

## General Synod Report July 2017

This year the normal 5 days had been compressed into 4, and with formal sessions from 9am to 7pm (once to 10pm for the House of Laity members), with fringe meetings outside these times. There was a full agenda with little time for anything else!

**On Friday**, instead of the usual Presidential Address, The Archbishop of York proposed a motion asking for “A Still Small Voice of Calm” after the General Election. He spoke with his usual enthusiasm about the need for moral principles and our need to seek “the common good”. He emphasised mutual rather than individual flourishing, and suggested that we should think about social insurance rather than welfare benefits. On tax, he asked whether we would be prepared to pay extra tax if it would be put towards Education, Health and Social Care. Most members of Synod indicated by an informal show of hands that they would be prepared to do this. Some people considered the motion too general and sought to make it more specific by adding amendments. These included our own David Lamming (changing the voting system at General Elections to proportional representation by single transferable vote) and Jonathan Alderton-Ford (a fresh referendum for Scotland).

Despite an eloquent speech from Jonathan, these amendments were all rejected, as was an amendment from the Archbishop himself, trying to add a call for a voluntary scheme for specific areas to be added to the tax system. The main motion was overwhelmingly carried.

The main legislative business was the final stages of Amending Canons numbers 36 and 37. They both bring the rules into line with what is actually happening in the Church today.

Amending Canon 36 allows the priest the option of dispensing with clerical attire for Holy Communion and Morning and Evening Prayer if they consider that it benefits the mission and ministry of the parish and has been agreed with the PCC. For Weddings, Baptisms and Funerals the option is also available at the request of the person(s) concerned, except for a Baptism during a normal service, where the tradition of that service must be followed. Amending Canon 37 allows the use of the standard burial service for those unbaptised or who died by suicide. Both these Canons were fully passed and have gone for Royal Assent. All the papers, including the full Amending Canons with their exceptional situations which clearly take precedence over the simplification above, are on the CoE synod website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/structure/general-synod/agendas-and-papers/july-2017-group-of-sessions.aspx>

**Saturday am:** An eagerly awaited item was the presentation from the Archbishop of Canterbury on the proposals in the area of Human Sexuality. He explained that the approach was based on the three principles of Scripture, Tradition and Reason, with Scripture as the final authority. He is setting up a Pastoral Advisory Group chaired by the Bishop of Newcastle, but accepts that there will be a level of “untidiness”. There will also be a major new teaching document on Human Sexuality being produced by a range of people with the Co-ordinating Group chaired by the Bishop of Coventry. To input into this, working groups have been set up to consider the Social and Biological Sciences, Biblical, Theological and Historical aspects. This will clearly be a considerable undertaking and it is hoped to report to Synod early in 2020. The Archbishop called for unity in a world where disagreement is badly handled.

Then there was an interesting presentation and debate on the “Presence and Engagement” programme that is working in parishes and areas with a high proportion of other faiths, eg Leicester, Birmingham, Bradford and Southall. It enables Christians to build bridges and engage with their neighbours of other faiths for the common good with the Near Neighbours programme, to share the Christian faith, and equips people for ministry in this challenging area. The vision is that there will continue to be a Christian presence in every community.

We repealed obsolete legislation, enabled swifter changes in the future and then consolidated closed pension scheme funds.

**On Saturday afternoon** the Synod split into six workshops to inform members about some of the different work streams through which the National Church Institutions seek to support the local Church and parishes for evangelism, outreach and mission. The areas, and our Synod representatives were : **a)** Thy Kingdom Come **b)** Life Events [Tiffer Robinson & David Lamming] **c)** Digital Evangelism [Jonathan Alderton-Ford] **d)** National events as opportunities for community witness [Tony Allwood] **e)** Inclusion and Outreach to the marginalised [Andrew Dotchin] **f)** Crossing the Generations [Karen Galloway]. Please consult them for further details.

Then came the controversial debate on Conversion Therapy, about which there had been a huge amount of lobbying beforehand. This was a private member’s motion from Miss Jayne Ozanne, who proposed that the Synod endorse a statement in January 2017 from various medical and ethical bodies “that the practice of conversion therapy has no place in the modern world, is unethical, harmful and not supported by evidence” and called for the Archbishops council to sign the statement. There were many speeches in a marathon session from those who themselves, or had friends and relations who, had undergone conversion therapy and had suffered massive pain and distress. There were also speeches from others stressing the need to put Christ above culture. An amendment seeking to “note”

rather than “endorse” the statement was defeated, however another amendment to replace the 2017 statement with a November 2015 Memorandum of Understanding which was slightly more restrictive (and agreed by more professional bodies including the Association of Christian Counsellors) and called on the Church to be sensitive to contemporary expressions of gender identity, was carried. A further amendment calling for the Church to sign the 2015 Memorandum was defeated as the vote in the House of Bishops was tied, but another amendment from Andrew Dotchin calling on the government to ban Conversion Therapy was carried and finally, after a strong plea from the Archbishop of York, the main motion was carried by a considerable majority in all three Houses.

That evening the House of Laity heard presentations on Clergy Wellbeing, the Crown Nominations Commission, an update on “Setting God’s People Free” (on which our Diocese was briefed by Matthew Frost on 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> July) and the incredibly complex Article 7 procedure to safeguard changes in liturgy.

After a good **Sunday** morning communion at the Minister, in the afternoon Synod debated a motion from Blackburn Diocese welcoming transgender people and calling for the bishops to consider liturgical materials to mark a person’s gender transition. Several speakers spoke movingly of the difficulties and major stresses of transgender people and how the Church needs to affirm such a disadvantaged group. An amendment calling for the theological understanding of transgender to be more fully studied before new liturgy was defeated. While some speakers felt there was already sufficient flexibility to provide appropriate services, following a speech by the Archbishop of York, the motion was carried.

We then had a report on Clergy Wellbeing, with recommendations including a Covenant similar to the recent Military Covenant. This was well received and supported by the Archbishop of Canterbury who said that people have different stresses at different times, with his most stressful situation being as a parish priest due to the lack of colleagues. After another Bishop suggested a Harvard Business School quote that “Leadership is disappointing people at a rate they can withstand!” the report was received and discussions will proceed.

Finally Tiffer Robinson proposed his private member’s motion aiming to make it easier for children of clergy and others in tied accommodation to gain school places prior to being actually resident. Tiffer explained that in some parts of the country, school admissions authorities would only place children on waiting lists when they were physically there, as opposed to accepting letters of appointment as proof of new residence. This puts such children at a disadvantage. Many people spoke in favour of this motion, explaining the difficulties and trauma associated with moving vicarage from both the point of view of the parent and the child. Several people (including Dean Francis Ward and the Archbishop of York) were worried that there might be pastoral difficulties if the clergy’s children were seen to have “jumped the queue” and displaced a local child from the school of their choice, but Tiffer assured us this was very unlikely and the motion was carried by a clear majority.

**Monday** opened with a motion from Birmingham Diocesan synod calling for a review of the cost of applying for British Citizenship. When people who already have a right to remain in the UK want to become full British citizens, they must complete a 70 page form, undergo language and citizenship tests and pay £1282 for adults and £973 for children. These fees are well above the actual administrative costs and the fees set by other developed countries. For many individuals and especially for large families these costs are huge and a serious deterrent to becoming full citizens and strengthening their sense of civic responsibility. Many members spoke of the injustice and negative impact of these fees and the motion was carried unanimously.

The Elections Review Group then reported that the whole process of General Synod elections in 2020 would be done online. This should encourage younger people to become involved and in time make it cheaper for Dioceses.

Arrangements will be made for those without internet access and several members stressed the importance of this.

Synod then considered the associated topic of who should elect members of General Synod. There have been calls to move away from the present system of the Deanery Synod representatives being the voters, to:

- Diocesan Synod members

- Parochial Church council members

- All members of Electoral Rolls

- A new Electoral College elected by each church at their APCM.

Your Diocesan representatives would like your views to guide their own when this comes as a formal motion.

The annual report of the Archbishops’ Council was received and its budget of 2018. Of the total of £105M, around 25% is Strategic Development Fund money, going to 32 projects in 25 Dioceses, with none of them being St Edmundsbury and Ipswich.

Finally, farewells were said to the Bishop of Bristol, the Right Reverend Mike Hill and the Bishop at Lambeth, the Right Reverend Nigel Stock. Archbishop Justin was sad that he could find nothing negative to say about Nigel, and extolled his virtues, including being able to put a banana in a milk bottle without breaking either!