

## **General Synod Member's Report** **April Group of Sessions (23 and 24 April 2021)**

The tightened restrictions early this year meant that the February group of sessions of General Synod was reduced to a single day, as I reported at the last Diocesan Synod. However, despite the pandemic, the work of General Synod has to continue, so two days of Synod on Zoom were scheduled for the end of April. These sessions allowed some essential decisions to be made and also further updates on ongoing work to be given.

General Synod always starts and ends with worship, which, as you might expect, covers the whole proceedings of Synod with prayer. The first business of Synod was to pass a motion conveying Synod's heartfelt sympathy to Her Majesty the Queen following the death of His Royal Highness, the Prince Philip.

Archbishop Stephen gave the Presidential Address, which concentrated on racism, with reflections about the death of George Floyd and the Panorama report on institutional racism within the Church of England. Archbishop Stephen's address finished with the words, "our facing this issue of racial justice is itself a movement of the Spirit breathing God's life of unity and glorious God-given diversity into God's Church". There is much hope that the forthcoming elections to General Synod will increase the diversity of the Synod and help drive the much-needed change that Archbishop Stephen outlined in his address.

The April group of sessions were intended to be a short, sharp meeting that would progress some of the more urgent work that Synod needed to deal with.

Steady progress was made on the Code of Practice for Safeguarding, which passed its final drafting and final approval. This Code is part of the Church of England's commitment to improving its safeguarding in light of previous failures.

Synod passed a motion on Religious Freedom sponsored by the Bishop of Leeds, "That this Synod, believing that freedom of religion or belief is of importance to everyone, everywhere, and that Christians who enjoy this freedom should be active in advocating the same freedom for others."

An order was passed making amendments to provide for the reconstitution of the Church of England Pensions Board and to limit the term of office for which members of the Board may serve.

As usual, question time raised a lot more questions than there was time available to answer them. Unfortunately, this is the part of Synod's working that is least suited to the Zoom format, as a lot of time is wasted unmuting and connecting.

Appointments were made of the Chair of the Pension Board and the Chair of Dioceses Commission. The work of the Dioceses Commission will be significant in the coming years as the new strategy of the Church of England is developed.

Synod accepted a report on the way people are elected to the Crown Nomination Commission (which oversees the appointment of Bishops). Several innovations are proposed in this report, including the election of a pair of people to fill one place (so that the workload could be shared between the two).

The Bishop of Huddersfield updated Synod on the Church of England's response to the IICSA report into the Church in October 2020 and the work being done in response to the recommendations made in that report.

The Clergy Discipline Measure has exercised Synod for a while, and work is being done to replace it. However, some modifications were made to the existing measure to allow it to be applied more straightforwardly. The discussions on the CDM changes produced a first for Synod, where one of its members contributed to the debate from his hospital bed. This intervention says a lot about the commitment of the member concerned and also demonstrates a positive side of the Zoom format that can be lost in all the frustrations with the online format.

Synod concluded with a series of farewells to people attending Synod for the last time before they retired.

General Synod is the second legislative body of England, which means it can pass laws. This power can mean that its work can seem dry and legalistic. However, it also underlines the reason why the work of General Synod is so important and why I urge you to consider standing in the upcoming elections.

**Rev Stuart Grant**

Member of General Synod representing the Diocese of York

## General Synod Member's Report July Group of Sessions (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>) 2021

Last week the last session of the current General Synod sexennium was held – although it was originally to be a Quinquennium, until Covid-19 intervened. It ran for 4 days from last Friday (9<sup>th</sup> July) midday through to Monday (12<sup>th</sup> July) evening, as a pretty intensive series of on-line Zoom meeting.

First, let me remind you that in any session of General Synod, there are effectively 4 types of business transacted:

- a) Standing Items of Business – which appear on the agenda of every session
- b) Legislative items – where what is passed by GS is laid before parliament and becomes part of the law of the land
- c) Ordering the Life of the Church – looking in at the way that the CofE is working
- d) The Church in the World – looking out

After the opening worship, Friday started with a Presidential address (*Standing Item*) – where we were reminded by ++ Stephen of the way that the Quinquennium opened, with the personal preacher to the pope delivering an incredible sermon in Westminster Abbey around Haggai – rebuild my house. He said that we should be a bolder church, and the CofE was called world-wide to be a bridge-building church, and included a call to take courage you bishops, clergy and laity. This sermon was followed by an address by HM the Queen in Church House, in which she underlined the importance she attached to of that sermon for all members of GS – especially the call to be bridge builders, which she said applied both within and beyond the CofE.

This was followed by a Presentation about the Racial Justice Commission (*Church in the World*), which is to be formally launched this September, which we now know is to be chaired by Paul Boateng. When the appointment was announced, he said “Racism is a gaping wound in the body of Christ’s church. Our mandate as a Commission is not only to bind but to heal”. Some dismay was expressed that the Archbishops' Council have taken the decision not to accept the recommendation to appoint full-time diocesan Racial Justice Officers. But even without full time officers, as we have learnt this morning, this is work which will proceed.

Then there was a fairly introspective debate about how we appoint bishops (*Ordering the Life*), and the way that the Vacancy in See Committees are formed, in particular the introduction of pairing of members, in preparation for legislative changes that will have an impact on the future composition of such committees and how members are chosen.

There followed another presentation - Update on the National Investing Bodies approach to Climate change (*Church in the World*), in which we heard about the way that the CofE is influencing the Climate related policies of companies around the world. This includes some well known multi-nationals such as Rio Tinto Zinc, Shell, and ExxonMobil, but also some companies you are unlikely to have heard of, such as NextEra Energy in the US

Then there was the appointment of body to oversee the next stage of the Anglican-Methodist covenant (*Ordering the Life*).

The first day drew to a close with Questions (*Standing Item*) – which is the time when the body of GS can hold the executive to account. Sadly, there was only time for taking 49 of the 129 questions, although written answers to all of them are available. The day then ended with another act of worship.

Saturday morning began with worship, and then the rest of the morning was spent on topics around *Ordering the Life*. First, there was a presentation of Archbishops' Council and Church Commissioners

Annual Reports, followed by the Archbishops' Council Budget. I just pick a few notable points – about 50% of the budget goes on national church responsibilities, including Safeguarding; a further 35% goes on ministry training, and this year there is about a 10% provision for retirement housing for clergy.

Business then moved on to adjusting the diocesan seat allocation to GS. A mundane task caused by incorrect use of the formula used to calculate the allocations when they were presented to GS earlier in the year.

This was followed by a presentation on Safeguarding – giving Synod an update on the work currently being done. I highlight one item – Safeguarding Sunday (10<sup>th</sup> October 2021) – which is a chance, for local churches, to use their regular Sunday service to explore together what safer places look like, and to thank all those working behind the scenes to make our churches safer for all.

The afternoon started with the revision of some standing orders of GS (*Legislative*), which was followed by a presentation Living in Love and Faith – passing the baton (*Ordering the Life*) in which we were told how this topic is intended to be handled during the next Quinquennium. As this is a huge topic where there is clearly a need for a lot of discussion, in smaller groups, Covid has severely hampered progress. But I want to draw attention to a Pastoral Principles Course which was published in April 2021 (see <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/general-synod/bishops/pastoral-advisory-group/pastoral-principles>). This contains some excellent material which can be used to underpin parish discussions and reflection on Racial justice and Diversity as well as on other type of Diversity in the church.

GS then tackled Church Commissioners order 2021 (*Legislative*), where there was quite a bit of debate about introducing a limitation of any elected term of office to 2 5-year periods. This was eventually passed, following a very close vote (140/144) on an amendment to send back to the Scrutiny Committee for redrafting.

The last item of business for the day was a presentation by ++Stephen on Responding to the Housing Crisis (*Church in the World*), in which we were told that – “Affordable housing is what the church is all about in the community”. The day ended with worship.

Sunday afternoon then opened with debate on the Church Representation Rules amendment – Deanery Synod Term of Office (*Legislative*). In contrast to the way that terms of office were being restricted in other bodies, this amendment has reversed the default limitation in the new rules of no more than two consecutive terms of office for people on Deanery Synods. Such a limitation is now no longer the default, but can instead be imposed by specific PCC resolution. There was also an emergency amendment included, due to the effects of Covid, waiving the requirement for all members standing for election to GS to have taken communion at least 3 times in the preceding year. Had this not been passed, it became apparent that there were a significant number of members who would have been disbarred from standing again. During the debate, I explained why I was not presenting an amendment which some members of GS were expecting me to make, relating to what happens when PCCs discuss personnel issues (and especially discussions about the extension of an Incumbent's licence when he is over 70). However, in closing the debate, a firm commitment was been made for the changes that I have been talking about with the legal office in Church House to be brought forward in the near future.

There then followed three items all relating to *Ordering the Life* of the Church. The first was a presentation on the Nature of Ordained Ministry, followed by debate on proposals for legislation to replace the Clergy Discipline Measure 2003 – which is now pretty well universally recognized as not fit for purpose. Finally, we voted on the reappointment of Canon John Spence to the Archbishops' Council for a further 2 years. He has been one of the truly outstanding Servants of Christ in the CofE that I have come to know through GS. Once again, the day ended with Worship.

Our final day began with worship, before a morning spent on *Ordering the Life* of the Church. The first item of business was a presentation about Mission in Revision – A review of the Mission & Pastoral Measure 2011. This is a very well researched and presented green paper, and is potentially one of the most significant things for the life of the church that the current generation will see – affecting Diocese, Deanery, Benefice and Parish. The consultation process for this Green paper began last Tuesday (15<sup>th</sup> July) and lasts until 15<sup>th</sup> September 2021. The results will be analysed and reported back to the Mission, Pastoral and Church Property Committee and the Legislative Reform Committee, with a target for new legislation by July next year. Further information about the Green paper and the consultation questions are now available on the CofE website (<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/parish-reorganisation-and-church-property/review-mission-and-pastoral-measure-2011>). All dioceses and a number of statutory partners are being asked to complete a formal response, but anyone is welcome to respond to the consultation. I believe that Peter will be sending out details to all members of Diocesan Synod of how to access the green paper and make a submission, along with other information from this meeting of DS.

We then had a Vision & Strategy presentation by ++ Stephen, in which the National Vision that he presented is very similar to the one he has already presented to the Diocese. Among other things, he emphasised that The Parish is at the heart of the Vision – and I would add that the consultation questions underline that. We were told that this is renewing a vision to serve the whole parish, not just the congregation. I highlight just a few comments from the debate which followed. “Congregational focus is defensive.” “ We ourselves need to be broken to be able to share and serve all!” “Perhaps the most ambitious vision of mission since St Augustine of Canterbury” “We are not in an era of change. We are in a changed era.” A trio of York members were called to contribute to the debate – although I think that we ALL tried to speak. This was followed by another presentation on Transforming the effectiveness of the church. I think it can be summarized as “How can we get more ministry / less administration from our ministers?”

After a break for lunch, we considered a motion from the House of Bishops on a report from the Implementation & Dialogue group (*Ordering the Life*). This was essentially about the *Five Guiding Principles* which formed the basis of the settlement which resulted in the ordination of women bishops. In the debate, the Revd Simon Cawdell mentioned the ‘toxic power dynamics’ in the background across the CofE, and there was also a worrying comment about the increasing number of male clergy who are now facing discrimination because they were ordained by a female bishop. A Private Member’s Motion about the appointment of Bp Philip North to the Diocese of Sheffield in 2017 was withdrawn.

There was then debate about the Vacancy in see Committees (Amendment) Regulation 2021 (*Legislative*). Canon Linda Ali proposed an amendment to equalize the elected numbers of clergy and laity, but this amendment was lost.

And so we came to the end, with Farewells, and the dissolution of the current Synod. It was a final farewell to some of ‘the usual suspects’, but a hope that others will be there in the next session. One of my disappointments was that this group of sessions had to be a virtual one. There was no Continuing Praying Presence cover by the community of St Anselm – and I firmly believe that this prayerful support of General Synod has been very valuable.

But that brings us to the forthcoming elections to General Synod. The starting pistol has been fired, for a race that will end in mid October, prior to the inaugural service in Westminster Abbey in November.

I remind members of our *Lexio Divina* this morning, where we read “in Christ We who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us ...” I ask you all to consider who might have gifts that will be a valuable and valued contribution to the next General Synod? Anyone on an electoral roll in the Diocese can stand. And for the first time, an advertising campaign has been created to encourage a younger and more diverse range of candidates to come forward for election. But it is a significant commitment – at least 15 full days a year in 3 blocks, plus additional time, especially if you are on other committees. For me it has

been a privilege to serve on General Synod since 2015, and a very stretching experience – but I feel that I still have more to give.

And finally – on Monday, the Northumbria Community Morning Prayer included this meditation, which I felt was so appropriate on the day that this General Synod was coming to an end, with its echoes back to that sermon in 2015 with which we started our journey:

#### **Restoration Song**

God called forth a people, and we responded to His call

‘Rebuild this ancient ruin, restore my city walls.’

He has led us day by day, as we listened to His voice

and we were fed on finest wheat, and manna from the skies.

When we started, we were strangers. We hardly knew each other’s names.

Now we are brothers and sisters, and we will never be the same.

As we built, brick by brick, we discovered the corner stone,

and as we let Him mould and fashion us, He built us up in love.

Now we have seen, and we have heard, that the Lord our God is great.

For a wilderness has been transformed, into His holy place.

#### **Mike Stallybrass**

Member of General Synod representing the Diocese of York