

Amersham Deanery Synod – March 2022

Report on General Synod group of sessions

16-17 November 2021

This was the inaugural session for the new quinquennium (2021-26) and was preceded by a useful induction day for the 60% or so of General Synod members who were, like myself, newly elected to Synod. It was good to understand how General Synod operates as the Church's legislative body. On the first substantive morning we had a service of Holy Communion at Westminster Abbey at which HRH the Earl of Wessex represented HM The Queen, who was sadly indisposed and missing her first opening ceremony since the creation of the General Synod (replacing the previous Church Assembly) in 1970. The Earl also gave Her Majesty's address to the opening session, expressing the Queen's hope and prayer that Synod would 'seek to balance change and continuity in the decisions that lie ahead.'

The agenda for this first session of Synod was fairly light and did not include any substantive legislation. Business over the next day-and-a-half included:

- A **presidential address** from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in which there was a strong call for unity despite the challenging issues that lie ahead. As Stephen Cottrell put it: 'The aim is not to reach agreement by means of contest between opposing positions but to journey together to see God's will, allowing differences to harmonize, to meet each other with respect and trust, to believe in our unity.'
- A debate **on diocesan finances** which proposed that legislation should be drafted and brought to Synod at a later date allowing dioceses to share their historic wealth with other less well-off dioceses across the whole Church of England. The Diocese of Oxford has already taken the lead in this area, sharing some of its money with five poorer dioceses.
- A debate on **tackling inequality** which led to a motion, overwhelmingly approved, calling on the government to 'adopt an explicit policy of reducing the wealth gap between the rich and the poor and the disadvantages that flow from it.'
- A discussion based on Archbishop Stephen's **Vision and Strategy** document approved by Synod in July 2021. This envisages a 'simpler, humbler, bolder' church, where 'mixed ecology' (parish and other forms of witness/presence) is the norm, a church of missionary disciples and a church which is younger and more diverse. The Archbishop expressed hope that 10,000 new Christian expressions might be created within the next ten years.
- A preliminary report by the **Governance Review Group**, chaired by the Bishop of Leeds and tasked with exploring the overhaul of the church's rather complicated National Governance structures. This proposed the creation of a single national body, Church of England National Services (CENS), which would take responsibilities for some or all of the work currently undertaken by the Archbishops' Council, the Church Commissioners (excluding asset oversight), the Church's central services and the offices of the two Archbishops. There was concern among some at Synod that this would lead to a further centralisation of power and reduced influence for General Synod.

There was also the usual discussion about the Church's finances (affected by a 10% drop in parish giving since 2019 due to Covid) and a lengthy Q&A session with the House of Bishops, Ministry Council, the Church Commissioners etc which ran out of time (132 questions), prompting Synod to ask the Business Committee to allow more time for questions in future sessions.

8-10 February 2022

This was the first time that Synod had been held in a 'hybrid' format, with members participating both in person in Church House and online (eg those who were isolating or vulnerable). In general the hybrid arrangements worked well and it is likely that this will continue in future sessions, to promote accessibility.

This session had a heavy agenda but again the actual legislative business was fairly light (one piece of legislation on faculty rules). The main items discussed were as follows:

- There was a moving discussion on **racial justice**, which was opened by a powerful speech from Lord (Paul) Boateng, the chair of the Archbishops' Commission on Racial Justice. This followed on from the Archbishops' report 'From Lament to Action' published in April 2021. Lord Boateng noted pointedly that the government front bench was more racially diverse than the General Synod platform.
- The lead bishop for safeguarding, the Bishop of Huddersfield, together with the new Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Board Maggie Atkinson, updated Synod on the Church's progress on improving its **safeguarding procedures**.
- Synod approved changes to the **Faculty Jurisdiction Rules 2015**, mainly with the purpose of making the rules more consistent with the Church's commitment to working towards net zero carbon emissions by 2030. One point of controversy was whether replacing fossil fuel boilers like-for-like should be subject to a faculty (the point being to encourage churches to switch to non-fossil fuels). An amendment dropping this requirement was narrowly defeated.
- There were debates on the church's **Setting God's People Free initiative**, on the **persecuted church** and **modern slavery and human trafficking**. On the latter, a motion was passed unanimously asking Synod to hold the Government to account on protecting victims of child-trafficking including those who were now vulnerable adults seeking asylum in the UK.
- The Bishop of Hereford provided a report on **clergy remuneration** which noted that clergy stipends had not kept up with inflation. It was reported that the Archbishops' Council had recently agreed a policy that the National Minimum Stipend would, in future, on average, increase in line with CPIH inflation, subject to three yearly reviews and the need to review this position if 'high levels of inflation establish themselves.'
- There was further report from the **Governance Review Group**, following which Synod passed a motion inviting the Archbishops' Council to bring forward legislation to simplify the Church's governance structures.
- Finally, Synod 'took note' of a report proposing changes to the membership of the **Crown Nominations Commission for the See of Canterbury**, with greater representation from the wider Anglican Communion and fewer representatives of the Diocese of Canterbury, recognising the Archbishop's increasing role in Anglican Communion affairs.

In another long Q&A section, split over two sessions, the Bishop of Lichfield confirmed the House of Bishops' relaxed position on **individual cups at communion**, despite the apparent prohibition under Canon Law: 'The House of Bishops and the bishops individually have no interest in policing this and our behaviour demonstrates that.'

Jeremy Moodey
March 2022