the Bishop. The high spot of this debate was when the Channel Islands' rep was asked if they were content with the appointment of Bishop Stephen and they indicated some enthusiasm – it transpired they had been involved informally – but the response then given was, 'He'll do for now'.

* Archbishop of Canterbury presidential address to Synod

<https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/general-synod-archbishop-canterburys-presidential-address>

The papers and debates are available on line, through the Church of England's website:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/general-synod>

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