

Report to Deaneries on General Synod July 2023

Introduction

This was a very packed weekend working on a full agenda across a wide range of issues. It covered the usual types of business: legislation, internal policy development and debates about issues in society, including motions put forward from Diocesan Synods (DSM) or by private members (PMM). These summer sessions also always receive the Annual Report of the Archbishops' Council, the report of the Audit Committee of the Archbishops' Council and the budget proposals for the coming year, which were agreed.

This report will cover some items in more details than others, so you will find at the end of this report the email addresses of all the General Synod representatives who attended in case you would like to get in touch with any of us for further information or discussion. The website address for the papers is also there if you have particular interests to follow up and if you haven't got a General Synod member on your Deanery Synod and would like a discussion sometime then do let us know.

Living in Love and Faith

Some of you may have wondered if there would be further news about the outcome of the work to implement Synod's decision in February about Prayers of Love and Faith. Synod received an updating presentation from the Bishop of London, followed by questions to a panel of bishops who have been chairing three groups working on finalising the prayers, pastoral guidance for their implementation and pastoral assurance for clergy as implementation moves forward. Those groups have now completed their work and the House of Bishops is considering the outcomes. Bishop Sarah was clear that the work is focussed on means of implementation, in line with the decision of the February Synod.

Climate change

This had a high profile, firstly through the National Investing Bodies of the church (Commissioners, Pension Fund etc) confirming their decision to divest from all the major oil and gas companies that are not committed to or are not on track to achieve net zero by 2050. The C of E has been a leader in developing the Transition Path Initiative that has been picked up by many powerful investors to challenge companies' performance. In reporting this work Alan Smith, the First Church Estates Commissioner observed "Not so much an example of our power as the power of our example."

Then there was a full debate of a motion from Oxford Diocese bringing together a range of national and local actions which, if taken up, will strengthen our collective response to climate change. In case you have read anything in the media about changes in the confirmation service arising from this debate – that proposal was taken out.

Safeguarding

There were three important items about safeguarding.

The most public of these issues before Synod was the termination of the contracts of the members of the **Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB)**, which had been established early in 2022 to advise the church on an appropriate method of independent oversight of all its safeguarding activity. This topic was dealt with by means of a panel answering questions and was very controversial. Synod members will have come away with a wide range of views about this issue arising from what they heard from the panel and from others who spoke.

Since the Synod met it has been reported that Professor Alexis Jay, who chaired the national Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has been appointed to pick up the brief of the ISB. She will be working fully independently of the church to prepare a report and advice.

More positively, Synod passed the motion about work that has been done on a **Redress scheme for abuse victims and survivors**. A survivor spoke in presenting the work, welcoming what had been done so far but noting there was more to do. The motion regretted past failures and welcomed the work to date, which will now continue.

Finally, Synod approved a **Code of Practice for Safeguarding Practice Reviews**, which is the first of a number of Codes of Practice that will strengthen the day to day practice of safeguarding across the church, drawing not only on our own experience, but on that of other agencies more well-established in this work.

Motions debated

An important debate took place on the first day on a Private Members Motion proposing the establishment of a **Youth Synod**. While all Synod members agreed on the importance of greater recognition and involvement of young people, including young adults, across the whole life of the church including its governance, there were different views about the best way to achieve this. The lively debate resulted in the motion passed calling for the establishment of a young adults Church of England gathering and the appointment of 3 young adults to attend General Synod.

Another important motion addressed the ways the church can work with the Probation Service on the **rehabilitation of prisoners**, proposed by a Synod member who holds a senior role in the Probation Service. There were some good speeches many of which gave powerful examples of the potential impact of integration into a church community, but also some in which that opportunity had been lost, to the detriment of the individual. Attention was drawn to the Welcome Directory which indicates churches that are willing to work with released prisoners – something for us all to think about.

Another key debate occurred on a motion about **revitalising the parish**. The motion affirmed the parish system as the central component of the “mixed ecology” of church that is a major plank of the church’s Vision and Strategy. Again there was a lively debate with many local examples illustrating how the parish can thrive even in difficult times.

A proposal to **reduce parochial fees for marriage** brought out different views about how this might, or might not, encourage church marriage, and its impact on parochial finances. It was amended to ask for a pilot to be conducted in two dioceses to provide more evidence about the issue.

Other Reports

Two other major reports were presented.

Proposals for **National Church Governance** and an attempt to reduce its complexity and improve efficiency raised a lot of questions and discussions. The recommendations were welcomed rather than confirmed and there is likely to be a lot more discussion to address the questions and concerns raised.

Proposals for a revised **Mission and Pastoral Measure** continued to be controversial. Some welcomed the redeveloped proposals as appropriate simplification and clarification, with more options for managing the difficulties faced by many parishes, while others saw them as a threat to sustaining parish life. The proposals were passed for further detailed development.

Legislation

There were thirteen items which included:

- Final approval of Canon 42 which completes the IICSA recommendation to rename Diocesan Safeguarding Advisors as Diocesan Safeguarding Officers and enhance their independence. This will be formally promulgated at a future Diocesan Synod.
- Faculty Jurisdiction Rules which usefully address issues of contested heritage in church buildings
- The use of an Electronic Register of Services – this is optional for parishes.

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