

Amersham Deanery Synod

Report on July 2024 General Synod group of sessions

The General Synod of the Church of England met in York from 5 to 9 July. Once again, the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) project loomed large on the agenda and in the resulting headlines, but there were other important areas of business summarised briefly below.

Living in Love and Faith

After a three-hour debate Synod passed a motion expressing support for the direction of travel [proposed by the House of Bishops on LLF](#), which included the bishops commending (probably from the time of the next Synod in February 2025) the use of 'standalone' services of blessing for same-sex couples, and establishing the basis for 'the delegation of some specific and defined episcopal ministry' as a means of providing 'pastoral reassurance', principally to those clergy and parishes opposed to the Prayers of Love and Faith. The precise details of this 'extended/delegated episcopal ministry' remained very vague. The motion also asked for further theological work to be done by February 2025 on 'the nature of doctrine, particularly as it relates to the doctrine of marriage and the question of clergy in same-sex civil marriages', the expectation being that the current *de facto* bar on clergy entering into same-sex marriages might ultimately be dropped. The bishops continued to maintain, despite doubts in many quarters, that neither standalone services nor the proposed relaxation of clergy discipline regarding same-sex civil marriage were indicative of a change in the doctrine of the church 'in any essential matter'. The votes in favour of the motion were, as in previous LLF votes, very narrow: roughly 52% in favour and 48% against in the Houses of Clergy and Laity. The majority was slightly larger in the House of Bishops, but 17 bishops, some 43% of those present and voting, either voted against the motion or abstained, underlining the controversial and divisive nature of the House of Bishops' proposals.

Standalone services of blessing for same-sex couples are likely to be commended for use by the bishops under Canon B5 ('Of the discretion of ministers in conduct of public prayer'). This will be for a 'discernment' period of three years, although the lead bishop on LLF (+Leicester) confirmed to Synod that it was very unlikely that such services would be 'un-commended' at the end of the discernment period. This is a departure from previous suggestions from the bishops that they would have a formal 'experimental' period under Canon B5A and/or opt for the two-year synodical process for approving new forms of service under Canon B2, which requires two-thirds approval in each of the Houses of Synod.

The Bishop of Leicester claimed that the proposal on 'delegated episcopal ministry' was a significant concession from the bishops, many of whom are very reluctant to see their episcopal rights and privileges circumscribed in this way. But it is not clear how far the proposed arrangements will go beyond what already happens here in the Diocese of Oxford (ie some ordinations and confirmations being taken by assistant or honorary bishops). This is unlikely to satisfy those in the Church opposed to the Prayers of Love and Faith, led by the Alliance grouping, including the Church of England Evangelical Council and the Holy Trinity Brompton and New Wine networks, whose [call for a 'de facto parallel province'](#) alongside Canterbury and York provoked a very [strong response](#) from the Bishop of Oxford and an equally strong [counter-response](#) from the Alliance.

Church finances

The Chair of the Finance Committee of the Archbishop's Council, Carl Hughes, gave a bleak report to Synod on the state of the Church's finances, which he argued were barely sustainable on the present basis, especially given massive duplication of administrative functions across 42 dioceses. He noted however 'that the primary crisis the Church is facing today is missional; the financial challenges are consequential.' To substantiate this, Mr Hughes observed that average weekly church attendance in every diocese since 2015 was down by 25-50% per cent, while regular givers were down 30% in a decade. Parish share in some dioceses was down by a third in real terms since 2019 and the number of ordinands starting training in 2024 was down by almost 40% on the pre-COVID peak. The forecast consolidated deficit for all dioceses in 2024 stood at £60 million, and thirty out of 42 dioceses had a structural deficit (ie the cost of mission and ministry not being covered by today's giving), this despite parishes sitting on reserves totalling £1.6 billion. A major review of the Church's finances, including the cost of dioceses and of ordination training, is underway.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding has figured significantly in recent Synod meetings, and this group of sessions was no exception. In February 2024, an independent report, [The Future of Church Safeguarding](#), authored by Professor Alexis Jay, had proposed the establishment of two independent bodies: one responsible for delivering all Church safeguarding activities (currently managed by dioceses), and the other responsible for providing scrutiny and oversight of safeguarding. A 'Response Group' provided an update to this Synod, but did not make firm recommendations in relation to the Jay Report, especially given concerns in some quarters that moving safeguarding activities from the dioceses into an independent charity was an untested model. A fuller report with firm recommendations was promised for February 2025. We also debated a Private Member's Motion calling for a further independent KC-led inquiry into alleged abuse in the Soul Survivor network. This was substantially and successfully amended by the lead bishop for safeguarding (+Stepney) so that instead the Church would consider recommendations from a KC-led inquiry which had already been launched, albeit with a narrower remit. This report was published in [September 2024](#). Finally, there was progress towards a redress scheme for victims and survivors of church-related abuse, with Synod completed its revision stage of the relevant Measure.

Other church matters

The first day was marked by discussion of a [preliminary report](#) which addressed **trust** (or the lack of it) in the Church. Trust had been undermined in recent years by concerns about racism and abuse, as well as the LLF process and increased use of social media. Various recommendations were made to improve trust within the Church. Additionally, a number of other 'ecclesiastical' items were debated. A draft of the new **Clergy Conduct Measure**, replacing the discredited Clergy Discipline Measure, received first consideration. A new **Safeguarding Code of Practice** was approved. A motion calling on the Archbishops' Council to change clergy conditions of service so as to allow for **36 hours of rest in every seven-day period** was also overwhelmingly passed. In an uplifting debate on the final day, Synod heard and affirmed a call for greater priority to be given to **the voices of children and young people** in the Church. Various other technical pieces of legislation were passed, although one motion proposing a 25% increase in the **retainers paid to Diocesan Registrars** was dropped after significant opposition was expressed in the Synod chamber.

National and global issues

There were the usual debates covering important national and global issues. Synod passed a diocesan motion from Liverpool affirming ***the human dignity of disabled children*** and calling on churches to provide pastoral support to parents who have been told that their child may be born with a disability (the sub-text being to prevent the termination of such pregnancies). Synod passed a diocesan motion from Sheffield noting the provision by many churches of ***food banks*** and calling on bishops to engage with the Government on 'serious inadequacies in the social security system', including the current two-child benefit limit. Finally, Synod endorsed a diocesan motion from London highlighting the plight of persecuted Christians and calling for the creation of a ***National Day of Prayer and Action for the Persecuted Church around the World***.

Deanery Synod members are welcome to contact me directly with any questions about the above.

Jeremy Moodey
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jeremy@stmaryschesham.org