

## General Synod, Remotely, 9th - 12th July 2021

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

What a difference 26 years makes. When I was first on Synod I trundled up to Westminster in November 1995 with a suit and 6 kg of books and papers. Every July we would travel to York with a suitcase more full of T Shirts and shorts than with suits although these were necessary for those who wished to experience the wonderful worship in the Minster and the Choir's singing of Psalm 150.

Now at the end of my tenure, we are in London rather than York and meeting by Zoom® rather than in person. Most of my information is via the Internet or the Synod App and weighs the same regardless of volume or content.

We meet over a weekend where many are distracted by the performance of our national football team. Accordingly, in his Presidential Address, the Archbishop of York tried to look for guidance from scripture. This he had found in Ezekiel 40.28 with these words: "He brought me to the inner court - that is to the prize and victory we long for - by the south gate." This, surely, is the inspiration we are looking for as a nation". His address was much more inspirational than this and can be accessed online [here](#).

Normally I would try to give a flavour of each debate but in this, my last report, I am going to spend more time in teasing out the moments where differences of opinion or unease occur.

One of the major disappointments that emerged on Friday and continued through the presentations and debates on Saturday was the fact that funding for Racial Justice Officers has been significantly delayed because of current strains on central church finances. Both the Archbishop of York and the Chair of Finance acknowledged that it was unfortunate and that it will be addressed as soon as practical. It isn't off the agenda.

Most of the afternoon was spent on the Recommendations regarding Responsible Representation and the changes to the processes relating to the Crown Nominations Commission and Vacancy-in-See Committees. Most of the controversy here was about the election of members to the CNC in pairs. The major challenge was to change the proposal to allow for the pair not to be considered as equal but rather as a principal and an alternate. This challenge was rejected. The process for dealing with the complexities of this led to at least one person declaring that they had "almost lost the will to live"!

The very valuable presentation by the First Church Estates Commissioner and the Chairman of the Pensions Board on the National Investing Bodies' Approach to Climate Change proved, to me at least, the value of having robust action against major International Organisations in terms of their inappropriate activity in addressing the Climate crisis. In particular their action has resulted in the replacement of 3 Directors on the board of Exxon Mobil.

Once again we had well over 100 questions for question time and failed during the period to answer free than 50. The answers are available but lack of time means that supplementaries are unable to be put and it is frequently these that tease out further information or, occasionally, enable the questioner to challenge the avoidance of the real issue by the way the question is answered.

## Saturday 10th July

This day, again, would bring some disappointments. Synod members who have worked together for 5 years (and in these peculiar times 6 years) look forward to the Saturday evening of the final Group of Sessions as they like to let their hair down at the Synod Revue that is always hosted by the Open Synod Group. Holding this in York would be easy. Holding it in London would have been a challenge! Holding it by Zoom® at short notice would have been impossible.

However, we had a lot of business to get through to keep us amused although not a lot of light relief.

We had a joint presentation from the Archbishops' Council and the Church Commissioners which painted pictures of optimism and some difficulties in terms of the Church of England's ability to deal with the future. The investment success of the Commissioners being balanced against the strictures that the pandemic has caused the church as a whole.

We were entertained as always by Canon John Spence by his presentation of the preliminary budget for 2022. A revised budget will be brought to Synod in November when a better understanding of the fall out from the pandemic will be available.

We had a brilliant presentation from the Bishop of Huddersfield on Safeguarding. The progress being made by on Safeguarding is steady but is clearly in safe hands. This is important work and the paper setting out the national projects and workstreams is available [online](#). I would recommend that people should read this carefully and if necessary look at the presentation [online](#). (About 2h 50 mins in to the Youtube offering)

The afternoon saw several points of disagreement. If you think that the CNC debate was like watching paint dry then normally the report of the standing orders committee is one stage less exciting.

When we create legislation we have a Revision Committee made up of appointed members and members of the Steering Committee. It is a concern of some that the appointed members should have a majority in terms of the conduct of the committee. Although the membership requires them to be in the majority, it is possible for a particular meeting for that not to be the case. An attempt to enforce a majority for all meetings was rejected after a lively debate.

Our church has been spending a lot of time following the failure of Synod to take note in 2017 of the House of Bishops' Report on Marriage and same-sex relationships after the Shared Conversations. This has resulted in work to produce the [6 Pastoral Principles](#) and an enormous amount of material under the banner of [Living in Love and Faith](#).

In the life of our church this work now needs scrutiny at Diocesan, Deanery and Parish level. The presentation today set out a timetable for this. We will have to ensure that the timetable is followed. It is clear that the church has previous (sic) in kicking cans down the road. It took 150 years + to get from our first Woman Deacon to our first Woman Bishop. We cannot afford to drag our heels on the issues of Human Sexuality as it is a measure of credibility for our church that we take inclusion seriously.

We moved on to discuss the Legislative Reform (Church Commissioners) Order 2021. This was an order which was designed to make the Church Commissioners more in line with current

trustee best practice. The Order had gone through the new process using the Scrutiny Committee which is subject to strict guidelines concerning the appropriateness of the process. There was a challenge to the Order because the Scrutiny Committee had only narrowly voted in favour of the Order and therefore there was concern that perhaps the legislation should have gone through the traditional route. The challenge was only narrowly defeated (only 4 votes in it) making Synod nervous that a vote by Houses might mean a failure of the Order. In the end it was passed in all three Houses.

Our final business was uplifting as it presented the work done to show how the church is responding to the Housing crisis. It frees the church to dispose of assets in a way that means that land can be used to meet local housing need rather than just for maximum value.

## **Sunday 11th July**

Today was a short day in Synod agenda respects and was concentrated into the afternoon vying for people's attention with the Mens Singles Final at Wimbledon and finishing in time for the Euro 2020 Final between England and Italy.

There was great hope at the start of the day but again disappointment was on the horizon.

On 11th February 2020 we debated changes to the Church Representation Rules. Some of these were fairly urgent and others which were not. Sadly, there was one change that was unacceptable to many over the imposition of restrictions on terms of membership of elected parochial representatives on Deanery Synods. It was unfortunate but, with assurances that the removal of this difficulty would be brought back to Synod in the future, we allowed the rules to be changed so that the time dependent matters could be implemented.

So now, exactly 17 months later, we had the opportunity to correct the error. The rules that had been put in limited elected lay membership of Deanery Synods to two terms. Someone said that this had been initiated from a more urban centred experience of long term incumbency being difficult to overcome. It was pointed out in the debate that many and particularly rural contexts have great difficulty in filling vacancies on Synods. It was also pointed out that, whereas Clergy have to be on Synod with no limit, laity have to be encouraged to engage and nurtured. Few people are ready to take on leadership roles after 3 years and if they do they would be a loss to the Synod if they had to leave synod after only one term of office. The change to remove this restriction was passed by a large majority in all three Houses.

Having spent a fair amount of time on a change which impacted the laity, we spent some time now looking towards the replacement of the Clergy Discipline Measure. The issue of having a Disciplinary Measure is hounded by the fact that it is operated in the context of complaints against clergy and regardless of severity. There is a need to have something which deals with Clergy Conduct and also that is nuanced regarding complaints that involve and don't involve misconduct and regarding seriousness.

However before we addressed this, the Bishop at Lambeth gave a presentation of the need to have a review of the Nature of Ordained Public Ministry. This was a wide ranging presentation covering not only the nature of ordained ministry but also the relationship with laity and lay ministry. A very welcome and timely contribution to the life of our church.

We then looked at the replacement of the CDM. The Bishop at Lambeth, reimagined as the Bishop to the Armed Forces, led us through this before we closed the day with a couple of procedural matters.

We extended John Spence's service on Archbishops' Council until 2023 and appointed our Auditors for the next period.

By this time many had switched off and prayers were being raised for the performance of the national football team.

As we now know, these prayers were not answered to the liking of many! Well - there is always next year!

## **Monday 12th July**

The final day of this bizarre July Synod.

Our first debate was on a report which reviewed the Mission and Pastoral Measure that has been in force for 10 years. The thrust of this review was to end up with simpler legislation for dealing with pastoral and church building matters. This is the start of an exciting change which will help to reduce bureaucracy but will need to be done sensitively as some changes that may be permissible will be radical for a church which is innately conservative.

This was followed by a presentation by the Archbishop of York on the progress of the programme he is leading on Vision & Strategy. In this presentation we had contributions from people all around the country on the way they see this vision developing.

Two contributions struck me. One from Julia Hill in Bath & Wells suggested that the vision should be "the Godthread that runs through our church". The other was from Sanjee Perera, Archbishops' Adviser on Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns, who hoped that a different church might not need her role to exist.

One of the perceived problems about this way of looking at vision and strategy is that it has not been done in accordance with the liturgy of Casablanca - by rounding up the usual suspects. I, personally, find this refreshing as it is clear to me that although the General Synod is made up of people selected by representative regulations it has failed to be representative of the Church of England as a whole in any of the three Houses. I found it disappointing that we had an attempt to suppress our chance to debate this by describing this Fresh Expression of building Vision and Strategy as having a bulldozer parked in parishes and a gun being given to dioceses to destroy the parish system.

Fortunately, our unrepresentative Synod declined to suppress debate and we have now moved forward on this.

Our third item today was also to do with building a new future for the church. This was about Transforming Effectiveness. There are many things being done in 42 Dioceses that could be done more efficiently through collaborative working. This together with the emerging Vision & Strategy and the review of the Mission & Pastoral Measure beckon a new dawn for our church.

We have had 5 guiding principles, since 2014, which help our church to be one where mutual flourishing can take place following the passage of the legislation which permitted episcopal

ministry to be exercised by women. Our next debate was to discuss a report which reviews the exercise of these principles and comes with 21 recommendations. There are a couple of these that will be controversial and some will think that the principles themselves are only supporting those opposed to the consecration of women. In some places there are high levels of traditional catholic and evangelical churches and the exercise of the principles is working well. There were voices in the debate which described the recommendations as giving over representation to opponents of what the church has clearly decided.

After a good debate, Synod voted to take note of the Report. It will need to be remembered as this goes forward that the departing Bishop of Rochester said that taking note did not mean acceptance of the recommendations.

The next bone of contention was the setting up of a new body to oversee the relationship with the Methodist Church. There were dissenting voices that were primarily concerned about the decision by the Methodists to allow for the performance of Same-Sex Marriages. The amendment to stop the new body proposal was defeated by 174 votes to 116 which shows the level of split amongst Synod. The main motion was passed.

We had the joy of revisiting the CNC matters dealt with on Friday so that the Standing Orders could be changed to reflect the decisions made then. Riveting! After such excitement was followed by consideration of changes to Diocesan Vacancy-in-See Committees. Interestingly the Synod voted for subsidiarity on one amendment and against subsidiarity on another.

And so to farewells. The Bishop of Manchester and the Archbishop of York gave moving tributes to specific members who are retiring and generally to those of us who have already stated that we are stepping aside.

I have been privileged to serve my Diocese for 26 years as its lay representative and to serve the church nationally for 16 years on the Pensions Board and 5 years on Archbishops' Council.

**Tim Hind**

**Bath & Wells**