

## Newcastle Diocesan Synod

### GENERAL SYNOD FEBRUARY 2024 REPORT

Produced by The Elected Members for Information

#### Overview

This was a much more constructive and agreeable General Synod than those of 2023. The calmer, more constructive, less intolerant approach probably stemmed from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Presidential Address which gave a theological lead to dealing with differences both within Synod and around the very troubled world. We should lament the past but aspire to a better future. The agenda helpfully interspersed the current controversial issues with topics that are very relevant to all parishes and upon which there was significant agreement. The excellent chairs, including our own Izzy McDonald-Booth, gave space for new voices to be heard and shut down some of the unwanted grandstanding. Nevertheless there were some hurtful moments including disgraceful misrepresentation of Bishop Helen-Ann's stepping down from the Living in Love and Faith work stream. You can be reassured that our Bishop showed grace through a difficult moment; her courage and integrity were unharmed, even bolstered. Such commitment and resilience will be necessary from us all as the war in Ukraine enters its third year. As the Archbishop of Canterbury stated, we cannot be neutral: Russia's aggression must not be allowed to succeed. The world faces the biggest challenge since the Cuba Missile crisis or, perhaps more pertinently, 1938.

#### 1. Living in Love and Faith (LLF)

The motion was not bringing any further work as such, but asked for a focus on reconciliation and bridge building and for proposals so that we can continue to pursue implementation of what General Synod has previously passed and bring those proposals back as soon as possible. There were quite a few speeches expressing frustration that things haven't moved forward, but Bishop Martyn Snow told us that the House of Bishops isn't in agreement over some of the issues. A few speeches mentioned the 'Pastoral Guidance' which will have details of what priests and ordinands will be asked to agree to in terms of their relationships and marriage. This is the now the next piece of work that will hopefully come to Synod in July. There were rumblings about this debate being cut short by a motion – we were due to discuss LLF for around 5 hours, many of us questioned why this was necessary given nothing new had been brought for decision. In the end a motion to 'pass to next business' was put forward. The reasoning was that we are going over the same ground, and until a different set of proposals is brought to Synod nothing will be gained from another lengthy debate. We voted and the motion was won, so the debate ended at that point. The motion to 'move to next business' means this particular LLF paper cannot be brought before Synod again, but the votes from previous sessions are still honoured and when we discuss this again, new proposals will have to be brought.

#### 2. Safeguarding

An important debate took part on safeguarding following the publication of independent reports from Sarah Wilkinson and Alexis Jay (the latter just a few days before the Synod).

Importantly, the Jay report calls for the establishment of two new, completely independent bodies to carry out and scrutinise the Church's safeguarding work. Several amendments were tabled: those expressing Synod's apologies to survivors and to former members of the Independent Safeguarding Board were accepted, whilst amendments calling for the implementation of the Jay report recommendations at speed and by those with no previous involvement were lost or lapsed. The loss of these significant amendments means that we are now entering a period of consultation (by an internal response group) with survivors and with other stakeholder such as Diocesan and Parish Safeguarding Officers and Advisers, before proposals are fully worked up. The proposed, slower pace of change is a cause of concern to some.

### **3. Land and Nature**

We debated a Land and Nature motion to add a commitment to improving biodiversity on church land, alongside the existing commitment to being carbon neutral by 2030. There was an amendment requesting that the church commissioners be required to report back on progress every three years and this was accepted by the proposer of the motion, the Bishop of Norwich who is the Environmental lead for the national church. It was a very positive debate, including acknowledgement of our call to be stewards in creation and the fact that we have a large heritage of land in the Church of England, not least our churchyards, as well as forests and farmland. Points made include “when nature thrives, people thrive”; the ecological crisis is an integrated crisis which requires an integrated solution; the need for sustainable food production, and commendation of the Anglican Communion Forest. An interesting project cited was the Farminary at Princeton University in the USA, which teaches ordinands farming alongside their theological studies.

### **4. Racial Justice**

We had a lively debate ending in a commitment to continue to provide resources for enacting the Lament to Action report, including the Racial Justice Unit, senior appointments and adopting liturgy that reflects Global Majority Heritage that is authorised and not just permitted. The issue of contested heritage (statues and monuments) also featured. Racial Justice is the work of the whole church and we heard of progress in ecclesiastical law appointments, accepting the mistakes of the past, a call for a lead bishop, examples of good practice, the need for data collection, being honest about our feelings, including discomfort and boredom, and inspirational quotations (“We all bear the indelible stamp of our Creator” - Martin Luther King). We were reminded of the crucial role of church schools, the collective impact of micro-decisions (“ a fish can’t see water”), uncovering the brutal history of empire, and recognising how much white resistance there still is. Black clergy have a higher incidence of mental health problems because of institutional racism, but if we can embrace diversity it is a beautiful thing! Usually when everyone is in agreement the debate runs for a while and then a halt is called, but on this occasion it was agreed that everyone who wanted to speak should do so, so further speeches included the need to take it to parishes, provision our racial justice training at theological colleges and support in curacies and appointments to incumbencies.

### **5. Legacy of Chattel Slavery**

In a separate debate the Synod received a report from the Church Commissioners who have allocated £100 million over ten years, for investment in communities blighted by the legacy of chattel slavery. In global corporate finance terms, this is a small amount but it was reckoned as a significant and praiseworthy action that would be noticed and would encourage other funds to do the same. We were addressed by one of the Oversight Group for this project, Roy Swan from the Ford Foundation in the USA, a major investor and philanthropic organisation, he was highly praiseworthy! The evangelistic value of this action was also acknowledged.

## **6. Love Matters**

In a further debate over two sessions the General Synod received and commended the Love Matters report from the Archbishop's Commission on Families and Households. It follows the Housing Commission and the Care Commission, all arising from the Archbishop of Canterbury's book *Reimagining Britain* (2018). The report is a large document which bears careful study, but its key actions are to maximise the protective effect of family, ensure that all loving relationships matter and are valued in everything we do, give every child the best possible start in life and tackle the societal issues which limit people's ability to flourish. An attempt to add an amendment prioritising marriage was resisted and defeated. Other speeches commended its analysis of civil society, the impact of poverty and the inadequacy of social security. On average there are 144 single-parent families in every parish, they deserve our support, as do other diverse and yet loving patterns of family life. The Bishop of Durham chaired the commission and was highly commended for the report, this Synod was his last action as Bishop of Durham and at the end of the set of sessions he was praised and thanked for his wide-ranging contribution to the church.

## **7. Codes of Conduct and Bullying**

There were three closely related items on the agenda during this group of sessions. On Saturday morning, Chelmsford Diocese brought a motion asking for a review by Archbishops' Council to a) consider the possibility of drawing up a Code of Conduct for PCC members and lay volunteers; b) the issues required to put in place a disciplinary process for their removal from the PCC when this process isn't followed; c) the resources required at national, diocesan and parish level to bring this about. This motion was passed with large majorities in all three houses. Later on Saturday a motion was brought requesting that the Business Committee revise the current General Synod Members' Code of Conduct and present their proposals to Synod at a future group of sessions. This too was carried. On Sunday a Private Member's motion by the Ven. Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn was debated, which asked Synod to recognise: a) that bullying is unacceptable behaviour within the Church of God, whether by clergy or lay people, and where it exists needs to be addressed; and b) the serious pastoral problems and unfairness that arise while clergy can be subject to penalties for bullying that include prohibition and removal from office but there is no means of disqualifying a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer who is guilty of bullying from holding office; request the Archbishops' Council to bring forward legislative proposals which would enable a churchwarden, PCC member or other lay officer who was found to have conducted him- or her-self in such a manner to be disqualified from holding office. Again this motion was carried with wide support; 273 votes in favour, 15 against and 22 abstentions.

## **8. Estates Ministry**

General Synod agreed that the Church must urgently tackle the “structural and financial injustices that prevent flourishing and sustainable worshipping communities on every estate”. Despite a commitment made in 2019 to establish Christian communities on every social housing estate in the country the Estates Evangelism Task Group reported that an increase of pace was still required if we are to have “a true and sustained ‘bias to the poor’ culture evidenced through intentional strategic decision making and resource allocation.” A quarter of our parishes contain 500 or more social housing homes and two thirds of the population live within these parishes, including two thirds of those aged under 19. More than 1300 of such parishes have no Church of England worshipping presence directly on the estate. The Bishop of Blackburn asked for a new and just financial settlement which addressed the fact that “estates parishes in the north are paying more in parish share than wealthy communities in the south-east simply because of the historic endowment of their dioceses.”

## **9. Clergy Pensions**

A private member’s bill requesting that clergy pensions were restored to their pre-2011 benefit levels was introduced by Ian Paul. In 2011 the clergy pension had been 2/3 of the national minimum stipend. A combination of changes in the way in which the pension rate is calculated, as well as the real term decrease in relation to inflation, has had a significant impact on the provision. After a fascinating range of speeches, the motions was passed 382 votes to nil, with no abstentions. The Archbishops’ Council, the Pensions Board the Church Commissioners have been asked to work together with dioceses to explore ways in which the levels of clergy pensions and stipends might be improved in a sustainable manner, and the National Minimum Stipend should in future increase in line with inflation, along with seeking steps to remedy the fall in the real value of pensions for clergy retiring since 2021.