

## General Synod Report 23-27 February 2024

General Synod met in London from 23 to 27 February 2024. This was a full five day session. I had to participate remotely as I am currently in isolation while undergoing chemotherapy, but I was able to speak via Zoom, and one of my questions about the theological depth of Bishops is quoted in full in [this week's Church Times!](#)

In his presidential address the Archbishop of Canterbury focussed on the many conflicts in a world 'off its hinges', and used Psalm 56 to remind us that suffering is normal, but God is faithful, and will not abandon His Church. Anticipating the LLF debate, he imagined a 'variable geometry of unity, with an unvarying commitment to love in Christ.'

There were some interesting debates about Land and Nature, the Future of Work and the Conflict in Ukraine ([which has upset the Ukrainians](#)). The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households *Love Matters* was challenged for its failure clearly to affirm the value of marriage.

There were other items that may be of interest to you. A change to the Fees Order may enable PCCs to receive a fee for a funeral conducted by their minister at a crematorium. Synod supported a proposal to consider restoration of the value of the clergy pensions, which has declined by 1/3 since 2011. Synod agreed to streamline the process of scrutinising ordinands who remarried and have a former spouse still living; or who are married to a person who has been previously married and whose former spouse is still living. but not to change the Canon requiring this principle.

In the debate following the Business Committee report, [Rev Dr Ian Paul](#) highlighted the absence of debate about the uncomfortable Statistics for Mission for 2022, which show continuing decline. Only one agenda item (Estates Evangelism) directly considered the need for evangelism, especially to reach the 85% of people of GMH heritage, and 2/3 of U18s who live on outer estates.

Synodical Business was focussed around four main areas:

1) **Conduct of Lay members.** Two different items addressed the real issue that although clergy can be held to account for misconduct (through the Clergy Discipline Measure, soon to be revised), PCC officers and members cannot be disciplined. The first debate asked for a national Code of Conduct and disciplinary process to be considered. The second asked for legislative proposals to discipline bullying lay officers and disqualify them from office. The need was widely recognised, with considerable unease about a disciplinary process. It was noted that Diocesan Bishops no longer use their power to excommunicate (Canon B16). Archbishops' Council will consider the next step.

2) **Safeguarding:** The debate considered the Wilkinson Enquiry into the dismissal of two members of the Independent Safeguarding Board in the summer of 2023: Synod voted for an apology to the members of the ISB. It considered the Jay Report published on 22 February (2 days before Synod) which had been asked to recommend how Safeguarding could be made wholly independent. She recommended two independent charitable bodies - one to operate safeguarding and the other to provide scrutiny. Many felt that Professor Alexis Jay had been given too narrow a brief, which begged the question whether operational independence was what was truly needed. Some wanted immediate adoption of the Jay proposals, but Synod wanted more time for consideration.

3) **Racial Justice:** Following the Report *From Lament to Action*, and the establishment of the *Archbishops' Commission for Racial Justice*, there were two debates, first urging all dioceses to monitor data and press on with local action plans. Many people of Global Majority Heritage (GMH)

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spoke, and the motion was carried unanimously. The second was a progress report on the Church Commissioner's £100M fund for reparations for the historic profits from the Slave Trade.

4) **Living in Love & Faith:** Many of the Questions submitted focussed on the legalities of the LLF process and the Bishop of Leicester, now lead Bishop for LLF, gave more detailed written answers and responses than we have been used to, in line with his own paper, GS 2346, which proposed a reset to the LLF process in order to restore trust, with more openness and transparency, and an indicative set of 10 commitments, with the stated aim of promoting reconciliation and unity as far as possible. Revisionists were unhappy with what felt like them a rowing back on votes made (however narrowly) in February 2023, and on the commitment not to consider liturgy for Same-sex marriage in this Quinquennium. Traditionalists were concerned with the commitment to allow clergy and lay ministers to enter civil same-sex marriages and required orthodox bishops to allow this, and to explore only the 'minimum formal structural change'. Annex B of GS2346 revealed that the House of Bishops had previously voted to press forward with these changes, without producing any legal or theological justification.

The only amendments to the motion were introduced by members of the CEEC coalition. Two are of particular note. Ed Shaw asked Synod to "acknowledge that for many in the Church of England, including members of General Synod, some of the issues raised are not matters on which they can simply agree to disagree". Rev Mark Smith gave an outstanding speech in support:

"It also exposes a troubling disconnect between the real depth of our disagreement and the character of the proposals before us. ...Bishops... You claim to recognise that for many these are not ones we can agree to disagree and yet every single proposal, every single strategy, every single position paper that has come out of this process consistently presupposes that these are ultimately matters adiafaphora and maps out a way forward on that basis. But that case has never been made theologically - it has only ever been assumed and asserted."

But this attempt to acknowledge the true depth of disagreement in Synod and church was defeated by a vote in all three houses, most firmly in the House of Bishops. As Rev Charlie Skrine said in moving his amendment,

"Last night, 177 people in this Synod voted to acknowledge that many in this Synod simply cannot agree to disagree. 177 people said, "We are here". And I know it was just an amendment but did 210 people then vote to say, "No, you aren't"? I want to understand - is it that you don't believe that I exist, or it it that you don't want me to be here? May I speak to the 210 - if we are going to get out of this dead-end - at some point I am going to have to vote for something you want or you are going to have to vote for something I want. And my suggestion is that we vote together for structures that will allow all of us to live with integrity, within the Church of England."

Charlie's amendment asking for "proposals for a set of commitments together with a settlement based on legally secure structural provision" put the need for a settlement at the heart of the process. It was naturally defeated, leaving traditionalists to face the uncomfortable fact that the overwhelming majority of Bishops (24 v. 8), and a slim majority in each other house, do not believe those who say that we cannot simply agree to disagree, and will not commit to discuss how we might work towards some kind of limited unity, however much they proclaim their commitment to unity and reconciliation.

At this point a leading revisionist proposed a "Move to next business" which was supported by revisionists and traditionalists, so the motion lapsed and cannot return as it stands. Bishop Martyn will not have been surprised at this, but will he and the House now take to heart what has been said? In the speech which I was not invited to give, I wanted to say that these amendments feels like we are being served 'notice to quit' despite our being good tenants committing no fault but faithfulness to the existing teaching of the Church. We await the wise counsel of CEEC as to what actions we should now follow.

Graham Hamilton