

Amersham Deanery Synod – March 2023

Report on February 2023 General Synod group of sessions

There was great anticipation ahead of the General Synod group of sessions in London on 6-9 February given the much-publicised response from CofE bishops to the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process. LLF and the bishops' proposals for the blessing of same-sex couples certainly attracted all the headlines and not a little controversy. But LLF was not the only item on the Synod agenda. There were also important debates on the cost of living crisis, dioceses supporting each other financially, ministerial education, safeguarding, parochial fees and Insurance Premium Tax, together with a 'Loyal Address' marking the accession of King Charles III. As I write this report, it seems that even President Putin was watching Synod closely; in his 'State of the Nation' address in Moscow on 21 February he pointed (erroneously – see below) to Synod discussions about God's pronouns and same-sex marriage as evidence of the West's moral decline! This was clearly the most significant group of sessions in this General Synod quinquennium (2021-26) to date.

Monday 6 February

The Archbishop of Canterbury opened the Synod with his **presidential address**. His speech was, predictably given the controversial agenda, a call for unity. Justin Welby acknowledged the 'deep and passionately held differences' on sexuality and, in a curious use of syntax, called people as they debated the issue to 'speak Christian in word and deed'. The Bishop of London, as chair of the LLF Next Steps Group, gave a **presentation on LLF**. She said that despite the years of Shared Conversations and LLF there was still no consensus among the bishops on the nature of holy matrimony and whether the biblical/theological understanding of marriage could be extended to same-sex couples. The proposed draft Prayers of Love and Faith were an attempt to chart a middle course, offering (together with new Pastoral Guidance still to be written) pastoral accommodation to same-sex couples while leaving the Church's doctrine of holy matrimony unchanged. Invoking Philippians 2:4, Bishop Sarah urged Synod members 'not just to look to your own interests, but to the interests of others'.

The day finished with **Questions Part 1**, on subjects other than LLF. Unusually for Synod, the session managed to reach the end of the 142 questions (and supplementaries) asked. One question, inviting the Liturgical Commission to consider introducing language that referred to God in a 'non-gendered way', especially in the absolution, attracted particular press interest. The Bishop of Lichfield responded that a new initiative on gendered language would begin this spring but that any change or alternative to authorised liturgy would require full Synod approval. President Putin subsequently claimed that the CofE was considering a 'gender-neutral God', but this does not quite square with what was actually said in Synod.

Tuesday 7 February

A key feature of Tuesday morning was **Questions Part 2** on LLF. Bishop Sarah had a torrid time as she tried to respond to over 60 questions (and supplementaries) on the bishops' proposals, many of them hostile. She batted most of the questions back by saying that many of the issues would be dealt with in the not-yet published (or indeed written) Pastoral Guidance which will come to the next Synod in July. Later in the day there was **Group Work on LLF** in which Synod members broke up into twenty groups of 20-25 people to discuss the draft 'Prayers of Love and Faith', each group in the presence of a trained LLF facilitator and 2-3 bishops, who promised to report back on the discussions to their colleagues.

There was also a debate on **Resourcing Ministerial Formation**. There were details of a new funding strategy for Theological Education Institutions (TEIs) which would hopefully give TEIs greater financial stability and mention made of a new national funding system for the training of lay ministers. But a new maintenance system for ordinands was still under discussion given the complexities involved, including the difficulties in costing different modes of training. I was finally able to give my maiden speech in this debate (declaring my interest as a TEI trustee): I welcomed the proposals but said that the sector would need continued careful support if TEIs were not simply to survive but to flourish and invest in the future. I also pointed to the debt problems faced by many of those training for ministry.

Wednesday 8 February

Before the big LLF debate in the afternoon there was a debate on the **Cost of Living**. A motion addressed to the government and calling for 'policies that offer generous support to those who are falling into poverty and the organisations dedicated to supporting them' was unanimously approved. There was then approval of the **Draft Parochial Fees (Amendment) Order** which, for the rest of 2023, increased the parochial fees for weddings and funerals over their 2022 level by 5% rather than the much higher CPI figure of almost 10%.

Wednesday afternoon saw the beginning of the exhausting 8-hour debate on the bishops' motion in response to the **Living in Love and Faith** process. In summary, this offered an apology for the Church's treatment of LGBTQI+ people, welcomed the decision of the House of Bishops to replace the 1991 Issues in Human Sexuality statement with new Pastoral Guidance, welcomed (subject to further refinement) the draft 'Prayers of Love and Faith' proposed by the College of Bishops for the blessing of same-sex couples, and invited the House of Bishops to report back to Synod on the use of the prayers (once commended by the bishops) in five years' time. The discussion was excellently chaired by Geoffrey Tattersall KC but Synod was unable to get through more than 19 of the 27 amendments originally tabled so the debate extended into Thursday. Each amendment was proposed by the proposer (the majority of whom came from the orthodox/conservative side of the debate), invariably opposed by the Bishop of London, and then debated briefly on the floor of Synod before a vote was taken, sometimes by a recorded vote of each House (in which case an amendment would only pass if it had a majority in each of the Houses of Bishops, Clergy and Laity). Every amendment was defeated on Wednesday, with bishops effectively using their 'veto' to protect their motion from unwelcome amendments which might undermine the fragile episcopal consensus achieved. Although the tone of the debate was less acrimonious than feared, there was frustration in some quarters that the bishops were hardly in listening mode (as they claimed) if they were using their votes to block every amendment. Having said that, none of the amendments opposed by the bishops would have got through both of the other Houses anyway, although in some cases the voting margins were quite narrow.

Well-publicised amendments from Jayne Ozanne (lay representative for Oxford Diocese) removing the apology to LGBTQI+ people and (debated on Thursday) asking the House of Bishops to 'end discrimination on the grounds of sexuality by bringing forward proposals to the July 2023 group of sessions that will provide for equal marriage in church' were defeated in all three Houses. Speeches from two episcopal observers, Archbishop Angaelos (Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London) and Dr Samy Fawzy Shehata (Anglican Archbishop of Alexandria), emphasised the significant implications of the LLF debate on the wider Communion and global church.

Thursday 9 February

The ***Living in Love and Faith*** debate finished in the morning. At last there was an amendment, from Andrew Cornes (clergy representative from Chichester Diocese, from the orthodox/conservative camp), which was not opposed by the Bishop of London and which thus had a substantive debate on the floor of Synod. It added an additional sub-paragraph to the bishops' motion and invited Synod to 'endorse the decision of the College and House of Bishops not to propose any change to the doctrine of marriage, and their intention that the final version of the Prayers of Love and Faith should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England'. This amendment, echoing the language in Canon B5 and elsewhere in the Canons, was arguably simply restating what the bishops had already declared in their position paper, backed up by some advice from Church House lawyers. This is presumably why Bishop Sarah found it uncontentious. The amendment was passed by narrow majorities in the Houses of Clergy and Laity and by 22-14 votes (with 4 abstentions) in the House of Bishops. Both Archbishops voted for the amendment, while our own Bishops Steven and Olivia voted against. It is likely that this amendment, offering an explicit statement of existing doctrine, persuaded some of the middle ground in Synod to support the bishops' main motion, which duly passed with solid majorities in the Houses of Bishops and Clergy but only a modest majority in the House of Laity. Taken overall, the voting was 57% in favour of the bishops' motion, 41% against, with 2% abstaining. Excluding the bishops, the voting amongst the Clergy and Laity was 54% in favour and 44% against, with 2% abstaining. The bishops achieved their main goal but could not have been unaware of the significant proportion of Synod members who were (for potentially differing reasons) unhappy with the LLF proposals.

A rather weary Synod finished its business on Thursday afternoon. The ***Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure*** was passed to allow wealthier dioceses to transfer monies from their stipends funds to more disadvantaged dioceses. There was an update on the Church's ***governance review***, a presentation on ***safeguarding*** from the new National Director of Safeguarding, and a motion was passed calling on the government to exempt charities, including churches, from liability for ***Insurance Premium Tax***. There were some other rather technical pieces of legislation which were considered and/or passed during the group of sessions, but explaining what they were about would require another three pages!

Jeremy Moodey
February 2023