

General Synod, Remotely, 23rd - 24th April 2021

For an overview of the Group of Sessions: [Timetable](#)

Friday 23rd April

In my last report, in November, I suggested that my penultimate report might be in February. Wrong again. Circumstances, beyond the complete control of even the Business Committee, pushed February into April.

We gathered somewhere, again, in cyberspace! Most of us met via Zoom while the platform party met in Westminster. The technology generally worked better than on the previous occasion in November but we still had a number of major glitches. Of which more later.

We were meeting after two events which will have major impacts on society. The first of these was the sadness of the death of the Duke of Edinburgh, aged 99, and whose funeral had taken place on the weekend prior to Synod. As a result the Archbishop of Canterbury put together a sombre recognition of his (the Duke's) contribution to society including mention of his eponymous scheme and his stalwart support for Her Majesty throughout their 73 years of marriage.

The second was closer to home. On the previous Monday, a Panorama Special, put out by the BBC, asked questions regarding the institutionalised racism within the Church of England by reporting on some specific, quite horrific, case studies. The programme came 3 days before the publication by the Archbishops' Anti-Racism Taskforce of a report called "From Lament to Action" which calls for systemic change in the way the church deals with racism. Considering the task group had been kicked into action in the Autumn of 2020, this can be regarded as swift action on the issue. More of this will come through in due course but the Archbishop of York offered an unconditional apology **and** action. The report is clear that addressing the underlying issues of systemic racism is a "missional imperative" for the Church.

Synod is beginning to get accustomed to Zoom and some of the changes made to the operation following the November Synod worked quite well. There was, however, the issue of the Crystal Interactive Voting System (for use with formal votes), Zoom Polls (intended to replace shows of hands) and Standing Orders.

Our Standing Orders require us to publish the Names of members who vote electronically. Both the "Crystal Maze" (sic) and Zoom Polls count as electronic! It is not possible to extract the Names of who voted by Zoom Poll. As a result the aforementioned Crystal was being used for almost every vote - including procedural matters.

After we had dealt with the Agenda Debate we had some detailed Safeguarding legislation to consider. Most of this was non controversial but thanks to the use of the Crystal System the process was worse than pulling teeth.

The additional strain on the agenda meant, sadly, that we had to ditch the debate due to take place on Changes to the Standing Orders.

Still, we did have an opportunity for some really useful stuff instead as we launched into the debate on International Religious Freedom. This was almost a motherhood and apple pie type debate as you would expect Christians to be tolerant of all faiths and none in terms of their

desire to operate side-by-side. However, some wanted to explore the issue of how and whether we could tolerate a belief system where its operation appeared to cause harm to its own or others - FGM was particularly mentioned. These are complex issues with, sometimes, no easy answers. It was also mentioned that some Christians were intolerant of other Christians because they had a different interpretation of the scriptures.

The other main topic, on Friday, was the legislative simplification process which would change the Pensions Board's way of operating. This was mildly controversial as it was using the "fast-track" process which some believed was inappropriate for the changes being proposed. In the end Synod accepted that the changes fitted the criteria for the process and so the changes were made. The revision reduces the size of the Board (making it in line with other Pension Boards) amongst other necessary simplifications.

It was useful to have only half a day at the start of this group of sessions as Zoom is not ideal for this type of meeting. What is missing is the opportunity for coffee room chats and one-to-one engagement with other members of Synod.

Synod finished the day with Questions!

Saturday 24th April

Today was a full day on Zoom! It started with worship led by the Community of St Anselm from Lambeth. Unfortunately, the quality of the technological connection detracted from the beautiful worship.

Much of the day was to be taken up with Safeguarding and Clergy Discipline. These are the necessary but less attractive events in the Synod calendar. Today's Safeguarding debates were a continuation of yesterday's legislative debate together with consideration of the implementation of the recommendations following IICSA.

The Clergy Discipline Rules are in need of some radical change and these changes are in some way an interim set to deal with some of the difficulties that have been recognised since their implementation in 2005. The changes fell into 4 areas - Efficiency, Clarity, Case Management and the practices relating to Vulnerable Witnesses. One particularly welcome change was allowing the word "complaint" to be replaced with "allegations of misconduct" which will remove many instances of complaint from the operation of the legislation which was genuinely created to deal with matters of discipline. The other one that will be a big improvement is the change to prohibit the cross-examining of a vulnerable witness in person in certain circumstances.

The Safeguarding Debate on IICSA recommendations had 10 major components. The Bishop of Huddersfield took Synod through the different aspects of the report and Synod was very willing to accept these significant reforms to the way that our Church will deal with Safeguarding in the future.

Fortunately, the Business Committee had recognised the pain caused by the Crystal Interactive System and by tweaking the Standing Orders were able to allow for Zoom Polls to be used for informal voting to take place without names and pack drill. As a result we were able to whizz through our debates comparatively smoothly today.

There were two appointments that needed to be approved. The first of these was to reappoint the Chair of the Pensions Board for a further term of office. His appointment

previously had been carried out with great due diligence and it was clearly sensible to renew his appointment.

The second appointment was for a new Chair of the Dioceses Commission. This fell vacant when the previous Chair - Professor Michael Clarke - had to step down on health grounds 3 years ago. The Commission had been ably led during the interim by Revd Paul Benfield, Deputy Chair. It is clear that the Commission will need to enter a new phase and so appointment of a Chair was essential.

The Archbishops had proposed Dame Caroline Spelman (former 2nd Church Estates Commissioner) for the post. Whereas, everyone was certain that she would be an excellent choice for the role it was important that questions were asked about the process for the selection. It was not clear whether any other names had been suggested and, if so, the reason for their elimination. Coming so soon after the publication of the report "From Lament to Action" regarding institutionalised racism, he was asked whether any UKME candidates had been considered.

The two other debates of substance related to the constitution of the Crown Nominations Commission (which elects Bishops to Dioceses) and the allocation of General Synod Clergy and Laity seats for the next (shortened) quinquennium (quadrennium?).

The first of these was the result of a review of the processes associated with the Commission. This included consideration of changes to Vacancy-in-See Committees as well.

There were rumblings associated with some of the changes - and in particular those relating to the suggestion that Elected CNC members should be elected in pairs to serve turn and turn about. The review made special mention that the revisions had several key drivers - one of which was the need for diversity to be addressed. The report was passed through to the next stage and I suspect that, whereas the general direction of travel was accepted, there will be further resistance to some of the changes when the legislation comes back for review in a future Group of Sessions.

In the other debate, we had a confession that incorrect values had been submitted in the run up to the previous debate on this matter. This meant that one diocese would have had an inflated number of Laity members at the expense of some other dioceses. Fortunately, the extension of the Synod (courtesy of the pandemic!) has prevented this error becoming fact.

It was also necessary to change the dates for the start of the quadrennium.

We needed to show our appreciation for a number of members of Synod who have stepped down from their roles. These "farewells" were spread over the two days.

Sue Booy had done a splendid job as Chair of the Business Committee but felt that Synod needed a new person in charge before the end of this extended quinquennium (sexennium?). She will be missed. However, her replacement has already shown himself very capable. Interestingly, for the first time for ever, this role has been granted to a member from the House of Laity.

The Bishop of Portsmouth has retired and had a good send off. One of the benefits of Zoom meetings is that screen sharing allows easy showing of a biopic of people that one wishes to honour. Hopefully, this process will continue when we meet in July - in person. My personal

memories of Bishop Christopher were when we were the Church of England Representatives on the Churches Together in England Enabling Body. He was a man of great humility.

My Bishop, Peter Hancock, who has retired early, was also the subject of a screen shared biopic. The way these farewells go is typified by a succession of events that have taken place in the rise of the individual to his/her final office.

However, in Bishop Peter's case, the real debt to the church was the way in which, in addition to his Diocesan and House of Lords roles, he was able to navigate through the IICSA period in such a measured way. Although the conclusions of the report from the inquiry will have immense consequences, his ability to engage with the survivor community has reaped reward for the tone and acceptance of the necessary recommendations that the Bishop of Huddersfield outlined earlier in the day.

This has probably been one of the hardest reports that I have ever had to produce - not helped by the stunning weather during the few days following Synod. A fairly arid Synod over less than 2 days was, surprisingly, filled with some really important issues which will have long lasting implications for the polity of our church.

We, now, move on towards the final Group of Sessions in July which will hopefully be in York. That will be my last Synod and I will then leave others to report on the thrills and spills of the gatherings which seek through their efforts to support, rather than govern, our Church. Perhaps we should rephrase the old adage to "Episcopally led, Synodically supported"!

Tim Hind Bath & Wells