

## **Amersham Deanery Synod – September 2023**

### **Report on July 2023 General Synod group of sessions**

I travelled to York for the fifth group of General Synod sessions since my election in 2021, and it was by some stretch the most disheartening and frustrating Synod gathering to date. It was personally exasperating because I asked to speak in a debate where I have some knowledge (the draft Clergy Conduct Measure) but I was not called, even though others who had already spoken on a number of occasions over the weekend *were* called. It is as if the chairs of the debates only call the familiar Synod faces. Other newcomers to Synod tell me they have found it similarly difficult to make their voices heard. Some of the debates and associated procedural wrangles were, frankly, chaotic, and we wasted a lot of time discussing reports and presentations which were *faits accomplis*. Worst of all, unsatisfactory discussions on the two main topics under review, same-sex blessings and safeguarding, together with two tetchy Q&A sessions with bishops, contributed to a toxic atmosphere in the chamber. The overwhelming sense is of a catastrophic loss of trust between and within the institutions of the Church, especially between Synod on one hand, and the House of Bishops and the Archbishops' Council on the other. It will take a lot of effort to restore this trust.

#### **Friday 7 July**

The Archbishop of York's opening **Presidential address** attracted a lot of headlines, but for the wrong reasons. His subject was the Lord's Prayer and his theme was the mutuality and unity implicit in the term 'our Father'. This was yet another archepiscopal plea for us to 'walk together' despite our sharp differences over sexuality. But the media seized on what Stephen Cottrell said about the word 'Father', which he described as 'problematic for those whose experience of earthly fathers has been destructive and abusive'. This is a fair point, but the press assumed that Cottrell was somehow criticising the Lord's Prayer for its implicit patriarchy. The usually sure-footed Archbishop of York made a number of other gaffes during the sessions. He probably felt exposed, as his fellow President, the Archbishop of Canterbury, left Synod on Saturday to attend to his mother, who is very ill.

Other business on Friday included approval of a private member's motion (itself subject to a number of confusing amendments) calling on the Archbishops' Council to re-establish a '**Youth Synod**' for young adults aged 18-25, to replace the Church of England Youth Council disbanded in 2019. The day finished with the first part of **Synod questions**. As recently as 2018 the York meeting of General Synod had just 83 written questions addressed to the House of Bishops, the Archbishops' Council, Church Commissioners etc. This time there were 260 questions, of which 23 were ruled out of order as they related to the Coronation where Synod has no jurisdiction. The sheer volume of questions highlights the erosion of trust between Synod and church institutions. Many of the remaining 237 questions related to the hot topics of safeguarding and sexuality and led to tense exchanges between the floor and the platform when supplementary questions were posed. The sharpest exchange occurred when the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked how he had voted in the Archbishops' Council's controversial decision to disband the Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB) just two weeks earlier (see below). His reply that 'both Archbishops had wished to wait a bit' implied that they had voted against, but this proved to be misleading at best because it was later confirmed that the Council decision to disband the ISB had been unanimous. Other members of the Archbishops' Council were furious that Justin Welby had undermined collective responsibility in this way.

## Saturday 8 July

The main items on Saturday morning were a presentation and debate on the recent decision of the **National Investing Bodies** (Church Commissioners and Pensions Board) to disinvest from fossil fuel companies who are failing to meet their climate change targets and the second and final tranche of **Synod questions**, where we managed only to get to question 95, despite the 237 questions asked. Many of the questions on Saturday related to the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) initiative, and the Bishop of London's standard answer to many of these was that all would be revealed in the forthcoming 'pastoral guidance' which is intended to replace the *Issues in Human Sexuality* document issued by the House of Bishops in 1991. There are widespread concerns both within and outside General Synod that this 'pastoral guidance' will not be able to bear the weight that is being placed upon it by the Bishops.

On Saturday afternoon we debated a motion from Worcester diocese on the **rehabilitation of prisoners** and the role that faith, belief and forgiveness can have in bringing about change and reducing reoffending. The final motion was massively approved by Synod (it would have been churlish to disagree with it), but even this debate did not escape controversy. A 'friendly' (ie agreed) amendment commending the impact in prisons of 'courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored' was voted down after these courses were branded as 'sectarian' and 'partisan' by liberal speakers who were dismayed that both courses were sponsored by churches opposed to the draft Prayers of Love and Faith. The divide over sexuality seems to colour all that we do in Synod.

Also on Saturday afternoon we had an 'update' presentation on the **Living in Love and Faith (LLF)** initiative. When Synod gave its approval in principle in February to the idea of blessings for same-sex couples, subject to the proviso that such prayers 'should not be contrary to or indicative of a departure from the doctrine of the Church of England' (ie its current doctrine of marriage), it was hoped by those in favour of the prayers that a final draft, together with the associated 'pastoral guidance', would be presented to General Synod at this July session. This has proved hopelessly optimistic, not least because of glacial progress in the three 'implementation' groups (which have now been disbanded), and deep divisions within the House of Bishops and the wider Church on how to treat sexual intimacy outside of heterosexual marriage. As Charlie Skrine, Rector of All Souls Langham Place, put it in a speech: 'is that [sexual intimacy outside of heterosexual marriage] going to be holy or is it going to be sinful...it is impossible to make progress without the answer to that question.' The Bishop of London confirmed that the Church's theological advisory group, the Faith and Order Commission (FAOC), will be assisting Bishops in addressing this and other thorny questions, and that it remains the goal to bring final proposals to an extraordinary session of General Synod on 13-15 November. Few of us are convinced by this timetable, given the significant work still to be done and the deep fissures which exist on this subject. Another issue bubbling under the surface was how any new prayers would be authorised or commended. The usual route for substantive and controversial liturgy (for this very reason a number of bishops kept correcting themselves when referring to the draft prayers as 'liturgy') would be Canon B2 which requires a two-thirds majority in each of the three Houses of Synod. Because no such majority appears to exist currently in the Houses of Clergy and Laity (the votes in February were, respectively, 56-44% and 53-47% in favour), it was reported that the Bishops are 'weighing up' using Canon B4(2), which is authorisation by the two Archbishops, but an earlier answer to a question revealed that this has only ever been used for uncontroversial liturgy such as the Coronation and Remembrance services.

## Sunday 9 July

Sunday afternoon was the lowest point of the whole weekend when we had a chaotic debate about the now disbanded **Independent Safeguarding Board (ISB)**. Confronted by a generally hostile Synod which felt that the treatment of the two 'sacked' members of the ISB had reflected badly on the Church and failed to look to the welfare of abuse survivors, members of the Archbishops' Council led by the Archbishop of York tried to explain their decision, which they stated was based on the breakdown of relations between the Council and the ISB members and the need to 'reset' the process to achieving a fully independent safeguarding body. The Council admitted that 'mistakes had been made'. But this was not enough for Synod, which demanded the suspension of the sitting to allow the two sacked ISB members, sitting in the chamber as observers, to address the Synod. So we then had impromptu speeches from Jasvinder Sanghera and Steve Reeves which gave a completely different story from that put forward by the Archbishops' Council. The outgoing ISB chair, Meg Munn (a former Labour MP), was also in the chamber but walked out because her side of the story, different still from her ISB colleagues and the Archbishops' Council, was not also being heard. She subsequently put out a statement announcing her resignation as ISB chair and accusing the Archbishop of Canterbury of 'undermining' her work. It was difficult not to disagree with Stephen Cottrell's verdict that the Church was facing a 'safeguarding crisis'. The only positive note came later on Sunday when Synod welcomed a proposal from the Bishop of Truro for a **£150m redress scheme** for survivors of church abuse. The day finished with a fractious debate about **national church governance**, with proposals to streamline the National Church Institutions (NCIs) approved by Synod despite scepticism from several quarters, particularly Save the Parish supporters, who distrust the NCIs.

## Monday 10 July

After Sunday's drama, Monday's debates on the **Archbishops Council report for 2023 and its budget for 2024** were relatively uncontroversial, but the discussion struck a downbeat tone, with news that church income had fallen by 14% and that the Church's training budget was significantly underspent (it had earlier been revealed in questions that just 239 candidates had been recommended for ordination training as at 30 June, with another 156 in the vocations 'pipeline', versus the medium-term target of 630 ordinations per year). Debates later on Monday on **revitalising our parishes for mission** and proposed changes to the **Mission & Pastoral Measure** failed to improve the mood of a rambunctious Synod. There was however approval of a first draft of the new **Clergy Conduct Measure**, replacing the largely discredited Clergy Discipline Measure (CDM) approved back in 2003.

## Tuesday 11 July

Many of us just wanted to get home by Tuesday, but we stayed for a lively and much-publicised diocesan motion from Blackburn proposing that **parochial fees for marriage** be reduced to zero, as a means of encouraging more couples to get married in church. The counter argument was that church fees are a tiny proportion of most couples' wedding costs, and that churches and parishes which rely heavily on wedding fees would be heavily penalised. But with a 'friendly' amendment proposing that the idea be subject in the first instance to a 'time-limited regional trial', the motion was passed by a large majority. There was also support for a Diocese of Oxford motion on the **climate emergency**.

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July 2023