

# Proxy Debates and the Challenge to Trust One Another

Report from Suffolk Representatives of General Synod, July 2016 - compiled by Andrew Dotchin

This sitting of General Synod was always going to be different. All York Synods have a different 'feel' to them; helped by living together in a quasi-monastic life sharing meals, worship and recreation it is intentionally less formal than Westminster sessions. This difference was good and necessary as we had to squeeze five days of business into two so that there would be time and space for the Shared Conversations on Human Sexuality which followed it. These were a confidential closed process, with no decisions taken, so no report of them is included.<sup>1</sup> The House of Bishops will be considering in November what, if any proposals to change canon law should be brought to a future Synod meeting.

We began with an emergency debate called by the Archbishops in response to the result of the Referendum on membership of the European Union. In some sense this was a debate with which no one would disagree. Whichever way the Referendum vote went the country would need healing afterwards. The debate gave us an opportunity to remember that the Diocese of Europe is part of the Church of England whose people are looking to England for guidance. Others spoke movingly about the consequences of the vote and the rise in hate crime that seemed to follow on its heels. In the end we resolved to seek to build 'A generous and forward looking country' which may be a metaphor for the Church of England's internal tasks as well.

Occasionally at Synod one phrase, usually coined by the Bishop of Willesden, crops up repeatedly in different discussions. Bishop Pete Broadbent was true to form when he suggested that much of the vote for Brexit was due to a 'proxy debate' about other issues that the nation felt had been left unaddressed by our leaders. For the rest of Synod it seemed that we were holding our own 'proxy debate' on two fronts. One was the approaching Shared Conversations (and it was sad to note that some of the most vocal on this issue absented themselves from the Conversations) and the other was the collection of issues around the seven streams of Renewal and Reform. Ultimately for the work of Synod, the progress of the Shared Conversations, and the life of the Church of England we must face the challenge to trust one another and learn that we are a mixed economy church that needs a theology of disagreement. The Faith and Order Commission's excellent paper on how we should go about this deserves wide circulation and reading.<sup>2</sup>

So, after the first day of 'Normal Business', greetings from Ecumenical Partners, reports from the Lusaka meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council, and the gentle dance that is the Report of the Business Committee and Question Time (it does feel a little like sitting on the green benches in the Commons!) what else did we discuss in a very full Saturday? Recordings of the debates and useful publications are available<sup>3</sup> for those who would like complete reports. Here are some highlights.

Mission and Pastoral Measure: Part of the simplification process, this debate detailed changes for those clergy affected by pastoral reorganisation. Tiffer Robinson was a member of the revision committee for this Measure and we hope his concerns will be taken into consideration before Final Approval.

Clergy Vesture and Burial of Suicides in Churchyards: Several people, including Andrew Dotchin, expressed dismay that proposed reforms arising from these two Private Members Motions had been put together in one amending Canon. A cost-saving measure, it made a curate's egg of business. Those supporting one part of the Canon but not the other could not vote one down without losing all! This was the 'mankini' measure much trawled in some of the media. It was sad to see real concerns about visible church presence in the community and care for suicide and those dying unbaptized descending to the realms of

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Shared Conversations please visit: [www.sharedconversations.org](http://www.sharedconversations.org)

<sup>2</sup> The Faith and Order Commission Paper GS Misc 1139 was written for the Shared Conversations but also provides a useful way forward to approach other areas of disagreement:

[www.churchofengland.org/media/2530546/communion\\_and\\_disagreement\\_faoc\\_report\\_gs\\_misc\\_1139.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2530546/communion_and_disagreement_faoc_report_gs_misc_1139.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Video and Audio recordings of each of the 14 sessions of the July 2016 General Synod can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLeck8GovYoaYzlgy0EIKZg>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england/sets/general-synod-july-2016>

Also look up IN REVIEW - a regular publication produced by the Communications Office. The July General Synod version is here:

[www.churchofengland.org/media/2545794/inreviewaugust16.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2545794/inreviewaugust16.pdf)

Borat. The Canon was referred to a revision committee and it is hope that when it returns for a Third Reading we will be able to exercise more care of those in need.

Vision for Education: This report from the Education Division<sup>4</sup> was spoken to, amongst others, by Dean Frances. She described how, 'In a mission-shaped Church, our schools are our best asset'. The challenge will be how the vision is taken forward. In the words of the Bishop of Ely, 'The vision for education must be lived not laminated'.

David Lamming spoke in the debate on the draft Legislative Reform Measure and has been appointed to the Revision Committee that will deal with this Measure and two others. It strengthens our Diocesan team that we have someone such as him who takes care to examine Measures in full detail

Quinquennial Inspections: A draft Measure to provide a new centrally-directed framework for the inspection of churches was effectively 'kicked into touch' after the Archbishop of Canterbury said that he had not yet heard much to convince him of its necessity and that there was nothing necessarily wrong with differing practices between dioceses, adding "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

The Bishop of Truro gave a progress report on the revised ways of Nurturing and Developing Senior Leaders. This has been a source of much debate and contention in this Synod as it can feel as if the church is making too much use of a 'one size fits all' model of discerning vocation and managing the church. Some very good and personal speeches by clergy with disabilities (the debate is worth watching<sup>5</sup>) described some of the dangers of this approach. Early fruit from this process was promising and an appeal for trust between Synod and the House of Bishops was made.

The Report the Archbishops' Council can appear to be perfect fodder for a half-empty chamber on a Saturday night. The advent of Canon John Spencer this has changed and, though finances remain challenging, hope is our keynote. Coming out of this for us as a Diocese is the National Parish Giving Scheme.<sup>6</sup>

A Vision for Renewal and Reform<sup>7</sup> pulled together the progress made on several of the other task groups which the programme had set and focussed on the call of our Lord Jesus in Luke chapter 10, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.' It is hoped that this will help the Church to stop talking about the work and how to do it and instead get on with things! The Bishop of Chelmsford's challenging comment gives pause for thought, 'We have missed successive harvests, and are hiding in the barn arguing over what colour the combine harvester should be!'

It is time to trust. Time to trust in the generosity of a God who equips the Church with many good and varied gifts. Time to trust those called to lead us and support them in their discerning of the way forward. Time to trust each other to be obedient to the call of Christ on each of our lives.

On the Sunday of Synod God set a rainbow over York University to remind us of the promise of provision and the gift of life. May we learn to share that good news with all we meet.



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<sup>4</sup> The full report 'A Vision for Education – Deeply Christian, serving the Common Good' can be found here:

[www.churchofengland.org/media/2532968/gs\\_2039\\_-\\_church\\_of\\_england\\_vision\\_for\\_education.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2532968/gs_2039_-_church_of_england_vision_for_education.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> The Speeches by Zoe Hemming (at 16m40s) and Tim Goode (at 33m55s) on this link speak strongly about Disability and Senior Leadership [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr3CB\\_M2zog](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr3CB_M2zog)

<sup>6</sup> Details of the scheme are here: <http://www.parishgivingscheme.org.uk>

<sup>7</sup> For information on Renewal and Reform visit: [www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/renewal-reform.aspx) Its purpose is stated in GS2038 here: [www.churchofengland.org/media/2529194/gs\\_2038\\_-\\_a\\_vision\\_for\\_renewal\\_and\\_reform.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2529194/gs_2038_-_a_vision_for_renewal_and_reform.pdf)