

Amersham Deanery Synod

Report on February 2024 General Synod group of sessions

The General Synod of the Church of England met from 23 to 27 February. Figuring large on the agenda were two topics which seem to be preoccupying the Church even to the point of existential crisis: safeguarding and the issue of blessings for same-sex couples, the latter following the decision taken by Synod back in February 2023. But there were also a number of other important items dealing with church matters and national and global affairs.

Safeguarding

Two recent reports had brought the Church's safeguarding challenges to the fore. The first, published in November by prominent barrister [Dr Sarah Wilkinson](#), had examined the circumstances surrounding the controversial decision of the Archbishops' Council in June 2023 to 'terminate' the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) which it had established less than two years earlier. This had reportedly had a deleterious effect on survivors of abuse. The second report, [The Future of Church Safeguarding](#), commissioned by the Archbishops' Council and released by Prof Alexis Jay just two days before Synod began, made proposals for the establishment of two separate bodies independent of the Church: one responsible for delivering all Church safeguarding activities (currently managed by 42 dioceses), and the other responsible for providing scrutiny and oversight of safeguarding.

The short gap between the publication of the Jay report and the Synod debate on 'Safeguarding Independence' on 24 February meant that there was little time to digest the significance of Prof Jay's report, particularly her recommendation that safeguarding activities (and staff) be moved from the dioceses into an independent charity, a model for which there is no obvious precedent and which had attracted criticism from a large number of Diocesan Safeguarding Advisers. The motion tabled by the lead bishop on safeguarding, the Bishop of Stepney, simply thanked Dr Wilkinson and Prof Jay for their reports and proposed further work by an 'internal team' on next steps. This was passed, along with amendments issuing apologies to survivors and ISB members, but only after concern was expressed by a number of Synod members who wanted an immediate commitment to implement the Jay recommendations. The Bishop of Newcastle subsequently described the delay in implementing the new structure recommended in the Jay report as 'disgraceful'. The challenge remains on how to improve the Church's approach to safeguarding, but without taking the kind of hurried decisions that led to the ISB debacle last summer.

Same-sex blessings

A paper tabled by the co-lead bishop for the 'Living in Love and Faith' (LLF) initiative, the Bishop of Leicester, attempted to 'reset the debate' by refocusing on the need for reconciliation despite the profound differences within the Church on blessings for same-sex couples. The paper underlined the difficulties faced by the House of Bishops as they attempt to move ahead on standalone services of blessing for same-sex couples (as opposed to individual prayers of blessing in regular services, which were commended by bishops in December 2023) and on permitting clergy and ordinands to enter into same-sex marriages, while at the same time maintaining the Church's historic doctrine (also confirmed in Synod's February 2023 decision) that marriage is between a man and a woman. The Bishop of Leicester proposed further work on ten draft 'commitments' aimed at 'cultivating unity as far as possible' and 'enabling as many as possible to stay within the Church of England'.

However, the Bishop's paper appeared to please few Synod members. For those eager for change, the proposals did not go quickly enough towards introducing standalone services of blessing and allowing clergy to enter into same-sex marriages; for traditionalists the paper offered too little detail on the 'formal structural changes' which they believe are necessary to protect their consciences and distinguish them from those who want to move more quickly to accepting same-sex marriage. As a result, after a few hours of discussion, including on four out of five amendments to the main motion welcoming the further work undertaken on LLF, a procedural motion was put to 'move to next business', ie adjourn the debate. This saved the Bishop of Leicester from potential embarrassment, as it is likely the main motion would have been voted down by both revisionists and traditionalists. Interestingly, an amendment proposing that 'a settlement based on legally secure structural provision' be brought back to Synod was rejected by a vote of roughly 57% to 43%, underlining that there does not appear to be a Synod majority for the kind of 'structural provision' which traditionalists are demanding. Further work was promised and 'concrete proposals' are promised for the next set of Synod sessions in July, but the Church remains stalemated on this deeply divisive issue. It was noted that the tone of debate on this occasion was less acrimonious and adversarial than previously, but that maybe because the debate was so rapidly curtailed!

Other church matters

A number of other 'ecclesiastical' items were debated. One key area of discussion was the **behaviour of lay officers and PCC members**, given that such behaviour is not subject to the same disciplinary sanctions as faced by members of the clergy. Synod voted to agree that the Archbishops' Council should consider drawing up a Code of Conduct for PCC members and lay volunteers, such a Code to include a disciplinary process for any breaches, including ultimately the removal of PCC members. A private members' motion asking for such sanctions to be given a legislative underpinning was also agreed, as was the idea of a **Code of Conduct for General Synod members**. New **parochial fees** with effect from 1 January 2025 were agreed, along with a decision in principle (subject to detailed legislation) that fees when clergy take funerals at crematoria should go to PCCs rather than the diocese. A private member's motion encouraging the Archbishops' Council, the Pensions Board, and the Church Commissioners to review the value of the **clergy pension**, which has fallen rapidly in real terms since a change introduced in 2011, was also unanimously passed. In a lively debate on **estates evangelism** led by the Bishop of Blackburn, Synod recommitted itself – despite significant financial challenges - to its 2019 goal of seeing 'a serving, loving and worshipping Christian community on every significant social housing estate in the country'. There was also presentation from the Church Commissioners on their plans to spend £100 million over nine years addressing the historic impact of **transatlantic African chattel slavery**. The very last debate was on a private members' motion to remove the canonical impediment (**Canon C4**) which theoretically bars from ordination anyone who is divorced and remarried with a former spouse still living, or married to a divorcé(e). This can be overturned by a 'faculty' from the two Archbishops, upon submission by the sponsoring bishop, but the process is cumbersome and intrusive and now accounts for a sixth of all those seeking to go forward for ordination. In the end it was agreed that the canonical impediment should be retained as a matter of principle, but that the faculties should be left to diocesan bishops, albeit on the basis of guidance from the Archbishops.

National and global issues

As with every group of General Synod sessions, considerable time was given over to discussing pressing national and global issues. Indeed, the Archbishop of Canterbury's opening **presidential address** quoted the UN secretary-general, António Guterres, who noted that 'the world is coming off its hinges.' Referring to conflicts and crises in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and elsewhere, Archbishop Justin urged the Church not to shy away from these issues, and its own internal challenges, but rather to trust in God's faithfulness. An impassioned debate on **the war in Ukraine** (which sadly was not twinned with an equivalent discussion about the ongoing war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, doubtless because the latter is too much of a hot potato) nevertheless attracted some criticism from the Ukrainian church and government for what was seen as its overly 'nuanced' treatment of the origins of the war. A debate on **the future of work** sponsored by the Diocese of Oxford looked at the increasing impact of Artificial Intelligence and affirmed the 'inherent value and dignity of good work in human flourishing.' A paper on **racial justice** provided an update on progress since the 'From Lament to Action' report released in April 2021, and the associated motion encouraged parishes and deaneries 'to develop local action plans to address issues of racial injustice.' Another paper, on **land and nature**, sought to highlight the issue of biodiversity as being one that is of equal importance with the Church's 2030 target for achieving 'net zero' carbon. Finally, Synod welcomed an update on the **Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households**, which produced its *Love Matters* report in April 2023. An amendment to the main motion which sought to 'reaffirm the value of marriage...as providing the most stable and permanent environment for bringing up children' was surprisingly defeated, perhaps because it was seen by some as a proxy for the LLF debate about the nature of marriage.

Miscellaneous

There were a number of other pieces of ecclesiastical legislation, most too arcane to go into here. However, mention should be made of the **Chancel Repair (Church Commissioners' Liability) Measure**, which our very own Julie Dziegiel presented for first consideration in her role as chair of the Measure steering committee. Julie can explain this draft Measure better than I can, but it provides for the liability of the Church Commissioners to repair the chancel of a church, which currently takes the form of an interest in land or a contractual obligation (which may make it difficult for the Commissioners to sell the land), to take the form of a free-standing statutory duty instead.

I am afraid that I am unable to attend the next deanery synod on 14 March so will not be able to give my usual oral report on this General Synod group of sessions, but I stand ready to answer any questions deanery synod members may have via email.

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